VOLUME XXXI, NO. 9
MARCH 1, 1978

THE IMPERFECT SOCIETY

HOW shall we release ourselves from the grip of the past? The question is somewhat rhetorical and even a bit pompous. A great many people do not want to be released from the past. They are familiar with the past, which has served them tolerably well, and they aspire to no changes, regarding with distrust and suspicion the advocates of change. But meanwhile a growing number of critics have become convinced that unless there are radical alterations in the way we live, far-reaching disaster will overtake practically all of mankind before the end of the century, or perhaps sooner.

Demands for radical change are not new, of course. The idea of revolution had its seed in the fertile thought of Giambatista Vico, who declared that the social world is the work of men, it following that what men have made they can change, when once they understand what ought to be done. This was the birth of modern political theory, which was developed by the *philosophes* and applied in France and America at the end of the eighteenth century.

For the most part, revolutionists concentrate their attention on what is wrong, leaving to the future the task of working out what would be right. The pain of oppression and the outrage born of injustice generate the energies of total revolution. The American Revolution, as Hannah Arendt noted, was an exceptional case, since the rebels—later called Founding Fathers—were not only philosophers of government but also experienced men who knew the ways of both power and populations. Their revolution *worked*, and for this reason attracted little attention from the would-be system-changers of later generations. Crisis and desperation are the typical causes of revolutionary activity, but a successful revolution puts an end to these provocations. A prospering republic offers little encouragement to enemies of the status quo.

But today we have no prospering republics. On the contrary, the outlook is dim for all the nations. More and more critics, with varying emphasis, are declaring that the "whole system" is wrong. In terms of what is now happening, they seem right enough. When Frances Lappé, in *Food First*, having declared that the people of the world would be able to feed themselves if they had access to the land, goes on to add that "no society setting out to put food first can maintain the concentration of wealth and power that characterizes most nations today," she is almost certainly right. But then the question arises: Who, by what means, will rearrange the redistribution of wealth and power? We see what is wrong, but how can we make it right?

A broader version of essentially the same problem is provided by Paul Goodman in an essay in the recently published collection of his political writings, *Drawing the Line* (edited by Taylor Stoehr, Free Life Editions, $11.95):

> For three hundred years, science and scientific technology had an unblemished and justified reputation as a wonderful adventure, pouring out practical benefits and liberating the spirit from the errors of superstition and traditional faith. During the twentieth century, science and technology have been the only credited system of explanation and problem-solving. Yet in our generation they have come to seem to many, and to very many of the best of the young, as essentially inhuman, abstract, regimenting, hand in glove with Power, and even diabolical. Young people say that science is anti-life, it is a Calvinist obsession, it has been a weapon of white Europe to subjugate colored races, and manifestly—in view of recent scientific technology—people who think scientifically become insane.
>
> The immediate reasons for this shattering reversal of values are fairly obvious—Hitler's ovens and his other experiments in eugenics, the first atom

> bombs and their frenzied subsequent developments, the deterioration of the physical environment and the destruction of the biosphere, the catastrophes impending over the cities because of technological failures and psychological stress, the prospect of a brainwashed and drugged 1984. And instead of rejoicing, there is now widespread conviction that beautiful advances in genetics, surgery, computers, rocketry, or atomic energy will surely only increase human woe.
>
> In such a crisis it is not sufficient to ban the military from the universities, and it will not even be sufficient, as liberal statesmen and many of the big corporations envisage, to beat the swords into plowshares and turn to solving problems of transportation, desalinization, urban renewal, garbage disposal, cleaning up the air and water, and perfecting a contraceptive. If the present difficulty is religious and historical, it will be necessary to alter the entire relationship of science technology, and human needs, both in fact and in men's minds.

This, one could say, is a practical critique. In *The American Condition,* Richard Goodwin speaks of the effects of the acquisitive drives in American industry and life, severing not only our bonds with nature, but also those with one another:

> The fragmentation of social existence, having destroyed previous forms of authority, also makes inconceivable the establishment of an accepted system of values and moral conduct. What is to be valued inevitably becomes, or seems to become, a matter of opinion—a situation that infuses life, work, and human relations with enervating confusions, cripples the commitments necessary to the fulfillment of existence, and imposes on each individual the enslaving and impossible task of legislating an entire ethic.

A response which may seem natural would be to say that now it has become quite *obvious* that the whole system needs to be changed! Minor changes in such a framework—unless they are part of a *total* plan—are bound to be corrupted by their reactionary surroundings and relationships, it will be said. And there is surely truth in this comment, as many reformers have reason to know.

We are obliged to stipulate, then, that the present condition of society does indeed call for something like total reorganization. Well, the modern world has been subjected to two harrowing experiments of this sort—one by the Nazis, the other by the Communists. Human freedom was the first thing to go under these systems, demonstrating, one may say, Richard Goodwin's proposition—that "legislating an entire ethic" is impossible. The reorganized society, we shall also insist, must be *free.*

This is easy to demand. And it is easy, also, to suppose that everyone understands the meaning of freedom. Anyone who has been interfered with in his chosen task, career, or important undertaking knows what he means by freedom. He wants to be left alone to exercise his will and his skill. The societies which allow a measurable degree of this sort of freedom are called by us "open societies," while the totalitarian regimes are called "closed." But as the critics easily point out, the freedom of the open societies is subject to many constraints. This freedom is also selectively available, much more of it to the rich than to the poor. Further progress in freedom is usually interpreted to mean the removal of such constraints—ultimately, *all* of them—on the ground that only a totally free society can be acceptable to freedom-loving human beings. Unfortunately, we are discovering that aggressive pursuit of this goal continually sets up obstacles to someone's freedom: what serves one individual or group imposes burdens on others. It appears that if freedom is left to the fortunes of self-definition, the general conditions of freedom are sure to be destroyed.

Quite evidently, "freedom" is a meaningless abstraction except in a framework of human purpose. People want their freedom in order to *do* something, and practical freedom itself is little more than the elbow-room necessary to doing it. Then the question becomes: What sort of goals or activities create the general conditions of freedom, and what works against them?

This is the crucial question to be answered in relation to a society which is not only reorganized, but also free.

In the last chapter of his posthumous book, *Meaning* (University of Chicago Press), Michael Polanyi presents his answer:

> What needs to come into the picture of a viable free society is a traditional devotion to the spiritual objectives, such as truth, justice, and beauty—those that require for their pursuit free, self-determinative communities: of scientists, scholars, lawyers, and judges, artists of all sorts, and churchmen. For without a general public devotion to these spiritual objectives, free, self-determinative communities could not long continue to exist. The public (or public officials) would most certainly decide at some point to try to control these pursuits in the interest of the "general welfare." Of course, a public which succumbed to this temptation would soon have little or nothing to use for increasing the general welfare, for it would have inhibited, if not annihilated, *real* inquiry, *real* spiritual or moral insight, *real* justice, and *real* art. What it would have left, in the caricature of these activities, would be powerless because meaningless. However, a too explicit and "official" devotion to these ideals (defining them too explicitly and setting up public agencies to promote them) would also destroy them, because it would destroy the freedom of people in these fields to make innovative mutual adjustments relevant to their pursuit.

What this gets down to is that the highest human goals can never be precisely defined. Definition first petrifies, then makes fraudulent, all non-material goals. Public definition of truth eventually leads to thought police and holy inquisitions. Definition of art first leads to the academy and then to politicalized æsthetics. Definition of morality leads to the externalization of the inner life and in the place of inner leadings establishes conformity as the only measure of righteousness.

These are not invented objections to definition, but examples taken from Western history, much of it in the twentieth century.

Must we say, then, that a society that would—hypothetically—be wholly just would have to be a society in which everything important is properly defined, in short, a closed and unfree society? That a society which allows no compromises with imperfection would be from the human point of view a totally compromised society?

The answer is almost certainly yes. If so, then would it be better to settle for an imperfect society where at least some freedom remains?

What sort of imperfect society do we have now? A full answer could not be contained in volumes', so an illustration by Paul Goodman must serve. The following is from *Drawing the Line:*

> It is said the system is guilty, but the system is its members coerced into the system. It is also true that the system itself exercises the coercion.
>
> Thus: a man works in a vast factory with an elaborate division of labor. He performs a repetitive operation in itself senseless. Naturally this work is irksome and he has many impulses to "go fishing," not to get up when the alarm-clock rings, to find a more interesting job, to join with some other machinists in starting a small machine-shop and try out certain ideas, to live in the country, etc. But against these impulses he meets in the factory itself and from his fellow workers (quite apart from home pressures) the following plausible arguments: that they must band together in that factory and as that factory, and in that industry and as that industry, to fight for "better working conditions," which mean more pay, shorter hours, accident insurance, etc.; and the more militant organizers will even demonstrate that by this means they can ultimately get control of all industry and smash the profit-system. None of this quite answers the original irk of the work itself; but good! he commits himself to this program. Now, however, since no one has native wit enough to decide for a vast factory and industry, and all industry, what to demand and when to demand it, and what means are effective, our man must look to others for direction concerning his own felt dissatisfaction. He fights for more pay when perhaps he does not primarily care about improving his standard of living but wants to accomplish something of his own between the cradle and the grave; he fights for seniority, when in fact he does not want the job, etc., etc. The issues of the fight are now determined by vast, distant forces; the union itself is a vast structure and it is tied to the whole existing Society. Next he

> finds that he is committed not to strike at all, but to help manufacture machines of war. . . . True, the impulses of such a man are vague, romantic, and what is called adolescent; even if realizable they would not lead to full satisfaction. Nevertheless their essence is deep and natural. A program is a crime that does not meet the essence of the industrial irk, the non-creative job, but shunts across it. The worker who does a coercive job is a traitor. When he is sidetracked into a good, but irrelevant program, he is a traitor. . . . It is horrifying, though not useless, thus to impute treason to the particular persons and to trace the institutional crimes, which are but symptoms and results, back to the incidents of coercion and acceptance. The guilty ones turn out to be little children and dear parents, earnest radicals, teachers unconscious of their intent, and even ancestors who are dead. Thank God the libertarian does not need to think of punishments, for he knows—following Socrates of old—that the punishment of injustice is to be what one is. The persons who separate themselves from nature have to live every minute of their lives without the power, joy, and freedom of nature.

A "revolution" will not change any of these realities, which are characterological, not political. Revolutions may make sense for individuals in their own lives, but this has little or nothing to do with the control of the behavior of others. Goodman writes on this, too:

> My real bother with the neo-Leninist wing of the New Left is that its abortive manipulation of lively energy and moral fervor for a political revolution that will not be and ought not to be, confuses the piecemeal social and cultural change that is brightly possible. . . . In my opinion, it is in authentic to do community development in order to "politicalize" people, or to use a good do-it-yourself project as a means of "bringing people into the Movement." Good things should be done for their own sake and will then generate their own appropriate momentum. The amazing courage of sticking to one's convictions in the face of the police is insulted when it is manipulated as a means of "radicalizing." . . . In an important sense, the present bandying about of the word *revolution,* in its usual connotations . . . is counter-revolutionary. It is too political. It seems to assume that there could be such a thing as a Good Society or Body Politic, whereas, in my judgment, the best that is to be hoped for is a tolerable society that allows the important activities of life to proceed . . . the growing up of children with bright eyes, and the air and water clean.

A perfect society, it begins to seem clear, will be achieved only by a society of perfect men. A "perfect" system is not possible for imperfect men, but only a society which allows for the latitude they need for improving themselves. An *imposed* social perfection assumes that this cannot be done. Polanyi seems to understand this well:

> Once we have fully grasped the import of the necessary limits on our ability to construct a perfect society and can dwell in that import, we will refrain from various sorts of radical actions aiming at the full establishment of justice and brotherhood. We will recognize that we *can* reduce unjust privileges, but only by graded stages and never completely. No single panacea for them exists. They can be dealt with only one at a time, never wholesale, since we have to use the power of the present system in order to make any changes in it. To try to reform all the power structures at once would leave us with *no* power structure to use in our project. In any case, we will be able to see that *absolute* moral renewal could be attempted only by an absolute power and that a tyrannous force such as this must destroy the whole moral life of man, not renew it.

In short, complete freedom from the past *is* both undesirable and impossible. The past gives us the framework in which we live and strive for change. Goodman saw this and looked inside the existing structures for the leverage for constructive change. He found it in the integrity of the professional groups—men and women whose lifework entails a measure of social awareness and responsibility. He appealed to them to refuse to do poor or antihuman work. There are ideal standards for professional people to follow and live up *to*. These ideals must be taken seriously.

Polanyi chose the community of scientists as a model for his ideal—not as a goal, but as a process. Goodman spoke of "piecemeal" efforts toward change, and illustrated them in his own life as a responsible citizen. His book, *The Society I Live in Is Mine,* relates some of the things he did and tried to do.

In a thoughtful passage in *Meaning*, Polanyi set forth what seemed to him the attitude that must be adopted:

> We must learn to suffer patiently the anguish these imperfect fulfillrnents cause us. A steady recognition that the evils which prevent the fullness of moral development are precisely the elements which are also the source of the power that gives existence to whatever moral accomplishments we see about us may eventually lead us to a tolerance of these lower elements similar to the tolerance we grant to the internal-combustion engine: it is noisy and smelly, and occasionally it refuses to start, but it gets us to whatever it is we get.
>
> We must somehow learn to understand and so to tolerate—not destroy—the free society. It is the only political engine yet devised that frees us to move in the direction of continually richer and fuller meanings, i.e., to expand limitlessly the firmament of values under which we dwell and which alone make the brief span of our mortal existence truly meaningful for us through our pursuit of all those things that bear upon eternity.

There seems profound metaphysical insight in this passage. Because we are imperfect beings (although with deep longing for perfection), we do less than perfect things in the name of our ideal. These partially good achievements create partially evil conditions. If we make a rigid social system governing life under those conditions, we constrain ourselves to adjust to its ignored imperfections. Then, inevitably, they become worse and worse. A systematic adaptation of our lives to conditions which themselves must eventually be changed prevents them from changing. This is the error and crime of the closed society. By politicalizing all human life, the closed society shuts out the avenues of individual change and improvement. This is the lesson of political experience in the twentieth century. Real human progress is characterological—voluntary, inventive, cooperative, and requires individual inspiration and example. This is an old truth, now being revived under conditions of pain, frustration, and struggle.

REVIEW
ON GOOD NEIGHBORHOODS

HOUSING is a word having numerous meanings, with good books on each meaning, requiring the reader to shift gears when he moves from one approach to another. There is for example housing as an aspect of village planning, as in Hassan Fathy's *Architecture for the Poor*, an extraordinary study of a town constructed entirely of mud and mud brick, with close attention to the needs of the Egyptian peasants—evicted from former dwellings —who would live there. Then there is *Your Engineered House* by Rex Roberts, valuable to do-it-yourself builders who need help in focusing the decisions they must make. At another level is *Architecture Without Architects* by Bernard Rudolfsky, which reaches back through centuries to a time when everyone built his own home, guided by custom and the accumulated know-how of generations. Or, one might turn to *Shelter* by Lloyd Kahn, providing 176 pages of illustrations showing the enormous variety in the way people house themselves around the world.

Housing as a way of thinking about community also divides up. There is housing as a means of reclaiming slum apartment houses through the self-initiated efforts of the tenants, generating community spirit where none existed, and self-reliant pride for the renovators. Turner's *Housing by People* gives example after example of how this is now happening in cities in the United States. Mr. Turner was able to see the potentialities in this sort of urban self-transformation after observing what had happened, over the years, in certain squatter shantytowns in South America, which slowly got better and better as places to live.

For over-all thinking about housing, Sibyl Moholy-Nagy's *Matrix of Man—An Illustrated History of Urban Environment* (Praeger, 1968) might be best of all. The temper of this book is illustrated by an early paragraph:

> The current "urban crisis," and its pessimistic, self-destructive diagnosis, differs from previous environmental revolutions in its contextual misdirection. . . . In city planning and architecture, the "scientific outlook" still has the romantic glow of an untried dream. The technocratic illusion that man-made environment can ever be the image of a permanent scientific order is blind to historical evidence that cities are governed by a tacit agreement on multiplicity, contradiction, tenacious tradition, reckless progress, and a limitless tolerance for individuals. Science must be specialized isolating, value-indifferent, and purely quantitative. With our capacity for incongruous comparisons, we try to solve qualitative problems of racial and social relationships with quantitative statistics; we attach significance to the ratio of old slum units to new slum units because the scientific determinism of the last century postulated that man is the product of his physical environment. The qualitative aspect of the city is the content of this environment, which is nonscientific, because its single definable denominator is social and spiritual self-preservation at maximum well-being. No other epoch has received more persuasive proof of the split between human content and ahuman objectivity than ours. The blind logic of science takes its course regardless of the effects of air, water, and food pollution, drugs, chemical and nuclear weapons, speed and the combustion engine. But in architecture and planning, only that is good which serves the human condition at a particular stage of existence.

If, from this general analysis, one turns to *The City Is the Frontier* by Charles Abrams, hardly any further reading is required to show what a mess the cities are in. Not only the mechanistic approach is at fault, but the debilitation and distortion of the political process are also imposed on public housing projects. Mr. Abrams says in one place: "The urbanization and suburbanization of American life is becoming a treadmill when it should be a frontier. This is the real challenge that urban renewal should be confronting."

Urban renewal subdivides into several approaches. There is the "sweat equity" approach described by Turner, the rooftop gardening approach of the Self-Reliance Institute in Washington, D.C., and, in the book we now have for review, there is the "open-housing" approach which seeks to establish neighborhood

communities with a reasonable balance of white and minority residents—people who themselves decide to play an individual part in making racial segregation and ghettos things of the past. Morris Milgram's *Good Neighborhood* (Norton, $10.95) is filled with illustrations of the "multiplicity," "contradiction," and "tenacious tradition" people take on by living in a modern American city.

Good Neighborhood is a public-spirited book by a man who for more than twenty years has been devoting *his* considerable energies and talents to the creation of open housing communities that work, and to proving this to be possible, culturally beneficial, and even "profitable." He started on this career when his father-in-law, who was a builder, invited him to join the business:

> When I recognized the opportunity for social change involved in the development of housing, I told him I would do so, provided I could build houses for all people. We shook hands on an agreement that his firm would back me financially in my efforts to develop integrated housing if I would learn the business. This I did, beginning in June 1947. For four and a half years I thus built houses for whites only while my conscience hurt.
>
> In 1952, I announced my determination to retool to open-occupancy housing at a meeting at the home of Frank Loescher, then Director of the Mayor's Commission on Human Relations in Philadelphia. I burned my bridges behind me and told the group that I would rather be a laborer and live in a slum than build housing for whites only, that I would in fact, build nothing, not even commercial properties, until I could get my open-occupancy housing projects under way.

The book is the story of his successes, much greater than many people would expect, and also his thorough-going account of where the obstacles lie and what must be done to overcome them. His most valuable legal tool is a Supreme Court decision (*Jones v. Mayer*, 1968) which said:

> . . . when racial discrimination herds men into ghettos and makes their ability to buy property turn on the color of their skin . . . it is a relic of slavery. At the very least, the freedom that Congress is empowered to secure under the Thirteenth Amendment includes the freedom to buy whatever a white man can buy, the right to live where a white man can live. If the Congress cannot say that being a free man means at least this much then the Thirteenth Amendment made a promise the Nation cannot keep.

One trouble with relying on the law is that often not even its administrators regard fair housing provisions with any enthusiasm. The people need to involve themselves in making a change in "tenacious tradition."

Thirty of the states as well as the federal government have passed fair-housing legislation:

> According to the 1970 Census, 63 per cent of the population, that is, 129 million people, live in these thirty states.
>
> In addition 345 cities and counties, including two in the South (Alexandria and Arlington, Virginia) have enacted non-discrimination housing ordinances; 114 of these ordinances are in states with no equal-housing legislation.
>
> If one adds the population of these areas to the thirty states that have enacted fair-housing legislation, the percentage of Americans living in areas which support equal housing for all citizens rises to 75 per cent.
>
> According to HUD's General Counsel, twenty-four of the thirty state laws are now "generally equivalent" to federal standards. Several additional state laws are under review.
>
> *But enactment of laws is almost meaningless unless enforcement follows.*

As a builder of inter-racial communities, Mr. Milgram soon found out that enforcement depends in large part on the people who demand it in order to live in an integrated neighborhood. The traditions of the real estate business are very strong, making it necessary to wear away continually at the myth that a mixed neighborhood never stays "in balance," but tends to become all black. Milgram tells of his experience in an early development of his own:

> One fact became clear sales to whites are not made easily by salespeople who are themselves unwilling to live in multiracial housing projects. We soon realized that sales commissions had to be geared to securing integration. Once this was done—by changing the commission from $100 for any sale to

> $100 for white sales and $10 for black sales—five white sales were made in five weeks by a salesman who knew nothing of real estate, did not believe in integration, and would refuse himself to move into the new community. This success led me to a major breakthrough, a realization that the formula for securing a substantial increase in sales to whites involved getting a salesman who knew real estate, believed in integration, and *would* live in the community. I called the Housing Opportunities Division of the American Friends Service Committee, proclaiming that somewhere in the United States such a salesman must exist. They found him for us! In the spring of 1955, Stuart E. Wallace, a real estate man in Syracuse, New York, was engaged. He moved into the development, handling the sales with great success: All 139 houses were sold in three years, 55 per cent to white buyers and 45 per cent to black buyers.
>
> The hardest task was to secure the first ten or twenty white sales. Once this nucleus had been established, it became easier to attract more white buyers. There was no problem as far as black buyers were concerned.

As the result of the efforts of Morris Milgram and others—as for example the Crenshaw Neighbors in the Los Angeles area, which has achieved balanced integration of blacks, orientals, and whites in a desirable residential section—it is no longer possible to argue that housing integration cannot succeed. There are many such pioneer inter-racial neighborhoods or communities around the country, showing that, as Milgram says, the people themselves determine either success or failure. As he puts it in his conclusion:

> Neighborhoods and schools which are expected to decay will undoubtedly do so—unless we act as if we expect them to survive and flourish, and provide the kind of nourishment they need to do so.

Good Neighborhood is a book on how to generate and spread that nourishment. Mr. Milgram does not give his readers theory, but a recital of vastly encouraging facts.

COMMENTARY
A TRIVIAL FREEDOM

THE question of the cultural cost of the advantages of "mass production" (see Frontiers) is argued generation after generation. In a qualified defense of industrial products, Lyman Bryson, a responsible apologist for the "popular arts," made this comparison in 1952 (in *The Next America*):

> The craftsman of folk art cannot show anything but dignity and good taste under the restraint of custom. The modern industrial democrat shows all kinds of trivial inventions of his own and chooses freely in a wild profusion of the trivial, mass-produced inventions of others. . . .
>
> Vulgarity is the result because vulgarity is the inventiveness of small or inexperienced or too numerous minds. The question that democracy poses is whether or not the restraint of peasant custom is better than the vulgarity of popular choice. . . . the ease with which the shoddiest commercial gadgets invade a market of peasant buyers shows, first, how little attached they are by anything but habit to the fine old things and, second, how much pleasure they get out of choosing.

Bryson is saying, in effect, that if vulgarity *is* the price of freedom, we should be willing to pay it. But the issue has other aspects. Musing on similar comparisons, Michael Blee, a British architect, says in *The Man-Made Object* (Braziller, 1966):

> For the primitive his wooden bowl is valued, fingered felt, and known; a true man-made extension, his spoon is a prehensile projection of his own anatomy. Each of his few possessions has a similar intense reality, each is necessary and life-enhancing. It is surely experientially relevant to ask to what extent such identity can be offered by or demanded of the trivia of materialistic society, the paper plate, the plastic spoon. If identity depends wholly on scarcity, slowness, familiarization, frequent contact, then the contemporary urban environment denies all possibilities of such experience.

While the things of everyday use may be a minor part of our being, it is certainly true that the merchandisers of "the trivia of materialistic society" conspire to convince the buying public that human identity consists of little else. As a critic recently pointed out, the purpose of advertising is to offer "a commodity self" to people who are unhappy or can be convinced that they are unhappy about their lives. The freedom to choose among trivia may be less precious than we have supposed.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
FOLLIES OF STATUS

ONE basic reform in education now going on has had little attention from educators. It is the general effort to abolish the authority of specialists in relation to matters which are not specialties. The more successfully this is accomplished, the more encouragement there will be for self-reliance among the young. The elevation of specialists to an almost priestly status has led to countless distortions in education, causing Ivan Illich to remark that education, today, has a role similar to that of the Church during the Middle Ages.

Peter Lomas, a British physician and psychotherapist, pointed out recently that the assumption by therapists that their specialized training alone makes them competent to help troubled individuals is a serious delusion. When techniques are looked to instead of basic common sense, false standards pervade education. This mistake runs all through modern culture. Leopold Kohr recently noted that the social responsibility of a Vespasian or a Schumacher, if expressed by a present-day student of economics, would do little more than earn him a failing grade. And discussing modern academic philosophy, Lewis Feuer remarked a few years ago: "Would a James Kierkegaard or Nietzsche ever have been able to get his mature works accepted for a Ph.D. degree? Probably not."

Such signs of artificial status are found at all levels (except perhaps kindergarten) in education. An article in *Prevention* for last November cites the finding of two Chicago professors of English:

> The profs said they took a basically well-written paper and changed the language (but not the ideas) to come up with two different versions—one written in straightforward language and the other loaded with verbosity and pedantic terminology.
>
> "Then they submitted the two papers to nine high school teachers; they were surprised to find that all nine gave the verbose papers nearly perfect scores but downgraded the straightforward essays as too simple and shallow." . . .
>
> "The professors then submitted the same two papers to 90 more teachers and came up with similar results. Three out of four high school teachers and two out of three college professors gave higher marks to pompous writing. " (Quoted from a report in *Mother Jones.*)

This sort of artificiality is not easy to get rid of. It seems to be a deep-seated cultural attitude or conceit. Robert Jay Wolff ran into it in his work at Brooklyn College:

> Years ago, when Biology or Chemistry majors would surprise me by electing our Basic Design workshop, I was as puzzled by their outstanding performances as I was exasperated with the stereotyped virtuosity with which many art-minded students went about their tasks. But I soon discovered that the young scientist had a distinct advantage. Having no idea where he was going or where he would like to go in art, his only security was in the firmness of each step he took. The Art major, smug in the notion of what he thought he was after, expected the instructor to provide the vehicle that would get him there. It was always a great satisfaction to see the pleased surprise of the science major when he found that the sustained firmness of his steps actually led him somewhere. And it was even a greater satisfaction to observe the dismay of the art student when he compared results.

The young pick up their distorted notions of "status" from the older generation. It gets into the schools from the culture, and while good teachers always resist this tendency, institutions naturally adopt stereotyped standards which, once established, stultify everything that happens in such places. A good illustration of how this pervasive attitude is transmitted is given by Harry Davis, a potter, in an article in the current *Studio Potter* (Vol. 6, No. 1):

> An event which first opened my eyes on the matter of what is Art and what is not Art, and of status in the arts, occurred when I was an art student, aged 17. I had taken a job as a decorator in a pottery. My parents were happy about this, as it meant that I was associated with something they thought of as Art, though nothing could have been further from the truth, because (as I now see it), the pots were

> appalling. I was very intrigued with the whole potting process and pleased to be able to earn a living in this way. I had also learned to throw and it seemed I was fairly good at it. One day the owners asked me if I would like to leave the decorating and learn the throwing side properly from an old man who worked there. I was delighted and agreed, but when I told my parents about this, they were quite crestfallen. I had failed them on the academic front, and the vision of my plodding up the ladder in the local council offices to the eventual pension had been abandoned. Art seemed to them to be a presentable alternative, and, who knows, there was always the possibility that I might do something "original," but there I was, about to learn to be a thrower. To my mother this was a terrible come-down. She was reduced to tears, and I was perplexed and unable to understand the reason for this reaction. Many years were to elapse before I was able to see how events in social history could lead to such a distortion in values.

This article in *Studio Potter is* an examination through Western history of the relation between craftsmanship and what is accounted "art." With Walter Gropius, Davis regards the separation of the two as a "fatal legacy" which isolated certain activities as "fine art," and in so doing, as Gropius put it, "robbed all arts of their basic identity and common life." This separation began, according to Mr. Davis, during the sixteenth century, following the age of Da Vinci and Michelangelo, but his general discussion seems more valuable than the historical account:

> Clearly one can have craftsmanship without what we call Art, but one cannot have art without craftsmanship. Somewhere in this sequence there is, one might say, a frontier zone where art becomes a craft in the non-imaginative sense. It is unfortunate that this is thought of as a fixed line, arbitrarily located, instead of as a zone with room to manoeuvre. The creation of a work of art involves the artist in innumerable movements back and forth across this zone. He switches between the purely manual and the purely imaginative, and the two merge continuously. It is perhaps even more unfortunate that people find themselves, or so they think, located on one side or the other of this imaginary line. In consequence, you get people who in certain situations will proclaim indignantly, or even conceitedly, "I am an Artist," and thereby put paid to any further argument, and others who when brought into contact with what they think is art proclaim pathetically, "Of course I am no Artist," and venture no comment. The probability is that in fact neither of them is uttering the truth. These arbitrary divisions are post-renaissance phenomena. One might say post-renaissance social irritants, because before the 15th century these distinctions were not made. Men and their occupations were distinguished on the basis of the physical tasks they performed. Painters made pictures. Image makers carved in stone and wood. Potters made pots. Although they made exceedingly fine things—beautiful things—significant things—exciting things—whichever adjective happens to be fashionable—none of these people were called artists. The interesting thing is that their languages had no such word, and the thing we call art was liable to emerge in almost any artifact that craftsmen made. In consequence—and with an absence of bally-hoo—a cultural something, a human something, permeated the entire social environment. One should note that the question of the relationship between artist and craftsman did not arise as they were one and the same person.

The split occurred, Mr. Davis says, when the work of the "artist" became a symbol of affluence and status. When the economic life of Europe began to be dominated by great bankers and merchant princes, the arts flourished abnormally from their patronage, while, at the same time, craftsmen came to be regarded as mere laborers. Not until the days of William Morris was there a deliberate attempt to restore respect for the makers of objects both useful and beautiful.

In France, we might add, the separation of the craftsman from the role of artist or designing architect came with the Royal Academy established by Colbert in the time of Louis XIV. In this school the manual skills were omitted from the curriculum, with training only in abstract design and Galilean mechanics. There are today scholarly architects who regard this change as the downfall of their art.

One recalls, finally, that the archaic Greeks had no word for art, and that the Balinese say simply that they try to do everything as well as possible.

FRONTIERS

The Troubles of Transition

FOR twenty or more years we have been reading about the decline and demise of the family-sized farm. The figures have been published again and again. The New England farmers especially, with their narrow and odd-shaped fields, can't compete with the vast expanses cultivated by agribusiness in the West, using tractors of great efficiency, so large that they are restricted to farmers with a great deal of level land and enough total production to be able to buy these monstrous machines. The capital investment for a modern farm has become so large that only the really rich can go into farming, it is said.

Fortunately, another kind of thinking about farming is slowly emerging. The rise in food prices has made organic farming more competitive, and there are pioneers who have shown the nutritional and cultural value of small-scale or subsistence agriculture. These demonstrations, however, are now mainly useful as anticipations of the kind of farming that can become general only through transformation of American society.

A curious parallel to the fate of the family farm may be seen in what has happened to publishing. It is becoming increasingly difficult to find much more than highly promoted best-sellers in many of the book stores. Mass marketing techniques have taken over. Books are hardly books, any longer—they are "merchandise." The costs of printing and binding have risen beyond reach for all books not expected to sell in fairly large quantities, with the result that often the serious writer finds himself restricted to university press publishers supported by subsidy. In the *Nation* for Oct. 22, 1977, Gene Lyons tells about a Texan "rare book dealer and part-time publisher," W. Thomas Taylor, who likes to issue carefully made books that he finds of particular excellence, having to price them, however, at a level where only rich collectors can buy. Mr. Lyons gives an example, a translation of a French novella written in 1924, which Taylor published recently, offering it for $90.

> To produce 500 copies, Taylor says, has cost him $20,000, not counting his own or his secretary's time. Rapid calculation shows that his markup is about 100 per cent over cost compared to the publishing industry's usual 500 per cent. "The truth is, he continues, "that it has become very difficult to make a profit on a handmade book, and most producers and publishers of such books don't do it for a profit. Some are subsidized by universities, some by the National Endowment for the Arts, and some by other businesses, my book-selling business for example. But a woman who would think nothing of spending $50 on a pair of shoes would think it ludicrous to spend the same on a fine book, although the shoes will last a year, the book 500 years. I think this is the last generation that will see a really good book produced."

There is substantial truth in this analysis, even though the example given vastly exaggerates normal production costs. Publishing for a small market of intelligent readers is now extremely difficult. Even if a publisher produces a book at reasonable cost, how will he get it into the stores without going through conventional channels which require mass market items to support the intricate scheme of distribution?

Surviving as the publisher of only good books has also become a dream of the future, although, here and there, one may find such a publisher who somehow manages to keep going.

How can this unhappy situation be changed? The paperback is perhaps a partial solution, but as Gene Lyons says, the paperback revolution "has not only brought cheap editions of classic works within the range of Everykid but has also succeeded in making books into cheap utilitarian objects." He adds: "The printing and collecting of fine editions is now seen as vaguely shameful." While we are not here championing bibliophile hobbies, but decently printed volumes of lasting merit, it remains true that the low-cost paperback classics are possible only because they are produced by mass production equipment

developed to accommodate the long press runs of "popular" books that can only be called junk.

There is food for thought in Lewis Mumford's reflections (in *Art and Technics,* 1952) concerning the industrial multiplication of visual images—graphic reproduction of works of art and other rare objects. Who, he wonders, will reverence and cherish a great picture when its copies are circulated by the million?

> Mass production imposes on the community a terrible new burden: the duty to constantly consume. In the arts, at the very moment the extension of the reproductive process promised to widen the area of freedom, this new necessity, the necessity to keep the plant going, has served to undermine habits of choice, discrimination, selectivity that are essential to both creation and enjoyment. Quantity now counts for more than quality.

This comment also applies to books.

Meanwhile, just as the time may come when agriculture will have to undergo extraordinary changes when the diminishing supply of fossil fuel makes all those big machines (and artificial fertilizers) obsolete, a very different sort of defeat may overtake present methods of publishing. In *Science* for last Dec. 2 Garrett Hardin asks: "Will Xerox Kill Gutenberg?"

Copying machines, he says, have now reduced their charges to three cents a page, and with further increase in the cost of books, a "really expensive book may be copyable for one-tenth its purchase price."

> The higher book prices go, the less we hesitate to infringe copyrights. . . . Original publication with its expensive editorial and typographic costs, is markedly subject to economies of scale. In contrast, the cost of xerographing individual copies is nearly constant. Every increase in the economic advantage of xerography encourages more copying and less buying of books, this increases the price of future books published, encouraging more copying, which raises the price further. . . . Publishers are caught in a vicious spiral.

Interestingly, most of the mass circulation magazines of earlier years were driven out of business by higher production costs and the competition (in advertising) of television. There is an obvious transition now going on in magazine publishing, with a few new good ones supported by environmental movement enthusiasm, and dozens of other ventures every year, most of which do not survive for long.

Our commercial civilization may soon exhibit still more indisputable signs of being on the way to exhaustion and failure. These are times, then, when there is need to watch for new and wholesome developments in publishing, and to give them what support we can. We need fewer but better magazines and books. Regional, small-scale publishing for serious readers, along with local crafts as an expression of community living, would be welcome contributions to cultural change.