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THE SHAPING OF CULTURE

CULTURAL imperialism, unlike military exploits in foreign lands, is something that people often practice without knowing it. They try to make other people think and act like themselves. It can also be a deliberate campaign. In *Tract* No. 26 (Gryphon Press, 38 Prince Edwards Road, Lewes, Sussex, U.K.) Keith Buchanan writes about the numerous "independence" movements now emerging in Europe and elsewhere, spurred by people who feel that their cultural identity has been reduced, or even suppressed and prohibited. The English, he finds, have been especially guilty of such oppressions, notably in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales (and in Asia, of course), with little or no self-questioning:

> The English-speaking world has concerned itself less with cultural imperialism than with imperialism in its military or its economic form. Perhaps this is because culture—or culture-loss—is not easy to quantify and we live in an age when, in the Anglo-Saxon lands, the only reality is the statistical reality. Perhaps it is because English, and above all American English, is a dominant language which has never been at the receiving end of the process of cultural liquidation. Perhaps it is because any study of cultural imperialism or ethnocide can scarcely avoid confronting some of the less creditable aspects of English colonial history, aspects which have been sedulously concealed by a smokescreen of double-talk; as Frank O'Connor remarks of the Great Hunger in Ireland: "Famine is a useful word when you do not wish to use words like 'genocide' or 'extermination'."

Why is cultural imperialism so evil—worse than military invasion and colonial rule? Because, Mr. Buchanan shows, it diminishes human beings themselves. The harm is greater than loss of their possessions or even of their political rights:

> Cultural imperialism involves the colonization of the personality of the dominated group by a more powerful aggressor; this implies the substitution of an alien culture, and especially the language which is the vehicle of that culture, for the culture and language of the oppressed. Such a stealing of culture is, Galtung points out, "analogous to dispossessing [a people] of its raw materials or its autonomy." It is a form of imperialism which, working through "processed" and purchased elite groups, may pave the way for military or economic conquest. More usually, however, it serves to consolidate the military hold of a powerful nation on its less powerful victim, and at the same time prepares the ground for the economic exploitation of the victim in the interests of the victor.

In *Hind Swaraj,* seventy years ago, Gandhi maintained that the real offense of the British against India was cultural imperialism. But he also pointed out that the Indians made themselves vulnerable. They *let* the invaders convert them to English ways of thinking and behaving. He wrote:

> The English have not taken India; we have given it to them. They are not in India because of their strength, but because we keep them. . . . They came to our country originally for purposes of trade. Recall the Company Bahadur? Who made it Bahadur? They had not the slightest intention at the time of establishing a kingdom. Who assisted the Company's officers? Who was tempted at the sight of their silver? Who bought their goods? History testifies that we did all this. In order to become rich all at once, we welcomed the Company's officers with open arms.

There may be some exaggeration here, but there is also truth. The English, he said, came to India for purposes of trade, they remained there for the same purpose, "and we help them to do so." So India was indeed vulnerable, whether to arms or the attraction of goods. Perhaps it was the British habit of *succeeding* that impressed them; in any event, British culture and English language began to dominate India, and the end of that influence is not yet, whatever the changes in political arrangements.

These processes of transformation have been going on as far back as history reaches, although the style of cultural imperialism may greatly vary. In *Bilingualism as a World Problem* (Montreal:

Harvest House; 1967) W. F. Mackey describes the building of the Roman Empire:

> With the Romans, colonization and education followed the conquest. Accompanying the Roman army of occupation in Britain, for example, came an estimated 100,000 business people. However, the Romans did not try to impose their language; neither did the Greeks, although in both cases it was on language rather than on race or nationality that the imperialism was chiefly based. The imperial language was not forced upon the populace; it was offered as a privilege. And as the language became more uniform and standardized, it became more attractive. This standardization and propagation of the language was done through a system of schools. It must be realized, however, that the rate of spread of these classical languages was slow, even their extension to the different parts of their country of origin took a great deal of time.

A later comment by Prof. Mackey is of interest:

> But the linguistic empire of Latin was eventually to be challenged by rising national languages. It has been said that the Wars of Religion were largely wars of language—that is, wars for the right and means to express the thoughts and aspirations of a new-born, secular thinking class. It is significant that the Reformation was most successful in the countries whose language was most removed from Latin.

The word "imperialism" hardly seems to apply in the case of such gradual changes in culture and language. The English, however, were more impatient than the Romans. Mr. Buchanan shows that they deliberately set about stamping out Welsh and Scottish culture and language. The people were forced to use English:

> In the Highlands the language of the new economy was English and the economic pressure against Gaelic was strengthened by legislative and institutional pressures. The 1872 *Education Act for Scotland* actively discouraged the teaching of Gaelic; children inadvertently speaking Gaelic in school were physically punished and, up to the 19305 in Lewis, made to wear the *maire-crochaid*—a stick on a cord. . . . The Act, remarks a member of Aberdeen University's Celtic Department a hundred years later, produced generations of folk illiterate in their own language and "taught by one of the most pervasive institutions in their community that their culture was of no value."

The motives behind cultural imperialism seem always acquisitive, but the worst thing about its practice is the contempt exhibited for the people who are to be "converted." Mr. Buchanan quotes a recent *Observer* editorial: "Over many centuries and until quite recently, the English treated the Irish, the Scots and the Welsh much as the Germans have treated their Slav neighbors—with a mixture of ruthlessness and mockery." The English were particularly irritated by the non-commercial mood of the Celtic sections of the British population, and in the nineteenth century it was argued in Parliament that English schoolmasters would be both more efficient and cheaper than soldiers or police control—they would "civilize" the Welsh by teaching them English.

The indictment goes on and on, the French being called to account for condemning the Breton language—in 1976 "forbidden in school, forbidden in official documents, forbidden in Church"; while the Basques and Catalans continue their struggle to win cultural autonomy in Spain.

What is the opposite of cultural imperialism? Is there something that could be called cultural generosity? Are there interchanges of cultural riches and values which are accompanied by friendly overtures and welcoming invitation? Are there times when people are changed for the better by visitors who come at the request of their hosts? Does history disclose only exploitation and oppression when strength encounters weakness? And do the people enjoying power and authority always exhibit mockery and ruthlessness toward those whom they have defeated, whether in war or by the encroachments of legal chicanery—or by using both, as in the virtual destruction of the American Indians on the North American continent?

Exceptions to this rule are hard to locate, but one that comes to mind is the ancient relation between India and China. Speaking in New York

in 1942, the then Chinese ambassador to the United States, Dr. Hu Shih, recalled:

> It is a well-known historical fact that India conquered and dominated China culturally for twenty centuries without ever having to send a single soldier across her borders. This cultural conquest was never imposed by India on her neighbors. It was all the result of voluntary searching, voluntary learning, voluntary pilgrimage and voluntary acceptance on the part of China.
>
> The real explanation was that the great religion of Buddhism satisfied a need keenly felt by the Chinese people of the time. . . . Ancient China had only a simple conception of retribution for good and evil: but India gave us the conception of *Karma,* the idea of absolute causation running through past, present, and future existences. . . .
>
> For more than a thousand years, from the first century A.D. down to the eleventh century, Chinese pilgrims continued to travel by land and by sea to India to seek its scriptures in their original texts and to study under living masters of the faith. Some of these pilgrims spent decades in India and brought back thousands of manuscripts which they devoted their lives to translating and interpreting to their fellow countrymen. Buddhist teachers and missionaries who came to China throughout the ages were always honored and eagerly listened to. (Address, "India-China Friendship Day," March 14, 1942.)

Other examples of cultural generosity on a large scale do not seem to exist, although here and there are cases of influence that show what a single individual can accomplish. Plutarch tells how the Romans, after Romulus died or disappeared, were able to persuade the eminent Sabine, Numa Pompilius, to become their king. They badly needed someone who could settle their disputes and help them to order their lives. With much reluctance, Numa finally agreed, although he warned them that, because of their aggressive habits, he was likely to become a laughing-stock, since he would be giving lessons "in the love of justice and the abhorrence of violence and war, to a city whose needs are rather for a captain than for a king."

After the Romans received him with joy and elaborate ceremony, Numa took charge:

> The first thing he did at his entrance to government was to dismiss the band of three hundred men which had been Romulus' life-guard, called by him Celeres, saying that he would not distrust those who put confidence in him, nor rule over a people who distrusted him. . . . he set himself without delay to the task of bringing the hard and iron Roman temper to somewhat more of gentleness and equity. Plato's expression of a city in high fever was never more applicable than to Rome at that time; in its origin formed by daring and warlike spirits, whom bold and desperate adventure brought thither from every quarter, it had found in perpetual wars and incursions on its neighbors its after sustenance and means of growth, and in conflict with danger the source of new strength; like piles, which the blows of the hammer serve to fix in the ground. Wherefore Numa, judging it no slight undertaking to mollify and bend to peace the presumptuous and stubborn spirits of this people, began to operate on them with the sanctions of religion. He sacrificed often and used processions and religious dances, in which most commonly he officiated in person; by such combinations of solemnity with refined and humanizing pleasures, seeking to win over and mitigate their fiery and warlike tempers.

In religious philosophy Numa gave them Pythagorean teachings. Pythagoras, Plutarch says, "conceived of the first principle of being as transcending sense and passion, invisible and incorrupt, and only to be apprehended by abstract intelligence." The new king planned accordingly:

> So Numa forbade the Romans to represent God in the form of man or beast, nor was there any painted or graven image of a deity admitted amongst them for the space of the first hundred and seventy years, all of which time their temples and chapels were kept free and pure of images; and to such baser objects they deemed it impious to liken the highest, and all access to God impossible, except by pure act of the intellect. His sacrifices, also, had great similtude to the ceremonial of Pythagoras, for they were not celebrated with effusion of blood, but consisted of flour, wine, and the least costly of offerings.

There was apparently some instruction in astronomy:

It is said, also, that Numa built the temple of Vesta, which was intended for a repository of the holy fire, of a circular form, not to represent the figure of the earth, as if it were the same as Vesta, but that of the general universe, in the centre of which the Pythagoreans place the element of fire, and give it the name of Vesta and the unit; and do not hold that the earth is immovable, or that it is situated in the centre of the globe, but that it keeps a circular motion about the seat of fire, and is not in the number of the primary elements; in this agreeing with the opinion of Plato, who, they say, in his later life, conceived that the earth held a lateral position, and that the central and sovereign space was reserved for some nobler body.

He also gave the people reason to acquire industrious habits, dividing the land among the indigent commonalty, hoping, as Plutarch says, that "agriculture would be a sort of charm to captivate the affections of his people to peace, and viewing it rather as a means to moral than to economical profit." In addition he organized the trades—"musicians, goldsmiths, carpenters, dyers, shoemakers, skinners, braziers, and potters"—"appointing every one their proper courts, councils, and religious observances." Under these arrangements, "all factious distinction began, for the first time, to pass out of use." And Plutarch adds that "during the whole reign of Numa, there was neither war, nor sedition, nor innovation in the state, nor any envy or ill-will to his person, nor plot or conspiracy from views of ambition."

Plutarch's conclusion—in the comparison of Numa with the Spartan lawgiver, Lycurgus—seems sage. The Roman ruler's "technical" influence, the forms of his legislation, lasted five hundred years—

But Numa's whole design and aim, the continuance of peace and goodwill, on his death vanished with him; no sooner did he expire his last breath than the gates of Janus's temple flew wide open, and, as if war had, indeed, been kept and caged up within those walls, it rushed forth to fill all Italy with blood and slaughter; and thus that best and justest fabric of things was of no long continuance, because it wanted that cement which should have kept all together, education. What, then, some may say, has not Rome been advanced and bettered by her wars? A question that will need a long answer, if it is to be one to satisfy men who take the *better* to consist in riches, luxury, and dominion, rather than in security, gentleness, and that independence which is accompanied by justice.

Well, the failures in the fostering of culture are of various kinds. In our day people look, not to kings, but to political parties and social movements for development. Parties and radical groups try or claim to assume the role of making things better for all. Writing in a confessional spirit, Ellen Willis gives her impressions of what was attempted by young American radicals in Chicago in 1968, and what she learned from the experience (*New American Review* for April, 1969):

I went to Chicago mainly for negative reasons. I thought that the Movement could not, without looking foolish, allow the Democrats to play their game in a complacent, business-as-usual atmosphere. . . . I left knowing that something very positive had happened to me. Specifically: never had I been so conscious that what I was involved in was a rebel *community,* whose emotions and sensations had a collective life of their own. . . . At the same time, I became more acutely sensitive than ever before to our problematic relations with the larger community. In its name we had been clubbed and gassed, yet in some ways it had been far more hospitable to us than we deserved. For we were and still are too much disposed to see ourselves as the beautiful green planet around which the vast body of the American people sluggishly revolves. What we need, if we are to understand and change this society, is a Copernican theory of politics.

Her point, finally, is that the Movement people had little sympathy for and less understanding of ordinary working people in America:

White workers, economically and psychologically ill-equipped to cope with change, were the group most affected by the domestic social upheaval. They suffered most from increasing crime, paid most—percentage-wise—for welfare and poverty programs, depended most on the disintegrating public school. But the Left, preoccupied with its own oppression, could not see them as human beings with real grievances. Liberal politicians (with the concurrence of radicals) dismissed the workingman's

> fear of crime as racist paranoia and his resentment at having to support people as social backwardness. Liberal experts (with the silent complicity of radicals) proclaimed that poor blacks and students must be consulted on policies that affected them, but treated white workers like inert material to be socially engineered at will.
>
> It took George Wallace to make radicals understand that white workers were in fact a vast disaffected constituency that had been fairly begging for someone to care about its problems. Then, just as this new consciousness began to make a substantial impact on the Left, Chicago happened. For anyone who wanted to look at it that way, Chicago was a case study in the indifference-cum-contempt that radicals, especially post-hippies, reserved for ordinary Americans. Many of us felt the contradiction very deeply. . . . The next step is for radicals in significant numbers to break out of their ghettos and go live in America.

What Ellen Willis is telling us is that the radicals at Chicago had a basic attitude in common with the cultural imperialists of Europe—contempt for the people they were hoping to "educate" or reshape. Writing about the same period in a later issue of the *American Review* (No. 17), John Schaar made essentially the same comment:

> The radicals of the 1960s did not persuade their fellow-Americans, high or low, that they genuinely cared for and shared a country with them. And no one who has contempt for others can hope to teach those others. A revived radicalism must be a patriotic radicalism. It must share and care for the common things, even while it has a "lover's quarrel" with fellow-citizens.

If the radicals fail in this, they will have no more success than the cultural imperialists, and may even become very much like them, at heart.

REVIEW

VACUUM AND REVOLUTION

GIVING attention to a recent London performance of *Dracula* (in the *Manchester Guardian Weekly* for Sept. 24), Michael Billington remarks that elaborate production techniques "cannot disguise the essential hollowness of the experience." His explanation puts a finger on the moral weakness of the times:

> Why does this Dracula not work? For much the same reason, I suspect, that Penelope Gilliatt touched on in discussing recent Hollywood demonological movies. She pointed out that they posit an anti-Christ without ever convincing you that they believe in Christ. Likewise this Dracula assumes a fundamentalist belief in good and evil which most modern audiences just don't possess.

What is art to do in such circumstances? Great artists are able to create new themes that touch and revive lost sensibilities, but for that you need a Dostoevsky, a Tolstoy, or a Blake. Meanwhile, we have only the authenticity of portraits of people who don't really believe in anything, in the work of Joan Didion and some other writers. One doesn't really like to read about such characters, but the stories have the passive virtue of being true to life.

What Paul Goodman said about audiences (in *Nature Heals*) seems obliquely relevant here:

> . . . bad audiences cannot be relied on to respond to a whole work of art; they will select from it what suits their own repressions, and interpret according to their own prejudices, the very fact that they have been moved despite themselves. The lovely is taken as dirty, the horrible as sadistically thrilling. This derogation is partly revenge against the artist. Bad audiences follow the plot as a story; they do not identify with the whole work as the soul of the poet, but they identify with the actors of the story and take sides.

The problem is simply that moderns seem to have become convictionless people. Thoughtful men as far apart as Martin Buber and Gregory Bateson have spoken of this—Buber as a moral reformer, Bateson as a teacher of science. There is nothing in our culture—except the pain it produces—to inspire people to a search for foundations.

In *Outrage* (published in paperback at $6.95 by the Guild of Tutors Press) S P R Charter identifies this farreaching ill as a loss of faith. In one of the brief essays which make up his book he says:

> Each of us needs a belief in something larger than self in order to lend substance to our lives and to our sense of purpose and future. This need is a human constant so long as people retain humaneness and individuality. It is through this ancient organic need that, in my view, the human concept of Deity emerged as one of mankind's greatest innovations.

Then what happened?

> From earliest times this concept of Deity was taken over and administered by priestly classes which subjected the populace, through fear and promise, to different rituals for the "correct" services of their beliefs. While great organized religions flourished for many centuries, in our present world the religions are fading—yet the need for belief in something larger than self remains.
>
> One of the many reasons why the established religions are failing is, in my view, the fact that religion itself has become displaced as a fountainhead of faith; a displacement which organized religion has been bringing on itself for many decades and for many reasons—basically because religion itself has proven to be without much guidance and hope for both Man and Earth. Organized religion has become so externalized, and people in increasing numbers reject both its promises and its threats.
>
> Man's faith is now more in his devices than in his belief in organized religion, or in a God. But our devices are also proving to be quite insufficient for our faith because so many of them fail, so many are replaceable, so many seem to be quite pointless.
>
> Yet to be without faith is to be adrift within self, much less within the world and the Cosmos, with no references through which to know ourselves, and through which to learn something of our own perspectives and our own largenesses. After all, life cannot live in any sort of vacuum.

The sudden popularity and mushroom growth of new faiths and cults is thus explained. People

are trying to fill the vacuum. Mr. Charter remarks of these groups:

> Their people speak rather mechanically of "the spirituality of all things," and to me they seem to be not pantheistic so much as what religious people used to term, pejoratively, paganistic and heathenish—people without faith but with much ritual. And these groups are very much like our devices: many of them fail, many are replaceable, many seem to be quite pointless, and some quite obviously are harmful through their destructive consumption of individuality and humaneness of those they entice to become followers.

Yet Mr. Charter also wonders if all this talk of "spirituality" and "awareness" and "consciousness" is not at root a good thing, even if so widely misdirected. Some sort of awakening, he thinks, is going on. He says in a concluding paragraph:

> It is indeed true that Man needs a different idea of himself, a different faith, but not in confrontation with the immensity within him, and also external to him, but in interrelationship with this immensity. Confrontation is often an antagonism; interrelationship is often a cohesion. We need faith, individual faith, that we are still capable of grasping the actuality of human largeness within self which extends beyond self, beyond the now, in our often stumbling attempts to ascend from the caves of our own making, guided by our own clarifies of what we are and by our own visions of what we may become.

Well, how shall we relate to the world and ourselves—the self in the world and the world in the self—in all their immensity? There is surely pantheistic feeling in the work of those who seek restoration of human relationships with the earth or planet which are both natural and rational—rational in the sense of noetic. There are roots of religion, a more philosophical religion, in these activities. But time is needed for transcendental meanings to emerge and acquire appropriate conceptual form.

There's not much use in trying to anticipate the intellectual expressions of new natural religion. However, in an exquisite passage in *Man on a Rock* Richard Hertz described the kind of religion that once existed all over the world, and may perhaps be regained at some time in the future, with the addition of another octave of meaning. He wrote:

> Chinese peasants, moving into the mountains every morning to gather tea, sang a hymn in honor of their enterprise, which they compared to a pilgrimage to the Western paradise. The Volga boatmen "accepted the universe," and the women of Madagascar acted, when they cultivated rice fields, like bayaderes trying to please a god. . . .
>
> The medieval fraternities of the workers in Flanders and Lyons . . . rolled the stone from the tomb of their narrow space; their triumph over the refractory material of the world was not mere routine, but was understood by them in its vast metaphysical connotations. Work interpreted as spiritual discipline gave these people a superhuman patience, detachment from results.

So it once was. A contrasting account of the present is given by Richard Weaver in *Ideas Have Consequences:*

> It is characteristic of the barbarian, whether he appears in a precultural stage or emerges from below into the waning day of a civilization, to insist upon seeing a thing "as it is." The desire testifies that he has nothing in himself with which to spiritualize it; the relation is one of thing to thing without the intercession of the imagination. Impatient of the veiling with which the man of higher type gives the world imaginative meaning, the barbarian and the Philistine, who is the barbarian living amid culture, demands the access of immediacy.

Weaver was a professor who saw the degradations of traditional culture plainly enough—in his time, as today, the evidence was on every newsstand—but he could hardly anticipate the signs of another kind of cultural rebirth.

Various transformations of attitude are now going on in America. One dramatic example of this change is available in a recent book, *Conversations in Maine* (Boston: South End Press, 1978, $12.00), which records the self-conversion of four political radicals into revolutionary communitarians. The authors—the book is made of their musings and interchanges, taken down—say of themselves:

> The four of us—a black worker, a descendant of Robert Treat Paine, a Chinese woman, a Jewish woman who had been a labor organizer—*could only havecome together in this way in America.* It happened this way because we were all in the Marxist movement to begin with. Otherwise we could have been all in our separate milieux. Black and white, Chinese and Jew, we were first brought together by a very Europeanized West Indian, a Marxist who was convinced that the American revolution would be the first, most perfect, manifestation of Marxist theory but who paid more attention to the American revolution than any American Marxists had ever done. Breaking with his theories, *but still intent on discovering and making the American revolution,* we began to discover our diversities and our special contribution.

These four—Grace and James Boggs, and Freddy and Lyman Paine—describe the fruits of their self-education (a better term than "conversion") in dialogue that has been assimilated to a continuous text. The foundation of their thinking is put into a few words at the end:

> Today we can say unhesitatingly that revolutionary change in this country will be brought about not because of people's class but because great numbers of Americans, regardless of class, have begun to demand more of themselves as persons and as citizens. In other words, we have finally freed ourselves of Marxist or European theories of class and faceless masses.
>
> All revolutions are changes but not all changes are alike. The American Revolution was such a profound revolution because it changed people's concepts of what it means to be a human being.

A sense of wonder and excitement at the implications of this discovery pervades the book. It is not too much to say that it contains some of the seeds of the authentic radicalism of the years to come. It fills the moral vacuum with convictions about the potentialities of Man.

COMMENTARY
WONDERFUL MICE

A LITTLE book for children we've been saving to find a place for noticing has been neglected too long, so we'll tell about it here. The title *is Esta Cosa Se Ve Asi* and/or *It Looks Like This*—in short, the text is in both Spanish and English. The author and illustrator is Irma E. Webber and the publisher is the International Society for General Semantics, P.O. Box 2469, San Francisco 94126. (No price on the book.)

What claims our attention is the drawings! Irma Webber, according to the cover note, has background in botanical drawing, but this hardly accounts for the fascination of her simple lines.

A good description is given on the back cover:

> Four mice live in four separate parts of a barn. Each, from his own safe knot-hole, sees life passing by. And each, from his knot-hole, thinks he is seeing life whole. Why shouldn't he, with no other views to confuse him? So, as things pass by, saying *oink-oink* or *moo* as they pass, the one-angle view seems like absolute truth. It takes the urgency of a real crisis to shake four narrow views into some sort of common outlook that begins to see life in the round.
>
> Is it true about men what they say about mice? Well it sometimes seems so, though men are supposedly more educable. If nations—nay sections of society and sections of our country as well—all seem to be looking from the protective confines of separate knot-holes, and if the harsh whip of crisis is required to teach a common view, is it not partly because we do not pay enough attention in the formative years, to the kind of thinking that is in this story for youngsters?

Collectors of reports by parents who have decided to teach their children at home will want to have a copy of the March-June issue of *North Country Anvil* ($1.25, Box 37, Millville, Minn. 55957), in which Robert Sessions tells about his adventure in home education in Iowa, and of the court actions which resulted and still go on. His concluding comment is of interest:

> It is difficult to over-emphasize the power of the educational system in our country today. The system has slapped us, and many people like ourselves, with little effort, and to this power. Few people have the personal resources it takes to fight such a large and complex system. Yet this system is extremely vulnerable. From both the local board and the Department of Public Instruction staff we heard concerns about the "landslide" which would occur if we were allowed to educate our son outside their system. ("Let one child out the door and they'll all run away.") And at our second hearing before the DPI the state superintendent spent more than an hour asking us for our recommendations on how they might improve/save an obviously faltering institution. It may sound naive, but our experience has convinced us that this institution is run by ordinary people who are very insecure in their power (someone who really has power doesn't have to brandish it).

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
GREAT ODDS AND HIGH ENDS

SOME lines by Bertold Brecht appear in the Fall 1978 *CoEvolution Quarterly:*

> What times are these when
> a conversation about trees
> is almost a crime
> because it includes
> so much silence
> about so many outrages!

Artists, especially, are haunted by such reflections, and especially in times of ostentatious espousal of righteous causes. John Holt, writing in No. 4 of *Growing Without Schooling,* revealed similar compunctions. When he was asked by the Director of the American Civil Liberties Union to participate in a national convocation on Free Speech, he replied by listing ten infringements of the rights of children by the public schools—characteristic practices which seem an inevitable part of mass compulsory education—and then said:

> As long as such outrages go on, I can't get very excited about such issues as the controlling of sex and violence in TV, the restricting of advertising material on TV programs, the rating of motion pictures, the censorship of student publications, or the banning of textbooks and library books on various grounds. People who argue strongly about such things, while accepting without protest the practices I here complain about, seem to me to be straining at gnats while swallowing camels.

This is part of an old argument having many forms and strengths. "There's no use trying to improve our society—it has to be changed from top to bottom and bottom to top" is a familiar version. The claim of course has truth in it. Yet "total" change, like total revolution, simply cannot happen all at once for the reason that the only real changes are in individuals, and we all have different rates of change. An *enforced* change becomes tyranny for those who are not ready. So the argument goes on, back and forth.

Mr. Holt's position is an instructive one. Theoretically, you could say, he is a utopian. He would like, it often seems, to get rid of all schools—or all public schools. But he knows that this is not—or not yet—really possible, but he retains this goal as a symbol of what might come about naturally in a really good society—an imperfect symbol perhaps, but it serves provocatively and in other ways—and he uses it to light up his "intermediate" argument for getting rid of *compulsory* schools. This would add freedom to the ways and means to utopia—an essential from any decently human point of view.

We quote a lot from Mr. Holt because he is that rare combination of a militant social critic with a teacher who knows that the true beneficiaries of all social plans or dreams must be individual humans, in this case children. His writing, therefore, is primarily about helping children to learn or grow. His chief point seems to be that children have the innate capacity to grow, and that teaching ought to assist that capacity, not get in its way, stifle it, or make it practically illegal. The fault he finds with public education is that it has built-in tendencies to these bad effects, and he sees little or no hope of change so long as it is compulsory. (See the article by Stephen Arons in the *Saturday Review* for Nov. 25.)

Does this mean that there mustn't be any "compulsion" anywhere, ever? Well, that isn't such a bad ideal. The really educated or mature individual needs no compulsion. But children need to be protected against themselves. There are, for example, three prohibitions for Hopi Indian children: Don't play with fire, stay away from the edge of the mesa (a big drop to the desert floor), and keep out of the Kiva (a sacred place, not for play). Otherwise, they can do exactly as they please until old enough to begin to learn their roles as members of the Indian community. (Hopi children, it turns out, have IQ's quite a bit higher than the white children in their area, if that means anything. See *The Hopi Way* by Laura Thompson and Alice Joseph, 1947.)

Holt would probably say that in our society the parents, not the schools, have the need and right to make a few rules and "enforce" them. Parents' rules can be intelligently, flexibly formulated, and immediately suspended if need be. Such rules do some good and less damage. (Only small schools can function with suddenly flexible rules.)

The thing about John Holt's paper, *Growing Without Schooling,* that makes it so good to read is that he adds plenty of "conversation about trees" to his forays against the evils of compulsion. In No. 4, he published this report from a parent about raising a boy:

> My wife and I did not begin with the notion that our son would not go to school. We named him Neil, after A. S., true, but assumed he would find an alternative school at age five. What we did begin with was . . . a conviction that we would help him in any way possible to realize his potential. . . . Since this meant that we were *available* (italics added)—without ever being intrusive—he quickly began to *use* us regularly, hourly, for learning, and we found that by the time he was two we literally couldn't stop him from spending his day in learning. He read very well by two, and by three and four moved into continuous lessons in nature, history, science, and so on. . . . Here is an example: at three, in Central Park, he was looking at the pretty trees, and I mentioned that they could be distinguished from each other by type, this was an oak, that was a beech, and others were like them. "Let's make a map of all the trees in Central Park!" he said.

Well, he (they) did it, although several summers were needed for this formidably wonderful child to learn to identify the trees in the Park (almost all of it) and put them on the map(s). When it came time for going to school, the boy, after school was explained to him, said he thought it would be "like going to jail," so they made other plans. The letter concludes:

> During his early years my wife and a couple of friends taught him all he wanted to know, and if we didn't know it which usually was the case, it was even better for we all learned together. Example: at 7 he saw the periodic table of elements, wanted to learn atoms and chemistry and physics. I had forgotten how to balance an equation, but went out and bought a college textbook on the subject, a history of discovery of the elements, and some model atoms, and in the next month we went off into a tangent of learning in which we both learned college-level science. He has never returned to the subject, but to this day retains every bit of it because it came at a moment in development and fantasy that was meaningful to him.

It must be admitted that this child was undoubtedly remarkable to begin with. And it might also be said that possibly parents like these, who are willing and able to teach their own children, have or "attract" offspring with potentialities that need this sort of freewheeling help. But however atypical such children may be, Mr. Holt's point is nonetheless made. He supplies an illustration of ideal learning, even though it may seem a bit bookish in content. In a natural or naturally good society, this way of bringing up children would be matter-of-course. There would also be centers (whether called "schools" or not hardly matters) where particular things could be best learned, but the mood would be similar to the one established in the home.

In a way, there is value in picking for illustration such an unusual child, simply in order to argue that *it doesn't matter* what sort of child is considered. *All* children are slowed down and inhibited by compulsory routines. John Holt shows how this works by describing the experience of Jim Herndon, given in Herndon's book *How To Survive in your Native Land:*

> When he and one or two other teachers stopped asking the children questions about their reading, stopped grading them, stopped tracking them, and just let them read, they all read better, even the ones who had been very poor readers. But even that school could not think of anything so sensible and simple as "a reading program" and refused to learn anything from it. . . .
>
> People learn to read well, and get big vocabularies, from *books,* not workbooks and dictionaries. As a kid I read years ahead of my age, didn't even *have* a dictionary. . . .

Growing Without Schooling is issued at 308 Boyleston Street, Boston, Mass. 02116—six issues for $10.00.

FRONTIERS

The Impossible Isn't Necessary

IN *Science* for Sept. 29, a science news writer, Barbara J. Culliton, reviews the problems confronting the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA) passed late in 1976. The idea of the Act is to keep the manufacturers of food and drugs from poisoning the public or distributing products which might cause cancer. In charge is the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which is empowered to bar from the market products which have "unreasonably hazardous" ingredients. The manufacturers are supposed to notify the EPA when intending to market a new chemical.

The *Science* writer doesn't say right out that the EPA has been given an impossible assignment, but that seems plainly the case. The facts speak for themselves:

> Of the estimated 4.3 million chemicals in existence, some 63,000 are thought to be in common use in this country. The sheer volume of chemicals alone is one indication of the magnitude of the problem of compiling an inventory, and it is complicated by the fact that many of them are produced by small companies whose data are not in any central bank.

After some argument it was decided to collect information on chemicals used during the past three years, but not to require the manufacturers to tell how they were used, since this is held to be a "trade secret." When a product is to be offered which has new chemicals in it, the manufacturer must notify the EPA of this intention, supplying data on the possible hazards (involving "unreasonable" risk to human health or the environment). Some say that a thousand new chemicals are marketed every year, while others claim that only a hundred are "significant," but even in this case the prospective volume of work in checking the new products, an EPA official said, would mean having "to rule on four new chemical applications every working day, which is clearly impossible."

The cost of all this watch-dog research may prove incalculable. Miss Culliton says:

> At the heart of the challenge of controlling toxic substances is the fact that there are few uncontestable data. Uncertainty prevails in the regulatory arena. And so, it becomes necessary to act in the face of uncertainty, to make judgments and regulatory decisions on the basis of the best available data and hope that the cost turns out to be worth it. And cost it will. At the upper end of the predictive scale, there are estimates that TSCA will cost the chemical industry $2 billion a year, although most estimates are more conservative.

An accompanying article in *Science is* devoted to showing that legislation intended to control toxic substances is based on the "fragile premise that it is possible to identify which chemicals are hazardous . . . and which are safe and can be ignored." Noting this uncertainty, the *Science* news writer concludes that we probably won't know for ten years whether or not the law is doing much good.

Writing more broadly on the same general subject—the unreliability of scientific prediction—in the *New Ecolo*gist for July/August of last year, Ivan Tolstoy speaks of the many failures to anticipate the effects of technological activity and concludes:

> Issues which, not so long ago, would have been regarded as only technical, to be resolved exclusively by scientists or engineers, may now turn upon values, not numbers.
>
> In recent years, technocracy has supplied a variety of proof for its inability to cope predictively with the consequences of its decisions. Leaving aside the unsuccessful gropings of economic theory, there have simply been too many catastrophes, too many wrong turnings—thalidomide, Soweso, DDT, industrial explosions, collapsing dams, worldwide pollution . . . the list is endless. The public, aware of vast threats lurking in the background, is worried and uncertain. Less innocent than in the past, it is no longer convinced by the stage entrances of learned men brandishing diplomas and assuring us all is well, because *they* understand the problem, even if we do not. For every expert who tells us not to worry you'll find one to contradict him, and the bewildered observer must ask himself how to find the truth. The

> sobering fact is that he won't get it from the experts—not, that is, solely from their expertise. Positions cannot be taken on purely technical grounds logic takes us only so far: sooner or later, one must make a value judgment or an act of faith.

It is commonly assumed by science-minded individuals that relying on value judgments is a leap into the unknown. Values are a matter of feeling, they say, and we must not let them distract from the objective facts. But if you turn to the other end of the continuum of human inquiry—to the work of ecologists, certain environmental scientists, investigators with long experience in biological or organic farming and gardening, and healing practitioners who rely on diet instead of drugs, another prospect emerges. At some time in the past these people began to turn away from conventional science, conventional agriculture, conventional medicine, by reason of some insistent forebodings. They began to use their value-feelings as guides in their work. They studied past practice and began to separate the useful and constructive practices from the blindly imitative things that people do without knowing why. A wonderful blend of the old and the new—the intuitive and the rational—was the result. On the beginnings of such developments, see the work of Sir Albert Howard, the father of organic farming. On broader developments now in progress, see the writings of E. F. Schumacher, Amory Lovins, and John Todd.

Already there are numerous publications exploring and propagating a kind of science which moves from both ethical and natural premises. For example, at the moment we have for notice the Summer 1978 *Ecologist Quarterly* (73 Molesworth St., Wadebridge, Cornwall PL27 7DS. UK—$9.00 a year) edited by Edward Goldsmith, which presents an article by R. D. Hodges on organic farming—not only the production achievements of biological agriculture (practically equal to commercial or chemically fertilized crops), but also on the superior nutrition available in organic produce. Food grown in this way doesn't poison you.

That Nature is willing to collaborate with the laws of human health seems a reasonable conclusion. There may be some "mysticism" involved, but people who eat and work according to the rules these people are proposing don't seem to get sick.