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EARTH'S ORPHANS

[This article is the Prologue of Danilo Dolci's *Sicilian Lives* (1981), reprinted by permission from Pantheon Books, the publisher, and with the consent of Justin Vitiello, translator and editor.]

Many Europeans think of America as an extension of New York City. Similarly, many Americans—and Milanese—think that all of Sicily, perhaps the whole Italian South, is Mafia.

I came here—to Trappeto, a village of peasants and fishermen on Castellammare Bay about thirty miles from Palermo—in 1952. Coming from the North, I knew I was totally ignorant. Looking all around me, I saw no streets, just mud and dust. Not a single drugstore—or sewer. The dialect didn't have a word for sewer. I started working with masons and peasants, who kindly, gently, taught me their trades. That way my spectacles were no longer a barrier. Every day, all day, as the handle of hoe or shovel burned the blisters deeper, I learned more than any book could teach me about this people's struggle to exist. After work I'd ask questions, trying to comprehend their reality. And I discovered that Sicilians were not what Northern Italians made them out to be. Those stereotypes—"bandits," "dirt-eaters," "savages"—were the products of racism.

Listening to the people one by one, understanding their language better and better, I began to write down our conversations. I realized that these painfully slow moments of radical self-expression were for them occasions to flower. I wrote quickly, respecting their syntax that needed no logical connectives, modifying only the most recondite words. Phrase upon phrase, the people's self-expression unraveled their inner life.

I couldn't write fast enough, and bit by bit I discovered that my note-taking was merely the occasion for these people to become more aware of their personal and cultural value. So I was tempted to tear up my reams of notes. But I found that after some of these encounters during which we almost burned ourselves out trying to clarify too much, it was useful to review what we had said. That way we could study questions in greater depth, emend, add ("last time I was ashamed to tell you, but . . ."). Also, reading these notes or hearing them read aloud, other people might feel that their values were being expressed and perhaps be moved to express themselves in new ways.

All this left a deep mark in me. Their inner lives, their most intimate experiences, could be frightening, fascinating, or both at the very same moment. At the beginning of our work, these people, mute for centuries, uttered, literally, their first words. These initial tremors turned into waves of communication; then into an acceptance of responsibility for their future, at first on a personal level, next in groups, and finally in the whole area. And all that meant real development.

From our profession of ignorance a method was gradually born. While some of our encounters developed into lasting friendships, others led to democratic organizing and group action. The individual and structural implications of this process, which became a useful method for people engaged in diverse activity in other parts of Italy and the world, led me to call it grass-roots consciousness- and conscience-raising (*autoanalisi popolare*).

In 1952 in Trappeto, wages for a working day of twelve or thirteen hours were $1.25 (a year later they rose to $1.50). Bread cost 30 cents a pound. That meant families whose fathers could find work—usually for three or four months a year—could afford four pounds of bread a day. Summers, on so-called half-time, a day's pay was 75 cents. Half-time meant eight hours.

The daily scenario went like this. At four A.M., when you still might see the lights of fishing boats in the bay, peasants who might have a small piece of land (maintained at exorbitant cost because the Mafia controlled irrigation) trudged to work. Around dawn the day laborers congregated in the main square, hands in pockets, feet planted. At their leisure the straw bosses would show up and choose whoever struck their fancy (or greased their palms) to work that day. If the day laborers were lucky and had connections, they'd be taken on for an olive- or grape-harvest season. During the morning, the square would fill up, with those left without a job that day and with Mafiosi and friends—government bureaucrats, landowners, the whole entourage—who would lounge around cafes getting rich by smiling.

In this postwar context, it was crucial to understand why many people had resorted to banditism, that phenomenon representing defiance of a system where the forces of law and order condoned Mafia violence. I was arrested during a strike we had organized to invent work. Sent to Palermo's Ucciardone Prison, I developed a good friendship with a man who explained to me why he had become a bandit. Just married, he and his wife found a place on Madonna Street in Partinico. One evening he's home sitting at the table while his wife is making dinner. There's a knock at the door. She answers. It's a child, thin and gaunt: "My mother says soon as you strain the pasta could you leave us the broth, I mean the water? See, nobody at home's had anything to eat for three days, and she has to nurse the baby but the milk's stopped, so she wants to drink something to see if it gets the milk flowing." The woman sends the child home with some food and dishes out the macaroni. Suddenly she bursts into tears: "I don't feel like eating." The husband gets up from the table, embraces her, and goes off to join the bandits.

In this area (Partinico, Trappeto, Montelepre, a total of 33,000 inhabitants), the most bandit-ridden in Sicily, out of the 350 brigands, only one had two parents who had gotten through fourth grade. Among them, the bandits had about 650 years of schooling. Disregarding the quality of education, or lack thereof, they averaged less than a second-grade education. In contrast, they had spent a total of 3,000 years in jail. And arrests and trials were still in progress.

The government was spending $65,000 every month on police and jails in the area: more than $750,000 a year. Meanwhile, though they claimed to finance programs in community development, we'd never even seen a social worker. The area had 4,000 people who needed jobs to make it through the week, but our society provided nothing. It was chaos.

Not a single charitable institution had helped the families of imprisoned or dead fathers. The children, the real victims, were virtually condemned to illiteracy. For almost a decade (1945-1954), the State had intervened, spending over $12,500,000 of the public's money to jail and kill. But it had done nothing to put the water of the local river (the Jato) to any use. That meant $200 million worth of water had flowed out to sea. A project in which that water had been utilized and distributed democratically would have provided work, a living, for everybody in this area. That way there would have been no banditism. Such a phenomenon was rooted in despair.

The immediate creation of real jobs would solve many of our most serious problems. How else could the unemployed live? How else could the people of Palermo Province manage from day to day? In our work, we had concentrated on a small area of western Sicily. Now we branched out, studying conditions town by town, from the sea into the mountains. We gathered denunciations of intolerable situations, the research material urgently needed for a liberation struggle. It struck me that I was no longer simply serving the people with my pen. I was also expressing myself.

Naturally, outside the area where I lived and worked it was more difficult to find people willing to tell their life stories. But I tried to win trust, develop real friendships. When I talked to new acquaintances, I never took notes. Only if they came to understand that they were real co-workers in a serious research project did we agree that it was vital to write down our conversations. Talking about your poverty and depression, about your deepest problems, is excruciatingly painful. But if you cannot excavate, thrash things out, reach a point where real dialogue takes place, you never get to the threshold of the solution.

I tried to excavate the city as well. I asked some friends in Palermo if they knew anyone willing and able to introduce me to its poorest neighborhoods. When they understood what I was looking for, they sent me to Gino Orlando, an unforgettable human being.

I met him in one of Palermo's slums. He was giving shaves in a back alley. As we began to talk, his intelligence and knowledge leaped out at me. We understood each other from the first, and our relationship led to profound research. He'd had a real sense of direction already; now he had the occasion to clarify himself and focus his energies. Knowing Gino was invaluable for anyone trying to understand Palermo's cans of worms and nests of vipers. To this day, young scholars and activists seek him out for consultation and for a vision of the people's essential needs that goes beyond party and union interests.

To deal with the complexities of Palermo, we needed, along with grass-roots analysis, facts and figures. We discovered, for instance, that in 1951 Palermo Province (an area of almost 1,800 square miles, population 1,019,796), 69.1 percent of the people, desperate for work, were unemployed (compared with 52.3 percent in Milan). Yet official studies revealed that "job applications [in employment offices] cannot materialize on the basis of incentive to work if, as is verified by statistics, that incentive does not exist." Even if any of the statistics were accurate, the real issue was their qualitative meaning: *who* was represented by these figures and *how* were they represented?

The aim of our work was not primarily to interpret sociological data but rather to mobilize concerned people in the province via self-awareness and analysis of their problems (the results of stigmatizing preconceptions) and to bring about social change. We had to break the vicious circle of poverty and depression at some point. Since Italy lacked a politically mature majority with a sense of democratic processes, and since the people didn't have precise instruments to do the kind of research vitally needed for well-planned and rapid development, the wheels had to be set in motion from the deepest furrows.

This process led us around 1960 to a most disturbing realization. In western Sicily, where in the face of the most widespread poverty, depression, illiteracy, and unemployment the Mafia was sinking its tenacious roots deeper and deeper, there was an incredible, literally absurd amount of waste everywhere, by everyone. On the simplest level, people threw a lot of things away. And consciously or not, we failed to use existing resources or to develop new ones. Nor did we evaluate potential resources. Meanwhile huge sums of money were squandered, frozen, or spent unwisely. Was waste innate in people? Or could we become aware of how to create an alternative: an organic way of life? Could we understand how time is being, a locus where we can create meaning, new values? In this area where development hardly existed or progressed haphazardly, reactively, at such a snail's pace that it was hard to perceive, could we find a working hypothesis whereby we could deal with waste? In a culture still bound by primitive technology, could we find ways and means to follow up on initiatives and to organize with a broad base? How could we best use our available natural and

human resources? What, exactly, were the real obstacles to development?

This spot is like many of the earth's orphans and vagabonds. Beneath the tattered rags, the wild head of hair, the scars, she's lovely. You can see how, given a chance to ripen, she could glow with intelligence, dignity, life. You can also imagine how she might go to seed, in pain and bitterness.

Traveling through western Sicily you see towns clustered, densely populated. Although there's virtually no industry in Partinico or Alcamo, the former has 27,000 inhabitants, the latter 40,000. In the countryside, you find a few isolated houses and abandoned fortresses, many of which serve as shelter for peasants and their livestock.

You sense in people's faces and movements the weight of the centuries, of the ancient tracks of Greeks, Romans Arabs, Normans, Spaniards, French, Northern Italians, of all the people who've come, mostly via armed invasion.

The land along the coasts tends to be divided into small landholdings. The desolate mountain interior is dominated by the heritage of feudalism. Vast tracts of land defy agrarian reform and make things easy for Mafiosi, heirs of the endangered species called aristocracy, to be masters of all they survey.

Spring doesn't exist. Summer seems to blaze without end—until the first rains of October bring some green. By Christmas, along the coast, the first almond trees are flowering in fields and citrus groves. The rains subside a few weeks after Easter, and except for the fields and rocky slopes where vines and olive trees have sunk their roots, the land is parched again.

To understand the complexity of this culture, you can't generalize. Sicily is as big as Switzerland. It has 4.5 million people (1 million more than Norway). Taormina is not Corleone. The Catania-Ragusa industrial belt is not Lampedusa's or today's Palma di Montechiaro. Enna, Caltanisetta, Agrigento, Trapani—each area is unique.

In the area where I'd been living and working for years, the courage and commitment of a few people began to bear fruit. The people's awareness had matured and they had, via nonviolent strategies, pressured the government to construct a large dam (the Jato) and irrigation system on the outskirts of Partinico. In addition, they wanted to put the water to its best use and use it at a fair price. That is, they wanted democratic water, not the Mafia's. The next step, then, was organizing a peasant cooperative to distribute it democratically, thereby making the water a lever to change the politico-economic structure of the society.

An ancient proverb warns, "You play alone, you never lose." But years of struggle were now concentrated in a new and dangerous grass-roots analysis, a collective effort, that led, with the help of trials and tribunals, to a whole series of clarifications regarding the misuses and abuses of power. We discovered that the host of political compromises which have led to Mafia control in post-war Sicily, a control initially aided and abetted by the American military and OSS, can be attributed to four kinds of perpetrators of this classic client system: (1) opportunist politicians who, mostly during election campaigns, meet with whoever can get them votes, good contacts, clout—it's "you help me and I'll help you"; (2) politicians who coldly and calculatingly exploit the Mafia to get power and then work out all kinds of double-deals and doublecrosses—while they are at the same time systematically exploited by the Mafia; (3) full-blooded Mafiosi who often succeed in getting elected to high offices (fortunately, they are in the minority); (4) young people who try to buck the system but eventually sell out.

The question still has to be asked: What are the local conditions that have made exploitation by the Mafia possible in the electoral process? In other words, how has the Mafia, in the postwar period, been able to have a hand in the governance

of Italy, on local, provincial, regional, and even national and international levels? (And I'm not just alluding, in the latter case, to the heroin traffic, but to multinational dealings as well.)

If you look at Palermo, city and province, it's self-evident that the great majority are discontented, often chronically so. People are in mourning, embittered. The essential question, then, is, Why can't they act to become a new force, a new political majority? Why does the situation seem at first glance so irrational, so absurd? Is it because we can't put together all the pieces of our own inner puzzle? Or are we confronting an engine with stripped gears that forever grinds down? Determined as they are by a particular past can present conditions be changed? If so, how? To what end?

Trying to understand these questions, we must undergo the slow and painful process of confronting what always seems to be the same old story, of pinpointing the real problems to be met head-on, and of opening ourselves up to new solutions. This apparently random movement will, however, result in a response based on past experience, our intuitions and aspirations, our authentic awareness and knowledge. It is in this context that we must try to find a thread of unity in our research to clarify all the difficulties of creating democratic structures of life in Palermo and its surrounding areas. Our instruments are primitive: naming, expressing ourselves, thinking.

Anywhere we go in this world, it is hard to evolve living structures in which we can communicate authentic needs and values and create a mutually productive life. Cancers, crises, violence, are endemic to every human community on this globe. But in the context of our aborting terrestrial city, we try in our work and in our books to provoke substantive, structural, organic change.

Of course, even a documentary study depends on your point of view. Other people might see and compose it differently. Whatever the case, readers have the luxury of reflecting. These pages don't give off any stench. You can leaf through them in a comfortable chair, between meals. A book speaks to your mind, not to your nose, eyes, ears, whole being. And after all, you can forget it. Reading, you don't risk slipping in the muck—or vomiting—as you do when you walk the streets of Palermo, Cammarata, Corleone, Palmi di Montechiaro, Licata . ..

I've always been struck by how much most Sicilians desire truth. They are the real authors of this book. Speaking from their own experience about their concrete problems, they have succeeded in expressing something that is universally human. I am profoundly grateful to them—as anyone else should be if he or she, meditating on what they have spoken, seeks to conceive a new world.

Nowadays, it's easy to find tales to read: Russian, American, Chinese. And in the particulars of a given time and place you can detect tracings of the universal.

Time passes for Sicily, as it does for the rest of the world. Sometimes salaries increase—especially when people act on their own initiative, organize, grow stronger. Bit by bit, people change their skin and the way they cluster. And if you resist, patiently, day by day, and listen to the spirit rumbling strangely from the depths, you can recognize a voice, voices, that are yours as well.

These voices, however muted or choked, can have a unity. Or they can be a source from which life can unfold: the bursting and flowering of what struggle to be expressed. From primitive documents in which people faced urgent conflicts and tried to change their lives, I've gathered these voices without shaking loose the dust of earth from which they spring. Perhaps they speak for all of us, in all our variations.

The world needs to see itself. Beyond distracting noises, it has to know itself via its most intimate voices.

DANILO DOLCI

REVIEW

A FORM OF COMMON SENSE

IT is a particular pleasure to take note of a book which breaks the rules dominating the field of its undertaking and goes on to undeniable success. The success, of course has to be practically "underground," which is why most people have never heard of this book—*Mental Health Through Will-Training,* published in 1950 by Christopher (North Quincy, Mass.) and available today from Recovery, Inc., 116 South Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill., at $12.00. The author is Abraham A. Low, founder of Recovery, Inc., a psychiatrist who devoted his energies, until he died in 1954, to developing a therapeutic method of preventing relapses in former mental patients and chronicity in nervous patients. His idea was to teach the patients to help themselves. He did, and it worked. There are now about a thousand self-help groups around the country, demonstrating this success.

What rules did Dr. Low break? Well, first of all he used the word "will" and spoke of "training" it. Until quite recently, the will has had no existence at all for the rank and file of psychiatrists and psychologists. Second, he abandoned the psycho-therapeutic orthodoxies and their language, using an ordinary vocabulary to explain his method of group therapy. He says in his preface:

> Psychotherapy, individual or group, is invariably based (1) on a philosophy, (2) on techniques. In years past, the field was dominated by three main philosophies and techniques: Freud's psychoanalysis, Adler's individual psychology, and Jung's approach which, because of its vagueness and mysticism, defies precise classification. More recently, the psychoanalytic doctrine has taken the lead and all but crowded out its erstwhile rivals. It established its hegemony in universities and philanthropic foundations and gained unquestioned prominence in the province of psychotherapy. The doctrine appears to be in firm control in the official psychiatric organizations, in the mental hygiene activities of the national government in the veterans administration, presumably also in the hospitals of the armed forces. Official psychotherapy, in the United States today, is essentially psychoanalysis.

This situation is doubtless now somewhat changed, although it can certainly be said that no new psychotherapeutic orthodoxy has arisen to replace the Freudian school, the influence of which may be relaxed or diluted, but hardly eliminated. There is point, therefore, in quoting Dr. Low's blunt statement of his own position:

> The author rejects the psychoanalytic doctrine both as philosophy and therapeutic technique. In point of philosophy, he cannot share the view that human conduct is the result of unconscious drives, sexual or otherwise. To his way of thinking, adult life is not *driven* by instincts but *guided* by Will. In emphasizing the priority of Will over Drives, he is merely echoing the principles and teachings of the late Professor Emil Kraepelin, founder of modern psychiatry, and those of the late Professor Wilhelm Wundt, father of modern psychology. Quite proudly he claims also to echo the voice of common experience and common sense. Whatever may be meant by drives, be they instinctual cravings (the favorite psychoanalytic term), or emotional trends, desires, wishes, yearnings and learnings, they all eventuate in impulses, acting or ready for action. To the author it is inconceivable that adult human life can be ordered without a Will holding down impulses. What precisely is meant by the term Will is amply demonstrated in the text.

The book has no index, but inspection of some of the chapters shows that will means making either a "yes" or a "no" decision about the desirability of a thought or an impulse. Feelings and sensations, Dr. Low points out, are beyond the control of will, but the thoughts or impulses which lead to feelings can be either accepted or checked.

> Suppose an idea lodges itself in the brain suggesting danger. It is then for the will to judge and decide whether or not danger exists. If the Will accepts (says "yes" to) the idea of danger, then, the thought of danger will mobilize feelings of insecurity and will release in their wake rebellious sensations and vehement impulses. The total experience will then be that of insecurity. Conversely, if the Will decrees that no danger threatens the thought of insecurity will be discontinued and feelings sensations and impulses will retain their customary

equilibrium. You will understand now that the ideas rising in the mind offer suggestions to which the Will replies with "yes" or "no."

There is this further explanation:

> If a person is seized with grief or stimulated by joy it would be senseless for the Will to claim that the joy is false or the grief impossible. Feelings are either experienced or not experienced. Their existence, wisdom and probability cannot be denied or affirmed. The same holds for sensations. If the head aches it would be absurd for the Will to object that, "No, this is no headache. It is unwise, untrue or improbable." Clearly, if the Will is to intervene in order to control the total experience of insecurity, its "no" cannot be directed to feelings and sensations. Instead, it must address itself to thoughts and impulses.

A basic point in this work is the folly of glorying in being "right" in a dispute, and then indignant and angry when your view is not accepted. To get steamed up and then disturbed because of the rejection of your righteousness is too big a price to pay. The "right" and "wrong" of an issue or a hurt is *trivial* compared to maintaining one's mental health.

The patient watches the drift of his thoughts and "spots" tendencies which will lead to some sort of relapse. Most of all he must prevent acts of "sabotage," which are excuses for not using the will. At the meetings of Recovery the members help one another by recounting their psychological experiences and telling how they dealt with them. They study together the art of "spotting" and catch each other up when there is a tendency to sabotage. As Low says:

> The members of the Association [use] proudly the "Recovery language." The most important parts of its vocabulary are the words "sabotage" and authority. The authority of the physician is sabotaged if the patient presumes to make a diagnostic, therapeutic or prognostic statement. The verbiage of the temperamental lingo ("unbearable," "intolerable," "uncontrollable") constitutes sabotage because of the assumption that the condition is of a serious nature, which is a diagnosis or, that it is difficult to repair, which is a prognosis. It is a crass example of sabotage if the claim is advanced that, "my headache is there the very minute I wake up. I didn't have time to think about it. It came before I even had a chance to become emotional. How can that be nervous?" A statement of this kind throws a serious doubt on the validity of the physician's diagnosis and sabotages his authority. Likewise, it is a case of self-diagnosing and consequently sabotage to view palpitations as a sign of a heart ailment, of head pressure as meaning brain tumor, of sustained fatigue as leading to physical exhaustion. Once the physician has made the diagnosis of a psychoneurotic or post psychotic condition, the patient is no longer permitted to indulge in the pastime of self-diagnosing. If he does he is practicing sabotage. Patients are expected to lose their major symptoms after two months of Recovery membership and class attendance. . . .
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> Contrary to expectation, it is comforting to the patient to be called a saboteur. Considering himself as such he knows that he has "not yet" learned to avoid resisting the physician. The "not yet" is reassuring. It suggests that in time he will learn. The patients encourage one another to wait until they get well. They warn one another against impatience. The most effective slogan handed down from veteran to novice is, "Wait till you will learn to give up sabotaging."

The point of this counsel needs illustration. During one meeting of a Recovery group in Southern California a woman told of her fear of heart trouble and how she took a brisk walk of eight blocks to show that she had overcome it, and then, after what she thought was a little flutter, walked two blocks more. The others in the group congratulated her on her taking a vigorous walk to prove her health, but one of them pointed out that she might be diagnosing herself. Had she been to a doctor to find out if she really had some heart trouble? No, she said, "I just couldn't do that!" Then another member said, "But you can, you know. I went to a hospital and spent seven thousand dollars for those doctors to *prove* to me that I was organically sound—nothing wrong with me." Self-diagnosis is a bad thing if it opens the way to self-indulgence in sabotage.

What then is sabotage? It is finding excuses for not taking charge of one's life, for declaring, "I can't help myself." The members say to each other, "You can, you know."

The bulk of this book is made of reports of panel discussions by ex-patients, with one of their number for leader. We said at the beginning that this method works, and the evidence is in these reports. One other thing becomes apparent: These are people who *want* to get well, who want to stop making excuses for not getting well.

What they learn from Dr. Low's book—which they read aloud at each meeting—is the indispensable value of common sense. He says in one place:

> If I speak of a philosophy I do not refer to a complex system of thought as described in textbooks. What I have in mind is what has been called the philosophy of life. Let me add immediately that I know three philosophies of this kind only: realism, romanticism and intellectualism. If in the pursuit of your daily activities you coddle your feelings you will act as a romantic; if you pamper your thoughts your conduct will be that of an intellectual. Your behavior will then be governed by feelings whose telltale story has been hastily believed, or by thoughts whose immature suggestions were uncritically accepted. In either case, your action will be guided by the subjective promptings of your inner experiences instead of by the objective requirements of outer reality. If you were a realist you would give first consideration to the actual facts of the prevailing situation and would not hesitate to suppress your thoughts or shelve your feelings if you found they conflicted with the realities of the situation.

A concluding comment about this sort of writing might be that it is necessary to accept its definitions in order to find out what it means. There could be endless finespun arguments with Dr. Low about his terms, but that would defeat the purpose of reading him.

COMMENTARY
MORE ON MEIKLEJOHN

CROWDED out of this week's "Children" was this conclusion on Alexander Meiklejohn:

His next venture in education was to become head of the new Experimental College of the University of Wisconsin, where the intent was "to get students to think about human problems, without being restricted by academic disciplines." What, asks Cynthia Brown, did Meiklejohn and his staff do with their freedom? She answers:

> First they abandoned all courses and subjects. Instead they planned a curriculum with one central theme for each of the two years. The first was to be devoted to the study of Athenian civilization in the first century B. C. from Pericles to Plato. The second year the students would become immersed in the civilization of the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The contrast between these two civilizations was intended to bring into focus the common underlying problems of human living in Western societies. To bring these problems home, each student would be required to conduct a regional study, an investigation of his own home region, modeled on the recent study by Robert and Helen Lynd, *Middletown*. Students would conduct this investigation during the summer vacation between their two years at the college and would submit it by January of their second year.

Students came to the Experimental College from all over the country, but it couldn't last. Meiklejohn allowed Communist students to make themselves heard on the campus—all six of them—and he welcomed Dora Russell as a visitor and speaker. There were also some very bright Jews in the student body. So the Experimental College—which was never large—closed its doors in 1932, Meiklejohn moved to Berkeley, Calif., where he wrote and taught for the San Francisco School for Social Studies, modeled on the New School in New York. World War II put an end to this splendid undertaking. For the rest of his life, Meiklejohn devoted his energies to the defense of civil liberties and the meaning of the First Amendment. The year before his death he spent a summer with the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, taking part in discussions with Robert M. Hutchins and Scott Buchanan. He was, for those who met and talked with him there, a strong, vital intelligence living in the frailest of bodies, yet an unforgettable presence still on the American scene.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
ALEXANDER MEIKLEJOHN

IN 1918, the city of Pawtucket, Rhode Island, celebrated the 250th anniversary of its founding. Four miles from Providence, Pawtucket was a center and could be called the creator in America of the textile industry. In 1790 a local blacksmith studied the drawing (made from memory) by an English mechanic of Arkwright's spinning machine and built one that worked. The industry grew and prospered, and when Alexander Meiklejohn, President of Amhurst College, addressed the celebrating audience, he had reason to speak with understanding of Pawtucket's heritage, since his father had come there in 1880 to contribute his knowledge of color for textiles, bringing Alexander with him, a boy of eight years. (While the family was Scottish, Alexander's childhood was in Rochdale, England, where, thirty-six years earlier, twenty-eight impoverished weavers had begun the cooperative movement as a way of staying alive.)

Meiklejohn began his address:

> This city has been made by machines. Here Jencke set up his forge, here Slater began the manufacture of cotton. And since their day this group of people has led the way in the building and using of machines for the making of goods which men desire. We are a machine city. It is our strength, our glory—and our problem.

With something like the clarity of Thomas Carlyle, who wrote on the subject of machinery ninety years before, Meiklejohn invited attention to the "implications" of an industrial civilization.

> Machines have brought to men results, some of them aimed at, some of them quite unintended and unnoticed. First, machines have increased the numbers of our population and, at the same time, the supply of material wealth for the use of the population. The machine magnifies human work, makes it more efficient, multiplies it, in its effect, by ten, by a hundred, by a thousand it may be. It needs more people for its work; it can support more people by its products. As a result of the machine mode of life, we have more people in our communities, more wealth at their service.
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> But again, the machines have claimed the people themselves as parts of the machinery. They have made human life more mechanical. The machine which extends the power of the human body at the same time makes the body a part of itself. Men and women are taken into mills and shops and offices to be used, more than they were before, as tools, as instruments, as parts of a machine technique. The human life which uses machines is, in turn, used by them.
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> Again, machines have broken down the community and stability of towns and cities. They have changed the town from a settled group of individuals and families into a place through which people flow in constantly changing streams. The machines of transportation carry people off to other places in search of wealth and opportunity, while, on the other hand, the machines in the mills are ceaselessly dragging other people in from the ends of the earth to take their places in the mills. Our communities are no longer places of settled abode. They are changing, flowing streams made up of elements novel and strange and foreign to each other, and ever replaced by others strange to them.

The family life, too, he pointed out, loses its unity and its integrity. Speaking in 1918, soon after the ending of World War I, he told his audience:

> That was no war of groups or tribes or even nations. It was the world at war, two huge, enormous forces fighting for mastery of our industrial power with every ounce of strength the world and its machines could give, being used to turn the scale. It was a war so great that all men had and all they were seemed to depend upon the issue, so great that many of us lived in ghastly fear that human life as we now have it would smash and go to pieces. Machines brought on the trouble, and when it came they made it monstrous in its power.

He saw it all coming—what we talk about so much, today—and how fitting, we may say to ourselves, that he was a college president! But who, it must be added, actually *heard* him? The same question needs to be asked about the vision and insight which flowed from this great educator

throughout his long life, until he died at ninety-two in Berkeley, Calif., in 1964.

Fortunately, there is now a book in which the essentials of Meiklejohn's thought are recorded, published last year by the Meiklejohn Civil Liberties Institute (P.O. Box 673, Berkeley, Calif. 94701). *Alexander Meiklejohn, Teacher of Freedom* is the work of Cynthia Stokes Brown as editor, presenting "a collection of his educational, philosophical, and legal writings," along with a biographical study. Meiklejohn went to Brown University, took his Ph.D. in philosophy at Cornell and then taught philosophy at Brown until he was invited to become president of Amherst. A believer in the catalysis of distinguished minds, Meiklejohn brought R. H. Tawney to Amherst to teach and lecture, and invited others to visit for several weeks to stir up the thinking of students—among them William Butler Yeats, Charles Beard, and Harold J. Laski.

What was Meiklejohn like as a teacher? One student who took his sophomore course in logic reported:

> A hundred or more of us sat on benches in the dingy chemistry lecture hall where the periodic table of the elements on the chart before us was soon forgotten (along with the smells from the laboratory) as we watched and listened while Prexy held forth. He would begin with a selection from the *Euthyphro* or perhaps the *Phædrus.* Then, eyes flashing, and voice trembling from excitement, he would carry the battle to us, testing our comprehension of what had been said, summoning us to debate, challenging us to criticize his thought and our own. There was nothing namby-pamby about his use of the discussion method—no easy-going "What do you think, Mr. Smith?" or "How do you feel, Mr. Jones?" Instead it was: "How should you think? What ought you to feel? What conclusion have you reached and why?" . . . On occasions, before the closing bell, a kind of incandescence would descend on us, and the embers of the argument, so to speak, burst into blazing flame: Afterward we would realize that the experience had touched us where we lived.

Meiklejohn's career as an educator resembled Socrates' hardly popular life. The alumni at Amherst finally got rid of him because he wouldn't encourage athletic achievement, thought poorly of our entry into World War I, and preferred Robert Burns to Bible study for the students. He left Amherst in 1923 for writing and lecturing.

FRONTIERS
A Long-Term Remedy

SOME readers may remember James Turner's *The Chemical Feast* (Grossman, 1970), a Ralph Nader Group report on the Food and Drug Administration reviewed here years ago. In his introduction, Turner, a young lawyer who worked with Nader on food issues (from 1968 to 1971), said his purpose was to find out why the diet of Americans had deteriorated to the point that their life expectancy had fallen noticeably below the expectancy of men and women in thirty-six foreign countries. The job of the FDA is to protect the people of this country against food containing harmful additives and to insure the good quality of all foods. The FDA can't do this, Turner concluded. He said:

> In spite of its vast responsibility, the FDA has found its meager although sometimes well-intended efforts continually neutralized by the powerful forces of special interests that include the large, well-funded efforts of Washington law firms, massive trade associations made up of the nation's fifty thousand food manufacturing firms, and a small group of industry-dependent "food scientists" who more often than not routinely produce scientific studies that support the most recent industry marketing decision. In the face of the $125 billion food industry, which is over six times as large as General Motors, America's largest industrial corporation, the FDA is unable to exert any meaningful influence on behalf of the food-consuming public. Impotence has characterized the FDA and its predecessor agencies since passage of the Pure Food Act of 1906. Due to the total collapse of the food protection effort of the Food and Drug Administration, which has allowed vicious, unchecked battles for profit to wrack the food industry, food restoration has become an important goal for all Americans to work toward. Understanding the magnitude, meaning, and cause of the FDA collapse may begin movement toward that goal.

The FDA, like most other regulatory agencies, represents the watchdog approach to preserving the general welfare. It doesn't work, and Turner's book assembled evidence to show how and why it fails. He made some suggestions in his last chapter on what might be done to improve control over manufacturers—such as establishing a body of independent quality-control engineers and auditors—but added that without "the support and participation of the consuming public," such efforts cannot succeed. A statement by the director of New York City's Department of Consumer Affairs seems briefly accurate: "Something is fundamentally askew about the whole regulatory system which the nation adopted to control corporate power in the public interest. Many of the regulatory agencies were doomed to fail from the start."

Commenting, the MANAS reviewer of *Chemical Feast* said that the book was "the strongest possible argument for home-gardening and natural foods." In the twelve years since the book came out, there has been some growth of the gardening movement, and health food stores have spread all over the country, but the vast power of the food industry to do as it pleases has hardly been diminished. Shelf life remains more important than human life, so far as the manufacturers are concerned, while appearance and taste are factors on which the sales managers rely to keep food products moving. Nutrition may count in advertising appeal, but the good health of consumers is not a primary objective.

The point of recalling the verdict of this book is that its author has recently told about a result that Mr. Nader apparently did not expect. Turner said in *Renewal* for Feb. 8:

> . . . as soon as *The Chemical Feast* was published one of the things that intrigued me was how many corporate people called me and wanted to pursue issues raised in the book. I argued strongly that I should be permitted to pursue these dialogues, and I did. That never came to a head, but it did make Ralph Nader nervous; it was not on his agenda.
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> In 1973 I started my own firm with my partner Dave Swanken. We have a policy of billing half time and doing *pro bono* [free] stuff half time. Also, in the 1970s, I was instrumental in creating the Food Safety Council. We got 34 corporations to put the money up to look at the food safety question; the board was made up of 20 corporate executives and 20 non-

corporate (types). What intrigued me about talking to these corporate guys was I was now getting a practical analogue to reinforce my notion that the evil in the world is not being done by evil people. The corporate guys told me all about *their* problems, what they were up against, what they could and couldn't do. The real problem in the world is not us-against-them but us against *it*: the people against this tightly-knit series of cubicles that everyone gets trapped inside of.

Well, if the government can't control the corporations, and the corporate guys (some of them) mean well but can't buck the system without losing their jobs, what is left to do? Quoting Schumacher seems the only available answer. He said in *Resurgence* for May-June 1975:

> The bigger the organization, the less it is possible for any member of it to act freely as a moral being, the more frequent are the occasions when someone will say: "I am sorry, I know what I am doing is not quite right, but these are my instructions," or "these are the regulations I am paid to implement," or "I myself agree with you; perhaps you could take the matter to a higher level, or to your member of parliament."
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> As a result, big organizations often behave very badly, very immorally, very stupidly and inhumanely, not because the people inside them are any of these things but simply because the organization carries the load of bigness. The people inside them are then criticized by people outside, and such criticism is of course justified and necessary, but it bears the wrong address. It is not the people of the organization but its size that is at fault. It is like blaming a car's exhaust gases on the driver; even an angel could not drive a car without fouling the air.
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> This is a situation of universal frustration: the people inside the organization are morally frustrated because they lack freedom of action, and the people outside are frustrated because, rare exceptions apart, their legitimate moral complaints find no positive response and all too often merely produce evasive, meaningless, blandly arrogant, or downright offensive replies.
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> Many books have been written about moral individuals in immoral society. As society is composed of individuals, how could a society be more immoral than its members? It becomes immoral if its structure is such that moral individuals cannot act in accordance with their moral impulses. And one method of achieving this dreadful result is by letting organizations become too large. (I am not asserting that there are no evil individuals capable of doing evil things no matter what may be the size of the organizations or, generally, the structure of society. It is when ordinary, decent, harmless people do evil things that society gets into the deepest troubles.)

This indicates a long-term, non-moralizing remedy for the problems James Turner is concerned with.