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THE IMAGE OF MAN IN ECONOMICS

[This two-part article by Walter A. Weisskopf, professor of economics at Roosevelt University, Chicago, is reprinted by permission from *Social Research*, Autumn, 1973 (Vol. 40, No. 3).]

I

ECONOMISTS have never developed a philosophical framework for their implicit assumptions about human nature. When economics became an autonomous discipline, it separated itself from philosophy. During the ascendancy of economics, theology and philosophy declined in importance. Assumptions about human nature in economics were and are obiter dicta, incidental byproducts of what was supposed to be empirical and logical truth. The very question of what is human nature cannot be and is not answered by any segmental discipline such as economics but only by a philosophy which encompasses the totality of experience. Such a philosophy existed before the scientific and industrial revolutions but has been gradually destroyed by modern thought.

Nevertheless, the history of economic thought abounds with statements and implicit assumptions which, put together, present an image of man. It was and is an image of how man should be in order to function in the economy. The economic image of man, although referring to actual economic behavior, has almost always a normative connotation: Man *should* be such and such in order to be an effective subject of the economy. Assumptions in economics about the nature of man, then, are rarely ever factual statements but value judgments—judgments how man ought to be, how the economy wants man to be, what he should want, will, think, and do so that the aims of the economy become his own aims. In analyzing the image of man in economics, one has to deal with hidden normative statements couched in factual language. Thus, most of what follows will deal with a sometimes explicit but more often hidden normative approach to human nature. Economists have implicitly shown how human nature *should be* to make the economic system work.

These normative assumptions about the kind of human nature required by the economy performed a twofold function. As far as they were presented in the form of factual statements, they supposedly served as explanations of reality. However, by presenting what should be in the form of statements about what is, they served the purpose of justification and legitimation of existing economic institutions such as the free market and private property. Identifying a desideratum as a fact is a way of justifying an ideal in a culture in which empiricism and naturalism of a narrowly defined science reign supreme. If theology and philosophy are abandoned, science remains the only source of cognitive *and* normative truth. By stating that an ideal is a fact, is rooted in the nature of man, in his reason or his drives and instincts, that ideal is vindicated. The continuing fight about the nature of economics—whether it is a "positive" or a "normative" discipline—overlooks the ambiguity of human existence and the dialectical nature of thought. Economics belongs to the social disciplines that deal with human beings and the human condition. As such, economics is a mixture of science and ethics; and it matters little whether one considers it as a science with normative implications or as an ethos with scientific foundations. Obiter dicta of economists about human nature have consciously or unconsciously—a normative character; and they are presented in such a way as to justify and legitimize existing economic institutions in the light of an ideal norm presented as a fact.

The relations between thought and society proceed in stages. In a stable society with well-

established institutions strongly supported by generally accepted belief and value systems, thought—analytical reason in the modern sense—plays a minor role. Belief and value systems are articulated in mythology, cosmogony, religion, and theology. This stage can be called (with Jaspers) the "mythical" era. It is an era of unconscious, secure envelopment in the existing social and spiritual order.

When this order begins to disintegrate for whatever external and internal reasons, conscious "rational" thought emerges and is applied to the institutional order and its ideas. The fight of the logos against the mythos sets in (Jaspers). This rational thought can be confirming or critical; often the former precedes the latter. Confirming reason tries to explain and justify institutions and beliefs. Critical reason uses rationality to change, reform, undermine, and destroy the existing order.[1]

Economics, ever since Adam Smith, has used both types of reason. Against mercantilistic restrictions Adam Smith used critical reason; but his main ideas on how the wealth of nations is produced represent an exercise in confirming reason. He uses reason to justify and legitimize the free market by trying to prove that its governing principles are rooted in human nature and that they lead to a just and beneficial result. His concept of human nature still underlies the mainstream of economic thought; it performs a legitimizing function. This was clearly recognized two centuries later by E. S. Mason:

> . . . it seems to be a fact that the institutional stability . . . of an economic system is heavily dependent on the existence of a philosophy or ideology justifying a system in a manner generally acceptable to the leaders of thought in the community. Classical economics in the form of a philosophy of natural liberty performed that function admirably for the nineteenth century capitalism.[2]

And still more recently a highly regarded market research survey discovered a general uneasiness among the buying public which it explains as follows:

> In making psychological and attitude studies over a period of many years, we have been continuously impressed with the need people have to find moral justifications for their own actions and even more important for what is done in their name by their own country. And the events of the past few years . . . have created a terrible uneasiness about the moral directions our institutions are taking.[3]

Economics, in its academic as well as in its popular formulations, has tried to fulfill this need for moral justification of the economic system and of the behavior it requires from its participants. The growing use of mathematics, econometrics, and abstract model building has obscured this function and tended to repress the moral philosophy which is implied in economics. However, its concepts of human nature were chosen, consciously or unconsciously, to serve the purpose of moral justification.

The normative elements in Adam Smith's thought are related to the natural-law tradition of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Growing out of Christian theology, the idea of natural law represented a peculiar symbiosis of normative and "scientific" principles. It contains the scientific idea of a "natural law" that works with "necessity beyond all resistance" (Mun), implying a deterministic scientism.[4] But it also retained the idea, taken over from Roman jurisprudence and absorbed by medieval theology, of a just order. Natural-law thinking was always a combination of science, ethics, and politics, a normative discipline of an order of justice. The ambiguity of the term "law"—a scientific law on the one hand, and a part of the legal order on the other hand—shows the Janus character of natural-law thinking. In a society in which the universe was considered a creation of God, these two aspects of natural law ran together: Nature and society could be interpreted as a lawful order created by God. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, nature and reason replaced God as a source of such an order.[5] In the natural-law philosophy, "normative" law and the "positive" scientific law were not yet sharply separated. This is also the case in the economic

teachings of the Physiocrats and of the classical economists. They derived their principles of political economy from nature and reason and implied that these principles would lead to a just order, a philosophy of natural law.

In the *Wealth of Nations* Adam Smith emphasizes again and again the acquisitive aspect of human behavior. What is important, however, is that he considers acquisitive action as rooted in human nature. Thus, he has laid the foundation to an approach that has become generally accepted in the Western world. The bar-stool philosopher who defends the venality of people by the statement "you can't change human nature" harks back to *The Wealth of Nations:*

> The desire of bettering our condition comes with us from the womb and never leaves us until we go to the grave. . . .Every individual is continuously exerting himself to find out the most advantageous employment for whatever capital he can command. . . There is a certain propensity in human nature . . . the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another.[6]

Adam Smith leaves open the question "whether this propensity be one of those original principles in human nature of which no further account can be given; or whether, as seems more probable, it be the necessary consequence of the faculties of reason and speech. . . . It is common to all men."[7] In any case, the propensity to exchange is an innate trait of human nature. It also rests on individual self-interest and self-love, which again are interpreted as basic traits of human nature.

Thus, the foundation was laid for a basic tradition of economic thought: A historically relative, time- and culture-bound value attitude, the acquisitive orientation, was derived from human nature and human reason. The striving for more and more money, wealth, possessions, and riches has developed against fierce resistance because it ran counter to the entire Occidental tradition. Moneymaking for its own sake, the taking of interest, buying cheap and selling dear, exploiting the fluctuations of supply and demand for one's own advantage—all these and other activities which form the daily routine of economic life in the modern economy were considered morally reprehensible throughout Western civilization until the advent of capitalism.[8]

In order to become socially acceptable against the resistance of traditionalism, acquisitiveness had to be morally justified. To accomplish this, it had to be demonstrated that the acquisitive orientation was part and parcel of the central belief system of the period, a natural-law philosophy which unified cognitive and normative beliefs. If the acquisitive attitude could be interpreted as part of a comprehensible and meaningful whole, it would thus be justified in spite of the tradition which rejected it. The value orientation—acquisitiveness—had to be derived from a cognitive belief system. Religious justification, tracing acquisitiveness back to God and revelation, was unacceptable to the eighteenth century. Nature and reason had replaced them. Thus, by deriving acquisitiveness from nature and reason, Adam Smith made it morally acceptable and legitimate.

That Adam Smith aimed—consciously or unconsciously—at a justification of acquisitiveness becomes quite clear from his definition of economic liberty and from his theory of the natural harmony of interests.[9] The idea of the natural identity or harmony of interests is the cornerstone of the philosophy of economic liberty and of the free market. It is obviously a justification of economic liberty by trying to demonstrate that it leads to social harmony. It rejects the Calvinistic and Hobbesian tradition of general human depravity, and the specter of *bellum omnium contra omnes,* and aligns itself with the Lockean tradition: Man is naturally good; his natural instincts and his reason do not inspire vicious behavior. In *The Wealth of Nations,* the pursuit of economic self-interest is not a vice (as it still is in Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees,* whose sub-title is *Private Vices—Public*

Benefits); the pursuit of economic self-interest is natural and reasonable because it promotes the *public* good, that is, the wealth of the nation. This is still the cornerstone of the popular belief in the free-enterprise system as far as it is still alive and the philosophical ground for statements such as: "What is good for General Motors is good for the country." It implies a *natural* harmony of interests: Individual economic interests are not in conflict with each other and with the common good. This comes about "naturally," through economic liberty, and not through governmental coordination. That this line of reasoning is clearly apologetic can hardly be denied.

The implicit intention to justify the goal of the free market economy through economic reasoning about human nature and society is even more obvious in the way in which the harmony of interest is made plausible by defining individual and common economic interests in an identical way. The reasoning proceeds in these steps: (1) Nature and reason have instilled in people the drive toward economic self-interest consisting of monetary gain. (2) Monetary gain is accomplished by the individual working harder, producing more products, and selling them to others. (3) The common economic interest consists in an increase of the national "produce," the volume of goods produced and supplied for sale. Thus, by defining individual and social economic goals in the same way the natural identity of all interests is demonstrated.[10]

The labor theory of value is another construct which serves to justify the moral legitimacy of the market and price system. Its morality rests on the presupposition that reward should increase in proportion to effort. To see this, it is not necessary to go into the intricacies of the labor theory of value.[11] Labor was still the main factor of production in the time of Adam Smith. Also, John Locke had justified individual private property as the result of personal labor ("the labor of his body and the work of his hands . . . are properly his"). Hard work, together with thrift, became the foremost virtues of the bourgeoisie in contrast to the idleness and profligacy of the aristocracy. If it could be demonstrated that price differentials conform to differences in effort and that those who work harder (and longer) will receive a higher reward in the form of a higher price, differences in prices and incomes are morally justified. This is what the labor theory of value tried to prove.

This moral principle is assumed to be rooted in human nature insofar as it relates merit and reward. In a way, the labor theory of value as presented by Adam Smith and Ricardo interpreted the free market and price system as a meritocracy where merit is defined as labor effort (measured by labor-time). The underlying feeling is still alive in the slogan "equal pay for equal work." It relates to the antinomy of equality and inequality. The feeling that human beings are equals and should be treated as such is qualified by the recognition that there can be differences justified by an accepted scale of values. In the Western political system, equality before the law is a basic principle. In the Western free market system, however, this principle is qualified by the principle of achievement leading to differences in income and wealth. In order to coordinate political equality with the differences created by economic competition, the idea of equality of opportunity, which combines initial equality with the inequality resulting from competition, has been introduced.

In present-day economics, these inequalities are justified mainly on functional grounds: They are necessary as incentives for increased effort and production. Classical economics, however, supplemented this functional argument by a moral defense of price and income differentials through the labor theory of value. The producer is justified in charging a higher price and thus receiving a higher reward if he has invested more labor in the production of the product. Hence the desperate attempts of Ricardo to explain profits, the rewards of capital, as accumulated labor. If there were no labor involved, profits would lack a

moral basis. He could not detect such a moral basis for the rent paid to the landlord. Therefore Ricardo could not explain rent in the same way as he did other prices and incomes (in terms of labor invested); rent had to be declared the result of the price of corn, and not a constituent; a residue without a moral basis: "the landlords . . . love to reap where they never sowed."[12] Ricardo tried and failed to explain profits in terms of labor.[13] Thus important types of incomes could not be morally justified on the basis of merit. They were felt to be "unearned increments."[14]

Marx, using the same implicit moral principle of the interdependence of effort and reward, carried Ricardo's analysis to its logical conclusion. If actual prices and incomes are not commensurate to effort, the economic system is morally wrong and should be changed. Income differentials *should* be determined by merit—that is, by labor effort—and those who are not putting in this effort should be expropriated. The surplus value is value unearned by labor and therefore immoral.

To summarize: The main ideas of the classical economists on acquisitive self-interest, the natural harmony of these interests, and the principle that man has a natural property right in the fruits of his labor form a syndrome of assumptions about men and their economic interrelations which aimed at the moral justification of the free market and price system as they saw it. These ideas about human nature and social relations were dictated by the need of the period to find a ground for the legitimacy of the economic system.

These fundamental ideas have never been completely abandoned in the mainstream of orthodox economic thought. However, a gradual disintegration of the philosophy of natural law took place.[15]

WALTER A. WEISSKOPF

Chicago

(*To be concluded*)

NOTES

[1] W. A. Weisskopf, *Alienation and Economics* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1971), pp. 33 ff.

[2] E. S. Mason, "The Apologetics of Managerialism," *Journal of Business,* XXXI (1958), 1 ff.

[3] Daniel Yankelovich, "Business in the 70's: The Decade of Crisis," *Michigan Business Review,* XXIV (November, 1972), 27 ff.

[4] Edger Salin, *Geschichte der Volkswirtschaftslehre,* 3rd ed. (Bern: Verlag A. Francke, 1944), pp. 74 f.

[5] Hans Kelsen, *Die philosophischen Grundlagen der Naturrechtslehre und des Rechtspositivismus* (Charlottenburg: Pan-Verlag Rolf Heise, 1944), pp. 7 f.

[6] Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (New York: Modern Library, 1936), pp. 73, 324, 421.

[7] *Ibid.,* p. 13.

[8] W. A. Weisskopf, *The Psychology of Economics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), pp. 11 ff.

[9] Weisskopf, *Alienation and Economics,* pp. 57 ff; Elie Halévy, *The Growth of Philosophical Radicalism* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1949), pp. 89 ff.

[10] For an analysis of the restrictive assumptions in the classical model of the free market, see Adolph Lowe, *On Economic Knowledge* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), chap. 2.

[11] Weisskopf, *Psychology of Economics,* Parts II and III.

[12] Smith, *Wealth of Nations,* pp. 38-49.

[13] Weisskopf, *Psychology of Economics,* pp. 88 ff.

[14] Today the Nixon administration tries to convince the nation that welfare payments to mothers with dependent children are also unearned. We seem to have come full circle: few maintain any more that rent and capital gains are unearned; this term is now being reserved for payments to those who cannot help themselves. Progress indeed!

[15] Weisskopf, *Alienation and Economics,* chaps. 3 and 4.

REVIEW
CITY AND ANTI-CITY

MURRAY BOOKCHIN'S *The Limits of the City* (Harper & Row paperback, $2.75), is short, eloquent, and good evidence that modern criticism of the city has reached a fruitful maturity. This book goes to the heart of the matter by showing that the quality of the city depends, basically, on the motives behind its existence and the tendencies which shape its structures. Three things stand out in Mr. Bookchin's work. First, and in a way the most valuable, is his comparison of the pre-capitalist or preindustrial city, of which he makes Athens an ideal example, with the modern megalopolis dominated by economic motives. The Greek city embodied human and community purposes and was a very different sort of place. The modern city, in Bookchin's view, is an "anti-city," a label justified by the fact that the modern city directly opposes the very qualities which were once the characterizing excellence of urban life.

The second thing that impresses the reader is the comparison of the feudal or medieval city with what it became under the control of the rising bourgeoisie. When trade became the prevailing function of the city, its human side was increasingly subordinated to exchange, and eventually all but erased. The cash nexus replaced the natural linkages between human beings. The rules of "business" pushed aside the normal feelings of obligation.

Finally, the book is valuable for a brief survey of city planning throughout history—brief enough so that the reader does not get lost, but specific enough to show the inherent weaknesses in the very idea of urban planning.

While Bookchin seems both a responsible scholar and an uncompromising radical, the value of his book comes from its eloquence at a broad level of generalization. This kind of writing is a great relief in these days of maximum "research" and minimum understanding. In other words, we could do with a lot less books on what is wrong with modern cities, now that we have this one. Most if not all its conclusions seem unarguable. While other critics might vary the emphasis, Bookchin's main points, we think, will stand until fundamental changes are accomplished. And his main points, or some of them, are very much in the air, these days. For example, Bookchin assembles detailed evidence for a "law" briefly stated by Ivan Illich in a recent paper:

> Any social structure must disintegrate beyond some level of energy use. Beyond this critical level, education for bureaucracy must take the place of initiative within the law. . . . technocracy must prevail when mechanical power exceeds metabolic energy by a certain ratio.

While Bookchin might dissent to the use of "energy" as decisive indicator—since he seems to think that advanced technology could serve to make possible harmonious urban life constructed around human purposes—if energy-use is taken as a symbol of economic growth, then their conclusions are much the same. The trouble is that, economic growth, having no natural limit, eventually must turn destructive and anti-human. As Bookchin says:

> Precapitalist cities were limited by the countryside, not only externally, in the sense that the growth of free cities inevitably came up against social, cultural, and material barriers reared by entrenched agrarian interests but also internally, insofar as the city reflected the social relations on the land. Except for the late medieval cities, exchange relations were never completely autonomous; to one degree or another, they were placed in the service of the land. But once exchange relations begin to dominate the land and finally transform agrarian society, the city develops according to the workings of a suprasocial law. Production for the sake of production, translated into urban terms, means the growth of the city for its own sake—without any intrinsic urban or human criteria to arrest that growth. Nothing inhibits this course of development but the catastrophic results of the development itself. The "exploding metropolis," far from posing the cliche of "urban revitalization," now raises the more crucial historic problem of urban exhaustion. The bourgeois city has limits too, but these no longer emerge from the relationship of the city to the land. They emerge from the expansion of the very

> exchange relations which are so basic to urban development as we have known it for thousands of years.

"Exchange relationships" make the meaning of the bourgeois city. They change the character of human association, depriving daily human contacts of their normal meaning and grace. Richard Goodwin has put this change very clearly in *The American Condition,* in a passage on how the use of money affected human relations:

> As money took on independent value, personal obligations could be fulfilled through payment—cash instead of services, gold instead of horses and bowmen. Deeply personal ties, which had extruded the consciousness of the age, a mode of thought, and a structure of values and perceptions, metamorphosed into commercial bonds. You no longer owed yourself; you owed money.

We have quoted from Illich and Goodwin to emphasize what we spoke of as Bookchin's maturity. It is no doubt a critical maturity, yet there cannot be good criticism without the capacity to see things whole as they *ought* to be—and this seems a leading characteristic of his book.

We spoke of Bookchin's eloquence: here is a passage on the reduction of human relations to money relations:

> By reducing every relationship to a cash nexus, capital removes all the moral and esthetic restraints that held the growth of earlier cities in check. The concept of social responsibility, once intuitive to precapitalist communities, is replaced by a single goal: plunder. Every entity and human capacity is conceived of as a resource for the acquisition of profit: the land, forests, seas, rivers, the labor of others, and ultimately all the verities of social life from those which inhere in the family to the community itself. The new industrial and commercial classes fall upon the social body like ravenous wolves on a helpless prey, and what remains of a once vital social organism is the torn fragments and indigestible sinews that linger more in the memory of humanity than in the realities of social intercourse. The American urban lot with its rusted cans, broken glass, and debris strewn chaotically among weeds and scrub reflects in the miniscule the ravaged remains of forests, waterways, shorelines, and communities.

The question of whether or not an honest religion might have operated in the lives of people to prevent the worship of economic growth is perhaps academic, or may seem so, and probably for this reason Bookchin does not consider it, being content to show how the changing circumstances of daily life attacked human community at its most vulnerable points, producing the pathology which accompanied the *spurious* success of modern commercialism and industrial exploitation. We now understand why these processes have distorted the lives of very nearly all but the most intrepidly resistant to the common influences of the modern environment:

> The integrity of the individual ego depends upon its ability to integrate the many different aspects of human life—work and play, reason and emotion, mental and sensuous, the private and the social—into a coherent and creative whole. By no means is this process of integration a strictly private and personal activity; indeed, for most individuals, the possibility of integrating one's ego depends enormously on the extent to which society itself is integrated existentially in the course of everyday life. . . . but this is not to say that the individual ego was "subordinated" to the collectivity. Rather, the ego was, in itself, the whole as it was manifested in the particular, for each individual embodied the unity and multifaceted nature of the life of the whole. In contrast to totalitarian societies that subordinate the individual to the larger social mechanism and supra-individual ends, the clan village and commune—and most eminently, the *polis*—nourished the integrity of the ego by recrystallizing its many-sided social goals and possibilities as individual ones.

What Bookchin says here about integration within the community may throw a light on the process of individuation, by which one grows psychically independent of the community, becoming able to find the basis of integration within himself. That is to say, he compensates for the shortcomings of the community from his own resources, and so remains undistorted by his environment. At the same time, he enriches the community through his balance. This is in principle what a teacher is, and does, and also the means by which communities may change for the better. But when commerce and money set the

chief patterns of life, the barriers to individual integration are made formidable:

> The bourgeois city separates these facets of life and delivers them, one by one, to institutions, denuding the ego of the rich content of life. Work is removed from the home and assimilated by giant organizations in offices and industrial factories. It loses its comprehensibility to the individual not only as a result of the minute division of labor, but owing also to the scale of commercial and industrial operations. Play becomes organized and the imaginative faculties of the individual are pre-empted by mass media that define the very daydreams of the ego. The individual is reduced to a vicarious spectator of his own fancies and pleasures. Reason and intellect are brought under the technical sovereignty of the academy and the specialist. Political life is taken over by immense bureaucratic institutions that manipulate people as "masses" and insidiously try to engineer public consent. . . . The urban ego, which once celebrated its many-faceted nature owing to the wealth of experience provided by the city emerges with the bourgeois city as the most impoverished ego to appear in the course of urban development.

At last, the city is being defined in terms of its *psychic* reality; and since it is a human creation, no other way of defining it makes sense. Its essence, then, is its purpose, since human activity is purposive. The true purpose of a city is to give to people a concrete focus of distinctive qualities and experiences not available in rural life. When this purpose fails, the city no longer exists:

> Modern urban entities are no longer sources of individuation; they are the arenas *par excellence* of psychical and physical massification—the aggregation of the individual into a herd. . . . The bourgeois city, if city it can still be called, is a place where one finds not human contiguity and association, but anonymity and isolation. The limits of the bourgeois city can be summed up in the fact that the more there is of urbanism, the less there is of urbanity.

The closing—and longest—section of this book deals with community planning. Bookchin finds hope in the spontaneous attempt to translate freedom and love into the realities of everyday life, the spirit which he believes is responsible for the best in the "counterculture" movement.

COMMENTARY
"WILL YOU, WON'T YOU?"

EARLY in *Spearpoint* (see "Children") Sylvia Ashton-Warner tells of an encounter with a child which set the tone of her experience as " 'Teacher' in America."

> "What about picking up your blocks, Henry?"
>
> "I dowanna."
>
> You used them. Come on, I'll help you." Kneel and start.
>
> "I said I dowanna and I don have to."
>
> Where do you go from here? "Well, who else is to pick them up?"
>
> Long legs planted firmly apart, he looks me contemptuously in the eye: "Not me, you dum-dum!" and sticks out his tongue for emphasis. So he wins, for we are equal. Equality on board appears to mean inverted authority. There's authority here but not from me.

The children were different; no doubt about it. So "Teacher," knowing that she could always learn from children, settled down to do the only thing left in these strange circumstances.

> The only way I see to direct and yet not direct is to teach by example and hope for the best, so that I return to the daily round I'd completed thirty years ago when I was young, when I was strong, intent and lured by a dream. Down I get on the floor with the children, from half past eight till three. Not that I mind being on the floor with our children; I'd rather be there for the present and forever, for you don't get bored among children, never knowing what they're going to say or do; and besides this is my level anyway, being a child myself, though professionally I'm surprised at the sudden demotion.

There is a lot more on wanna, dowanna, then some musing on the excess of "decisions" pressed upon the children. "Will you? Won't you?" they are asked. Rocky will you come and do writing now?

> Why put this wall between him and his writing . . . a decision? He doesn't see in mind the writing itself but an alternative: no writing. True, there is an alternative but let him find it himself. Don't present him with it each time you present to him your work. Rocky, come to me for your writing. Clear. . . . To constantly approach our child with double possibilities, with an alternative, whenever his work is concerned, or an obligation, practices in him the mechanism of doubt. It is no longer a question of here is something to do but will I or will I not do this thing?

Can there be an embarrassment of freedom? A superfluity of decisions? More than a child can use to grow on may be another ill of our affluent society.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
TEACHER COMES TO AMERICA

THE jacket-flap of *Spearpoint* (Knopf, 1972) gives a rather gentle version of Sylvia Ashton-Warner's reaction to the children—mostly five-year-olds—she came to teach a few years ago in "an American experimental school on top of the Rockies." The flap says she drew some "astonishing conclusions" about our society. Well, yes. She worked in what was meant to be an "open" school, and the children were told beforehand that they could do anything they liked. She doesn't say that nearly everything seemed to go wrong, but she became a very bewildered teacher up against incredible frustrations. Early one morning, early in the school year:

> I can't stand closed doors where children are segmenting the family fluidity, and when I see the door of the math room shut I take the liberty of opening it. I'm not one to intrude or invade if I can help but "That's no way for big boys to behave." Six and seven they are.
>
> "We'll do what we like!" Crash the Cuisenaire rods on the floor.
>
> "Standing on a table hurling things on the floor. That's like babies, not boys."
>
> "We have every right to do what we like!" Bang, whiz, spin. . .
>
> "Not like six and seven," I say. "You're both like little babies standing up there throwing valuable material that other children need. Babies."
>
> "When you say something about someone," he shouts, "it sticks on yourself. It's you like the baby. You, you!" Crack, skid. "It's you that's the baby."
>
> It's true. They're far cleverer than me. This is a modern open school and I've got to be that too. No pride or anything like that. No hurt. All being equal, he can say what he likes. And do what he likes too. I'm learning that reciprocal respect is not necessary to equality. On the other hand, am I respecting their rights to release their imagery; who am I to criticize?
>
> "It's you that's the baby," he repeats.
>
> "Could be that too. Me the baby. But in any case you bore me."
>
> "And you bore us."
>
> A jolly good answer. I'm floored again. Like the Cuisenaire rods. I try another way: "What makes you two think you're so clever?"
>
> Flings more rods but he's thinking. "Because" . . . bash! . . . "we *are* clever."
>
> "I agree. But does that make you interesting too?" No answer from either.
>
> "Why don't you answer?"
>
> The bombs still pound the target but still there is no answer, so I walk toward the door, ashamed of victory.
>
> "Yes, go," they say, "and shut the door. We want to be by ourselves."
>
> I obey and shut the door. I'm getting the hang of equality and the evils of authority.

Trying to introduce a little "order" so she can get down to teaching, Mrs. Ashton-Warner drew on her past experience, saying to the other teachers: We need some children "to see that everyone does his job. A couple of policemen to . . . "

This brought outrage. The *verboten* word. Americans call policemen pigs. Substitute expressions didn't gain any enthusiasm from the other teachers, so she said:

> "I take it," warming up, "that what you're all telling me is that no one is in the position to ask the children, *expect* the children, to help us with the other children?"
>
> Doggedly, "They don't like any one of them to be in authority over any other."
>
> "They 'don't like.' Interesting." The authority terror again. No wonder they go in for the wannadowanna. I'm baffled. I don't know what to do about the terror of authority. New ground. New country to colonize. In some societies, the police are as close to the people as bartenders and butchers. I'm recalling other children I've known honored to be the policemen, and children who like being policed by each other. If we could get clear of politics, we could get on with teaching. Where the devil has the *substance* of education got to?

A few nice things happened; no one can really stop Sylvia Ashton-Warner from teaching. But here we want to get out the other points she keeps on making. She began to wonder whether a new kind of people are developing in America—very bright, very shiny, and also very frightening. Is the American personality mutating? Her title, *Spearpoint*, indicates a positive answer. Getting used to these children was a project in itself:

> Another thought I've been walking with ever since I came is what you mean by freedom. I can't refer you to the dictionary, because I haven't got one here; you can't cart books around when you're in transit. But if you do look it up you'll find its meaning is different from license and anarchy. I look into the dictionary of my own life, where I find that because I wanted freedom of my own mind I had to discipline myself. I learnt it young. Naturally I tried the wannadowanna, which led me straight to hells; agonizing no-exits, so that there was nothing for it but self-discipline. The other day when I used this word to a young teacher from another country, she advised, "Don't use that word 'discipline' in this country. They don't like it."
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> "What shall I use in its place, then?"
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> "Guidance," she said.
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> I laughed. It wasn't Guidance that got me up early in the morning when I was young, when I was teaching and had a young family too, and had no time to study. It wasn't guidance that got me out of bed rubbing my eyes to creep in the dark to the kitchen, turn on the light, make the tea and get out my books. I wonder what Guidance says in the dictionary. And what Discipline says. The dictionary of my own life shows Discipline as putting the boot in. And Discipline itself in my own life's dictionary means freedom of the mind. You've got to *pay* for life. Take what you want from life but pay for it. And if you take but don't pay, life will put you in prison where there's no freedom of anything at all.
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> I'm not talking about putting the boot in where children are concerned in school. There are two kinds of discipline the outer and the inner.

Without much blaming of anybody—she was, after all, a "guest" in America—Mrs. Ashton-Warner puts her dilemma at the beginning of the book. She had been asked to come to this "new kind of school" to get young teachers started off right by showing them what she knew. She was supposed to teach them "the organic style in the infant room." So everyone was waiting around for her to tell people what to do, and then she found she couldn't:

> So I'm the director of the infant room but room but must not irect, as all are equal. Irrespective of how much one has learned or thought, how long one has lived, how much experience one has clocked up, I'm told that no teacher likes any other teacher to be above him, from which I read that equality means that none can be above the least and the laziest. Authority turns out to be a very dirty multi-letter word indeed, though all very sweetly implied in the kindliest and sincerest voices and which I learn at once.

If to what Mrs. Ashton-Warner said about her life-dictionary definition of Discipline you add her comment on Affluence, you don't need to make any pedagogical argument at all. The issue—but not the problem—just settles itself. This "doing whatever they please" sort of education is possible only in affluent circumstances. Normal folk grow up under all sorts of practical constraints. So, this is really education for rich elites—for, you could say, systematically spoiled children. How, finally, can children ever learn about life if they are not deprived of *anything?* Surely this is an ultimate distortion of human experience. As Mrs. Ashton-Warner says:

> Affluence is one of our troubles. The thing about deprivation is that it makes you dream, and a dream is a germ of living and exercises the imagery. This is the main aim in organic work . . . to exercise the imagery to keep it alive. Keep it flexing and pulsing and in good form, active, to help us think and do things.

She hid the fancy mechanical toys the parents bought for the children. Because one boy no longer has his truck, "he thinks of one and is moved to compose one for himself." One wonders if Mrs. Ashton-Warner ever got through to the parents of these children.

FRONTIERS

This Stable World

IN his concluding summary of a symposium on the quality of human life, held several years ago at the University of Gncinnati, Dr. Charles D. Aring, professor of neurology at the University, quoted a modern classicist to illustrate the gist of the symposium's findings:

> Professor William Arrowsmith has pointed to the technician mind which flourishes because the problems it prefers are soluble and these are seldom, if ever, the problems from which we suffer. He said: "Thus, for instance, we have extremely sophisticated medical research carried on in many places with almost absolute disregard for the social causes of disease; or hydroelectric systems which manage to create a wasteland in the name of life; reclamation programs which, for want of a civil context, desolate."

A portion of the contribution by Jacques Barzun deals with a related misconception:

> Count the instances when you meet in print the statement that the world is changing so rapidly that we cannot adjust. We are therefore in a mess. It is a cliché and an obsession but if you do a little reading of history you will see very little has changed in the last 100 years, almost nothing in the last 50. We suffer from the same relationship of men to machines and men to their beliefs. What has changed which is not negligible, is the surface of life. We may go faster in airplanes and, in the city, in automobiles than on foot. These are interesting variations on the theme of locomotion, but the fundamental things, the things that contribute to the quality of life, have not changed since the days of Carlyle and Ruskin, who first voiced our complaints and predicted our despair.
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> It was Ruskin who said that the conditions of modern work would induce in every worker, even the humblest and least reflective, self-contempt. His contemporaries did not quite know what he meant; we do now. To these things we try to bring remedies of various kinds. . . . from a mere listing you can see that they worsen the disease. They remove further qualities from life, because they partake of the idea of engineering in the bad sense. They are sociological engineering.
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> The idea of a problem to be solved is at the root of this effort, and it is a foolish idea. Human affairs do not contain problems with solutions. They contain predicaments, difficulties which are at best only partly overcome—when it Is possible to overcome them at all—a very different thing from solving problems.

Dr. Barzun turns to the "gene optimists" who suppose that "they can manipulate our genetic structure and produce ideal men, or at least better men," pointing out that their idea of "better men" is not one to inspire confidence in their plans. Dr. René Dubos, another participant, says that the capacity of the geneticists to alter the human genetic endowment has been much exaggerated; they cannot really do this now and, he adds, "Focusing attention on such an improbable occurrence is tantamount to a form of escapism from other more pressing problems of our societies." Environmental circumstances, he shows, are fully as important as hereditary factors, and the best environment is one that permits maximum diversity in human development. He therefore regards the design of an "optimum environment" as delusive, because of the limiting uniformities it would involve. "Irrespective of their genetic constitution, most people raised in a featureless environment, and limited to a narrow range of life experiences, will be crippled emotionally and mentally."

Dr. Barzon expressed the view that the changes of the past hundred years have been only superficial. The "fundamental things," he said, have not changed. Dr. Dubos says something similar about scientific knowledge:

> I question that scientific knowledge has increased anywhere as much as people believed during the past century. In fact I believe scientific knowledge has increased little during the past half-century. We are, all of us, functioning on the body of knowledge, scientific knowledge, developed during the 17th, 18th and first half of the nineteenth centuries. What we call the fantastic amount of knowledge and its increasing rate of acceleration is made up of two things: (1) polishing the lilies that were raised during the preceding centuries and (2) playing with those problems in which we happen to be interested. . . .

> Why has this assumption of an immense and explosive increase in knowledge become so widespread? It has come about because as a community, an academic and especially a scientific community, we have decided to consider important only those aspects of knowledge in which we happen to be interested today. But if you were to take the tremendous body of ignorance which prevents us from dealing with the problems of most of the people of the world, then you would see how our knowledge has failed to increase in any significant manner.

Dr. Dubos notes that the "scientific problems" which concern researchers and academics in the "advanced societies" touch the lives of only thousands of people, while two-thirds of the world's population "suffer from deprivations and mismanagement blights." He comments:

> It is a form of escapism to say that these are economic or social problems, and not scientific problems. I do not believe it.
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> The plain fact of the matter is that if we had all the money we wanted and all the scientific and social personnel, we would not know how to deal with the problems of most of the people in the world today. Take this continent alone, the United States, and of course even more so Latin America where children are born under such conditions that they have no chance of expressing their potentialities. This percentage is so large that it is a crime for the scientific and academic community to dismiss it by saying that these are social and political problems. The fact is that nobody works on these problems, or so few of us do, that we cannot provide the kind of understanding that would make it possible for us to design rational approaches to the important problems of mankind.

These statements appear in *Man and Life*, a publication by the University of Cincinnati celebrating its hundred and fiftieth anniversary in 1969. Their importance lies in the change they represent in the conception of human knowledge, and in the idea of responsibility they bring to the fore.