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DESIGNING A SYNTHETIC PLANET

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WE have noted that Earth itself is well on the way to becoming a synthetic planet. The designer enters the scene very early on, with the creation and shaping of useful things—tools, utensils, weapons and buildings—and it presently becomes a general activity for all mankind for *it is not possible to make anything without a design,* even if it is only in one's head; furthermore, each design is based of necessity on a *design program,* which is a series of statements of what it proposed, and at the same time an indication of the designer's freedoms and limitations.

In our time, the design range has been extended from artifacts to *the design of systems,* and the designers now involved include a broad range of disciplines far beyond the traditional arts and crafts. Designing systems, which is a normal response to increasing complexity, also sets in motion a growing awareness of interlocking systems in Nature, both delicate and tough at the same time, and immensely complicated. This, along with increasingly alarming situations created by our careless meddling with such systems, has triggered a growing consciousness of the fragility of the environment, once certain limits are breached, and a realization that it can be damaged beyond any point of possible recovery.

Design thus becomes related to all such matters on an increasing scale, and this in turn opens the question of the competence of the designers. Concerns about the quality of human performance take one to the mystery of creativity, an essential element which always seems to be in short supply. On the face of it, the idea that a mass technical society of spectators and bureaucrats can foster the growth of a kind of individual who would be the antithesis of everything the society stands for seems absurd. However, one must be careful about snap judgments here, for the *role* an individual is led to play in a society is not necessarily *who* that individual really is.

We have said that the world, the entire planet, is in the grip of a transformation—a crisis—of absolutely unprecedented magnitude. For example, only a few months ago it was reported that world population has now reached 4.8 billion people, almost a billion more hungry mouths than at the end of World War II. There is already malnutrition afflicting millions. The production of food is not increasing; in fact, with the continuing loss of topsoil in immense quantities and overfishing in the oceans, it is more likely to decline. Is this a crisis, or just another news item? People who don't like being presented with bad news, which includes just about all of us, have been deeply conditioned to think, "new technology will take care of it," like the highly publicized "green revolution" based on new strains of plants combined with heavy dosages of fertilizer, but it is increasingly a matter of observation that in its present state of development agriculture creates more and more problems for every one it solves.

For anyone who feels some curiosity about how real the crisis may be, there is an entire library of books and other documentation, very little of which offers encouragement to those who wish it would just go away. The grandfather of the modern doom-sayers was probably Oswald Spengler, whose *Decline of the West,* in the 1920s, provided the same kind of thrills for the nervous they can get today from the endless parade of catastrophe films. Most of us have been exposed to Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *1984,* Huxley's *Brave New World,* Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and *The Castle,* some of Doris Lessing's books, plays like Ionescu's *Rhinoceros,* Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Sartre's *No Exit.* There are even excellent science fiction books like Robert Sheckly's *Journey into Tomorrow* and Brunner's *The Sheep Look Up.* Then there is the large number of psychologists, sociologists, biologists and physicists with an overwhelming collective output. All of such books present the same message in a variety of ways. The message has three parts: we are in very serious

trouble; it is going to get worse, not better; the planet may not survive (as a habitable environment) the increasingly ferocious maltreatment it is getting, and certainly will not if the runaway population increase continues. The psychologists and sociologists tend to home on "people problems," the psychic damage done to large populations through propaganda masked as news, advertising and entertainment. Some economists, like Ezra Mishan of London, concentrate on the huge hidden costs of high technology and unlimited economic growth. Sociologists, whose concerns often overlap with those of the psychologists, point out the mushroommg controls over people's lives, the growth of crime and drug addiction, and international terrorism. A philosopher, Erich Kahler, has written at least one book linking trends in modern art with breakdowns in the society itself.

In all the writing I have seen, there is a conspicuous lack of inhibition in saying what the authors clearly feel must be said. Erich Fromm's *The Sane Society* gives most of its attention to the *insane* society. The people who have written under titles like *Our Plundered Planet*, or *Our Depleted Planet* show downright horror at their own findings. If one does no more than scan the titles of this mass of work, it is quickly apparent that the major critics of the contemporary scene are convinced that the phenomenon of global transformation—or crisis—is total.

I have been looking at Pitirim Sorokin's book, *The Crisis of our Age* (1941), which goes into considerable detail about what is wrong with our age, and then proceeds to tell how to set everything right, which is to do everything possible to accelerate the inevitable collapse of a system which has run out of steam.

Just what kind of crisis do we have? In Sorokin's description, "it is not ordinary, but extraordinary. It is not merely an economic or political adjustment, but involves simultaneously almost the whole of Western culture and society. . . . It is a crisis in their art and science, philosophy and religion, law and morals, manners and mores, in the form of social, political and economic organization, including the nature of the family and marriage. . . . More precisely, it consists in a disintegration of a fundamental form of Western culture and society dominant for the last four centuries."

It is remarkable to what an extent this brilliant and undoubtedly cantankerous man anticipated what was coming up. When he flatly states, "Man as a man has no value whatever for most sensate groups of the present time"—an observation which must have been a shocker even in the liberal atmosphere of Cambridge at that time—is now taken as a truism by most of the writers who came later.

The remedial action Sorokin prescribes in this book is not designed, like most reform programs, to somehow get us back where we were, but to hasten the social transformation he has been describing. What must be done, he tells us, is "Step one . . . the realisation as wide, as deep, and as prompt . . . as possible of the extraordinary character of the contemporary crisis of our culture and society." This, in effect, is the message of the Club of Rome's report, *Mankind at the Turning Point*, thirty years later.

"The sensate form of culture" must get "unequivocal recognition that it is not the only great form of culture."

"Third, when one of these forms ages and begins to show signs of creative exhaustion, as they all do after some period of their domination, *a given culture, in order to continue its creative life, must shift to another*. . . . Only such a shift can save it from a complete disintegration or mummification."

"Fourth, the . . . preparation for the shift implies *the deepest reexamination of the main premises and values of sensate culture, rejection of its superannuated pseudo-values and reenthronement of the real values it has discarded.*

"Fifth, such a transformation of the mentality of Western culture must be followed by *a corresponding transformation of social relationships and forms of social organization."*

Sorokin's prescriptions take us back to the designers, who are still waiting for their design program. While admirably clear and humane, it does have more than a faint recall of those churchly

admonitions to go and sin no more. Nobody disagrees, to be sure, but nobody expects to stop sinning.

Actually, much of what his prescriptions recommend is now going on in a number of inconspicuous ways. Most of the books published since 1941 are a "reexamination of the main premises and values of sensate culture"; and the "rejection of its superannuated pseudo-values" is animated. "A transformation of the mentality of Western culture" is also "visibly under way."

In addition, the post-Sorokin developments, while scattered well outside the range of normal establishment interests, are visible in many places. There are small groups in Australia, Japan and the U.S. which are trying to save our vanishing topsoil by experiments in which the land is left unploughed (to resist air and water erosion) except for narrow trenches in which the seeds are dropped. Biological experiments to replace insecticides with natural controls are widespread. Many groups are working to save endangered species and to revive damaged environments. People can now fish again in downtown Grand Rapids, and the shad are running in the lower reaches of the Hudson River. The "soft energy" people are scattered all over the planet, working photovoltaic cells, wind farms, tidal power, energy conservation in building. Our own establishment, understandably, puts its weight on capital-intensive projects like underground gasification of coal, exploitation of oil-bearing sands and shale, offshore drilling and nuclear energy. This is because what is good for the military-industrial complex is good for the country, and because the supply of nineteenth-century minds in good condition is still ample.

A critical attitude on all such matters is essential in times of great change, but it is also essential to live with the realization that most change takes place with agonizing slowness, and also in an unpredictably spotty fashion. The learning process itself can be very slow. We are only beginning to learn that it is a totality of interacting forces in which nothing is really isolated from anything else. Hence the risks created by planetary meddling.

The only proper way to design a synthetic planet is to do as Plato's Artificer did the natural one, which takes quite a bit of doing. Still, no one can fairly say that we are learning nothing, for as I indicated earlier, a lot is going on in many places. The double bind we are in lies in the population growth, which is simply not manageable indefinitely, and the accelerating pace of technological development, which has become an independent problem-generating process, to add to all our other woes.

Even so, we have possibly learned enough, at least at the thinking end of the population, to start roughing out something that might look like a moderately acceptable design program. A good place to start might be to examine the notion so popular with the 19th-century technocrats, that we were here to achieve "victories" over Nature. I have sometimes thought that this nonsense must have gotten its start on the competitive playing fields of Eton, but it is more childish than that. Even Kipling's Jungle Books are better, for all the animal characters know the Law, and obey it. The Law is an understanding of the limits set by natural systems, and it must be obeyed if one wants to go on living, which happens to be Earth's problem at the moment.

A sailboat wins a race because its skipper understands the Law better than his competitors. The ancient farms of Europe are in better shape, after centuries of use, than the vast territories being chewed up by hi-tech agribiz, which each year has to put in more fertilizer to maintain fertility.

One of the curious consequences of affluence in the mass societies is mass boredom, a telltale sign of spiritual malnutrition. Even if Scripture is dismissed as a collection of ramshackle myths, it is worth a moment to consider the subject of myths, which have not only provided the handiest kind of vision and wisdom since the most ancient days, but also the glue which held the early societies together in a reasonable state of lively mental health.

"Myth," said Bronislav Malinowski, is "a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral

wisdom." It is not easy to imagine where the design program might locate some hard-worked and active myths, and it is possible that many of them are buried under one or more of the asphalt deserts of the regional shopping centers.

Myths lost much of their power as knowledge of the physical world increased. I think of the man who said, "Who needs the faith that moves mountains when we do it all the time with bulldozers?" But along with this we have the savage, cool statement of Jose Ortega y Gasset: "I want to draw attention to a point . . . that technology for all its being a practically unlimited capacity will irretrievably empty the lives of those . . . resolved to stake everything on their faith in it . . . Just because of its unlimited possibilities, technology is an empty form like the most formalistic logic and is unable *to determine the content of life. That is why our time, being the most intensely technical, is also the emptiest in all human history."*

Paul Goodman, in his *New Reformation,* about 40 years after Ortega, wrote: "Since labor is not needed, there is vague talk of a future society of 'leisure,' but I have heard of no plans for a kind of community in which all human beings would be necessary and valued." Erich Fromm, in a different context, noted that mass technological society inevitably attempts to turn all people into *things.* Franz Kafka dramatized the notion in his story *Metamorphosis* by turning his character into a cockroach.

Education, for most of us, evokes images of school, although anyone interested in such matters will conclude that it is a personal lifetime business. For the education of young children, adults are clearly needed, and this country alone has several millions engaged in doing just that. However, schools are not run by teachers but by bureaucrats, who may or may not have an interest in education, and they are responsible to school boards and indirectly, parents. John Holt, in Boston, has been working for years on programs for education *without* schools, for parents who simply cannot take what the local schools provide. Such a remedy must require some pretty heroic as well as desperate parents.

In India, some of the Gandhian schools have a Basic Education geared to a single production process, like cotton. The children are taught how to prepare the soil and sow the seed, how to hoe, weed and cultivate, how to harvest the bolls, to spin the thread, weave it into lengths and finally to make the cloth into garments. They are also taught the arts of dyeing and embroidery, and exposed to similar work from other provinces, not only broadening their awareness of pattern design, but learning some geography as well, along with the arithmetic needed in connection with distribution and marketing.

This is the most ancient of all methods of teaching and learning, and it probably works just as well as it always did. Such an approach, sometimes described as "holistic," has the advantage of making a lot of separate elements intelligible and more interesting to the children. Learning to spin thread is bound to generate an interest in weaving and all the other related processes. It seems to be a very "natural" way to teach and learn.

Inevitably, the name of Thoreau drifts into view when one thinks about education, not because he was an educator but because he was a thinker. Already, when at Walden Pond, he had decided that there was no news in the newspapers, which would have left him fully prepared to cope with television had he lived that long.

"Undoubtedly," he wrote, "if we were to reform this outward life truly and thoroughly, we should leave no study of the inner omitted." This "would be an employment of the whole nature, and what we should do thereafter would be as vain a question as to ask the bird what it will do when its nest is built and its brood reared. But a moral reform must take place first, and the necessity of the other will be superseded, and we shall sail and plough by its force alone."

One could go on almost indefinitely, quoting authority of every description to demonstrate that information is not knowledge, and never will be; that knowledge does not guarantee education. In a travel book of rare sensibility, *Blue Highways,* an elderly schoolteacher called Miz Alice, who lives on a tiny island in Chesapeake Bay, talks to the author about

her children in school. "Learning rules is useful but it isn't education. Education is thinking, and thinking is looking for yourself and seeing what's there, not what you got told was there. Then you put what you see together. It's more than difficult to get kids today to look for themselves. They want their visions to be televisions. 'Eyeballs'! I said to them. . . ."

Ralph Waldo Emerson also believed, along with Miz Alice, that people should think. So did Ortega. "Without a strategic insight into the self," the latter wrote, "without vigilant thought, human life is impossible." It is truly remarkable that these and so many other good and wise men and women should have homed in, over more than 2,500 years, with such unanimous approval of *thinking*, an activity which is beyond question the most universally unpopular alternative ever handed to the human race.

In this patchwork I have assembled, I think it is possible that there is almost enough to begin sketching out a rough design program for our synthetic planet. Inevitably, there are gaps and rough edges, and I suspect that there always will be. If we were to make a design program for the Synthetic Planet, taking it very seriously, we might say that it is for the Tentative Society, a name I like particularly because you can't make an ism out of it. As for rules, I can think of only a few, like "Take it easy. Remember that nobody really knows much about anything." Or, "No act has only one consequence. Everything is connected." Perhaps something like this would be useful: "Whatever it is, try it for a while on a small scale. Remember all those thalidomide babies. One would have been enough to make the point." We might throw in Oliver Cromwell's anguished exhortation—or was it angry?—to the Church of Scotland:" I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible that you may be mistaken." Maybe someone could find a latter day Betsy Ross to make a nice flag out of that one, maybe Gloria Vanderbilt if she would stop sewing her name on all those jeans bottoms for a few hours. It would go very well with the Stars and Stripes, and perhaps even the Hammer and Sickle. Flags look very well on buildings; they soften and give life to all those hard surfaces.

I suppose a few other rules might be added to the design program from time to time for the improved operation of the Tentative Society, but if so, they should be adopted only by a unanimous popular vote. including children down to the age of five. These rules, plus a few specially aimed at the problem of growing people, may well take care of the design program, and, come to think of it, provide the alarm clock implied in Alberto Moravia's famous last word on the subject: "The modern world is nightmare from which men will wake up."

New York, N.Y. GEORGE NELSON

REVIEW
WHAT WOULD THOREAU SAY?

A BOOK review section in a magazine is far from representing a natural life for the one who conducts it. No matter what you do, the distortions of civilization shape at least the form of the undertaking, as for example the continuous flow of reading matter which piles up on the desk, there for weekly reduction—a phenomenon which has no consideration at all for such questions as, what amount of reading, even in volumes presumed to contain the eternal truth, is enough for one human being to consume within a week! But since the publishers never slow down, except seasonally, there are all those books, waiting for conscientious attention, although a large number of them may not deserve it. One silently groans to oneself a confirmation of Hudibras, who somewhere said, "Of the making of books there is no end." And you don't really want to make an end to books—no books, no book review department, and we are not quite ready for that.

But who, in passing, was Hudibras? Since he doesn't appear in the eleventh *Britannica*—the only compilation of certainties on which we rely—how can one find out? Well, the unabridged Webster helps by identifying the name's adjective form: "hudibrastic: *Hudibras*, mock-heroic satirical poem in octo-syllabic couplets by Samuel Butler." This is the earlier Samuel Butler of the seventeenth century (1612-1680), not the nineteenth-century novelist (*Erewhon*) who was critical of Darwin, also a satirist, but not, as we recall, a poet. So we can't go back to Hudibras for more sage and perhaps consoling comment on the endlessness of the flow of reading material.

But we can illustrate, beginning with the volume of "literature" that day after day comes in the mail. While a certain respect is due to the "worthy causes" represented by the well-dressed brochures, pamphlets, and flyers that appeal for our help, using nearly every form of rhetoric known to man, the number of these sometimes frantic cries inevitably benumbs the most responsive of editors. If you got only one of these appeals per month or year, you would probably act on it, but when they seem to run into hundreds, what are you supposed to do? The best you can do is to adopt a sort of hit-or-miss policy, leaving it to the moment, the quality of the brochure, and the inclinations of the editorial association network at the time, while knowing full well that the problem is not diminished but will go on and on. The problem is typical of the *toujours plus* (always more) civilization of ours, and the distortions which affect the good people as well as the not so good.

Our first illustration is a pamphlet, *What About the Children?* carefully prepared in English and other languages by the Parents and Teachers for Social Responsibility (Box 517, Moretown, Vermont 05660), subtitled "The Threat of Nuclear War and Our Responsibility to Preserve this Planet for Future Generations." What can you possibly say on a subject like that? Well, the pamphlet begins with an "open letter" by Glenn Hawkes, a member of the group, who explains he was haunted by this question. He says he is a fortunate father with two healthy children of whom he took care, just like a mother, when they were babies. As he, like some others, began to feel concern about the increasing likelihood of nuclear war, the question, "What about the children?" assumed major proportions in his life.

> I saw the question on the playground. I saw it climbing the fence. I saw it running in tears with a scrape on the knee. I saw it in the empty stroller by the apartment door. And at night the question crawled into my bed and took away my sleep.

Naturally enough, with an introduction like that you read the pamphlet, even though you know perfectly well the question has no answer, can have no answer; yet it is a question that needs to be asked.

The pamphlet spells out how vulnerable children will be to nuclear war. The argument is appealing because everyone knows that children,

unlike the rest of us, are *innocent*, but like us, are *defenseless*. What does the pamphlet say? Well, get one and read it. They don't say how much to send for it, but it can't be much. Our copy came from another editor who thought well of it and sent along other material, including a copy of an article by Thomas Powers which appeared in *Commonweal* a couple of years ago. He begins with his experience of the lives of children, their war games, their acceptance of conflict as a part of life. But all that was years ago. Today, with the spectre of nuclear war breathing down our necks wherever we go, such games would be symbols of derangement. Powers, a writer of real capacity who does books and reviews on the threat of nuclear war, said in this article:

> Now things are quite different. War worries me a great deal. I have three daughters of my own, and I wonder what to tell them. One day last summer the oldest, Amanda, asked me what my book was about. I am asked this all the time. It's a form of polite inquiry. People don't mean anything by it. You ask brokers how the market is going. You ask the old how they're feeling. You ask farmers what they think of the sky, and you ask writers what they're working on. I'm working on a book about strategic weapons. How interesting, people say. That's very topical just now. You'd better get it out soon while everybody's still interested. This remark, which has popped spontaneously from more people than you would imagine, used to fill me with despair. It made the job seem hopeless. How can a writer pierce a carapace so thick?
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> But of course piercing that carapace is precisely the point of the undertaking. I think about this a lot and try out my stratagems on the unwary. If there's time, and we're not just glancing off each other on the street or at a party—in short when I've got someone in a corner for fifteen or twenty minutes—I can usually scare the living daylights out of them. But what do I tell my daughters, who are four, nine, and eleven? Do I want to scare them? Can fear possibly do them any good? How can children live with a knowledge of the world as it really is when adults find it so difficult?

Powers argues this back and forth to some effect, ending with the conclusion that "there are some things you just don't tell the kids." Why not? Because they don't know how to go numb and indifferent when the threat of the outside environment gets too much to bear. Their reactions are fresh and undiminished by experience. "War is more than kids can handle." And as Powers says: "They don't really need to be told." They pick things up. In time. And who knows the real stuff anyway? Certainly not the adults, who let the mess get so far ahead of us and over our heads. As someone wisely put it, "We may not all be guilty ones, but we are all responsible ones."

How do MANAS writers handle such situations? Not being specialists in arms debate, and not wanting to be, they fall back on Thoreau, who said:

> We should wash ourselves clean of such news. Of what consequence, though our planet explode, if there is no character involved in the explosion? In health we have not the least curiosity about such events. We do not live for idle amusement. I would not run round a corner to see the world blow up.

At the moment this seems exactly the right attitude to adopt—if we are able to do it. There would certainly be no character involved in a nuclear war. Death and lingering collapse, and wide destruction and almost endless pollution there would be, but no character. No character on either side. Mr. Powers, with all his talent, would not be able to scare the living daylights out of Thoreau. Nobody could. Growing people like Thoreau ought to be the project, not scaring people.

In fact, we are beginning to feel that in this Review Department we ought to have a new rule, to the effect that nothing much of importance has been published in this country since Thoreau. It isn't true and it's sort of outrageous, but it would be a very useful rule. It would certainly clear the air to ask, when a book comes in, "Is it as good as Thoreau?" This would simplify our job, eliminate a lot of hard questions and time-consuming stuff. Thinking about how Thoreau handled the depressing events of his time is salutary. And

what was his time like? Well, you could build a little house good enough to live in for $28.00. No endless pieces of paper to sign, hardly any bills to pay. With a little sweat anyone could have his own home. Those people did without motor cars very well. And they got a wonderful education without anyone doing all that "research" that is now claimed to be vital to our future. . . . if any. Yet Thoreau, bless him, found reason to be depressed at the way the world was going. What, we sometimes wonder, would he have set down, in our time, if Jonathan Schell had invited him to do the last chapter in *The Fate of the Earth,* and Freeman Dyson asked him to finish up *Weapons and Hope?*

The thing is, *nobody knows* what Thoreau would add to such books, and that is the kind of writers we need today—writers wholly uninterested in scaring people. Only the fearless can make peace for keeps. Some people say that if you believe in the immortality of the soul you can be fearless, since everyone will incarnate again in perhaps a better world. That well may be, but fear is hardly a good reason for adopting faith in immortality. A faith made by fear wouldn't be much of a faith—it would always be in danger of trembling apart.

COMMENTARY
RESEARCH FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

SINCE Dec. 1, 1984 is the deadline for application for next year's forty-three weeks of the Land Institute's internship term (Feb. 18 to Dec. 20, 1985), we are glad to use this space to tell about this opportunity, which is offered to students of agriculture who are graduates or upper level undergraduates. Good health and stamina are required. Especially invited are those who plan to complete a Ph.D. and to take part in a teaching and research program in the area of sustainable agriculture. Ten internships are available for next year's spring, summer, and fall sessions. Each accepted intern will receive a stipend of $90 a week for the 43 weeks, and full tuition scholarships. According to a sheet descriptive of this program—

> The Land Institute is a non-profit, educational research foundation established in 1976 along the Smoky Hill River southeast of Salina, Kansas. It is devoted to a search for sustainable alternatives in agriculture, energy, shelter, and waste management. The Land offers a unique curriculum for college-age students, serves as an environmental studies center for the region, and conducts pioneering research into the development of a sustainable agriculture based on the model of the prairie.
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> Researchers at the Land Institute design and conduct experiments which they hope will lead eventually to a sustainable agriculture based on high seed-yielding, herbaceous, perrenial mixtures, or what might be called "domestic prairies." Currently, all of our plant breeding and ecological studies are directed toward answering four questions: (1) Can perennialism and high yield go together? (2) Can a perenmal polyculture have an economic advantage over a perennial monoculture? (3) Can an herbaceous perennial seed-producing polyculture capture and fix sufficient quantities of nitrogen to support itself? (4) Can such an ecosystem control weeds and avoid epidemics of insects and pathogens?

The interns are expected to help design and plant experiments in the spring, tend them in the summer, and harvest and record the result for analysis. They will also have opportunity to contribute to research publications. Applying students are asked to explain why they want to study at the Land Institute rather than a university. The interns study and do physical work, including general maintenance of the facilities. Wes Jackson, author of *New Roots for Agriculture,* is founder and director of the Land Institute. He and the staff are the teachers. The address is Route 3, Salina, Kans. 67401.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
WHY SCHOOLING IS GOING WRONG

SOMETHING over a year ago (June 22, 1983) we quoted an *American Scholar* (Spring, 1983) article on the teaching of English in American schools by E. D. Hirsch, Jr., who teaches English at the University of Virginia. His point may be briefly made by quoting two sentences: "The current curriculum guide to the study of English in the state of California is a remarkable document. In its several pages of advice to teachers I do not find the title of a single recommended work." Why not? Because the prevailing theory is that knowing English is a matter of acquiring formal skills, that content doesn't really matter and may be left to local interest or accident. It is a policy, Hirsch maintains, that leads to impoverishment of mind.

In the *Scholar* for the summer of this year, Prof. Hirsch returns to this analysis and criticism. His title is, "'English' and the Perils of Formalism." For his beginning he goes back to a time when formalism had not yet drained the blood from the teaching of English—to Hugh Blair, a contemporary in the eighteenth century of Dr. Samuel Johnson. For Blair, a Scot, English meant the content of the best writers as well as linguistic skills. For an American of similar persuasion, Hirsch recalls the dictionary-maker, Noah Webster:

> Webster was the George Washington of the American subject of "English," and his American *Spelling Book* alone sold sixty million copies before 1890. He was shrewdly conscious of the connections between language making, culture making, and nation making. Because of Webster and other educators who thought as he did, "English" in America has been a repository not only of our national language but also of our national tradition and values. The connections between language, schooling, culture, and nationhood were understood not just by Webster but by Herman Melville, and William McGuffey, and many, many others. They recognized that our dependence upon the national schools was even greater in this heterogeneous country than in the nations of Europe.
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> These early educators recognized that because we had abjured the common traditions of an established national church, we had all the more self-consciously to make our own national culture. The schools of America became the national church for what has been called our "civil religion." "English," along with history, served as the principal school subjects that acculturated young people into the adult ethos and the affairs of the nation. "English" introduced our youth into our national linguistic conventions, stories, and traditions—in short, into the shared culture that enables citizens within a large modern nation to communicate with each other, live together peacefully, and work together productively.

"Formalism" in educational theory put an end to this broad intent. The arguments for formalism are familiar. Learning the techniques will make us "efficient"—an American principle and goal. "What could be more efficient than to learn a habitual skill that could be transferred to an indefinite number of future tasks?" And "What could be more democratic and federalist than to leave the actual contents of teaching up to our diverse local districts?" The arguments sounded good and they relieved educators of the terrible responsibility of selecting the "good books" for use in teaching. Prof. Hirsch says:

> Only recently have the technical defects of a skills approach to reading and writing begun to come to light. . . . In the recent past, there has seemed to be enough truth in the idea that literacy is a transferable set of skills to make educational formalism a respectable theory to hold. One should add that it has also been a safe theory to hold. Specialists in reading or writing or literature who adopt formalistic theories need not commit themselves to any particular contents or values. They can present themselves as technicians who remain above the cultural battle. This posture of neutral expertness is nowhere better illustrated than in official curriculum guides to English (for instance, the official guides of California) that mention no work, no period, no author.

There is this contrast with the past:

> Our old school readers, like the McGuffey and the Baker-Thorndike readers, were self-consciously

> devoted not just to reading skills but to the greatest authors, the noblest moral principles, and the most inspiring stories. In earlier days we did not separate technical skills from the acculturative side of English. But in our own day, after fifty years of the dominance of educational formalism and despite the advances we have made in reading research and in educating the so-called disadvantaged, we find a decline in SAT scores and an increase in cultural fragmentation.

Hirsch has a lot more to say about this fragmentation and what it means, well worth reading. At the end he invokes Plato, who maintained that the culture of a people, the *content* of their ideas, and the resulting cultural decisions, is the decisive element in education. He concludes:

> English teachers are not the only group of people among whom educational formalism is widespread. It is the dominant and official theory among educationists and in schools of education. It has been widely accepted in the country at large. It has allowed us to avoid the hard choices and political conflicts that would precede any agreement about the essential contents of the humanistic curriculum. Although I have my own views about what those contents should be, I also know that when viewed from an anthropological perspective, many of our decisions are bound to be arbitrary. The important thing is to have a literate culture; next in importance is to have a good one; and after that, to have a good one with such and such traditions. The French require Racine, we do not. But we do require something. And we will not have a literate culture just by hoping that an invisible hand will determine the humanistic curriculum. From the start, national cultures have been self-conscious artifices. If we turn away from the seductions of educational formalism, we can look forward to an interesting national debate about what (heterogeneous) knowledge should now be the canonical knowledge of our tribe.

Some day, we hope, Prof. Hirsch will set down his list of "required reading" for an educated man. If he does, we hope we come across it, for quotation and comment. MANAS did what it could along this line, in the series, "Books for our Time," published years ago.

Hirsch, we assume, is in the main talking about high school education. Another valuable critical article, this one about the elementary schools, is by John Holt in the *Progressive* for last April. It is short and needs to be read entire; but we can note the highlights. Answering the question (his title), "Why Teachers Fail," he explains that organized public education in the United States is dominated by three metaphors. The first is the metaphor of a factory production line, with the management upstairs deciding what should be squirted into the rows of cans as they hurry by. "The assumption is that whatever is squirted *at* the container will go *into* the container, and once in, will stay in." He needs only a little space to prove that this doesn't work, yet we keep on trying to make it work.

The second metaphor is that of laboratory rats in a cage. This is essentially the behaviorist theory in which you offer a morsel and reward its consumption with "positive reinforcement"—the carrot approach, with the stick to apply to the unpersuaded—"negative reinforcement." This hardly works either. The interest of the children, Holt says, is rather in finding out how to demolish the cage.

The third metaphor is of the school as a mental hospital, in which educators are diagnosticians who have to decide what is *wrong* with the children and then apply therapy. On this approach Holt recalls that at a conference of more than a thousand specialists in learning disability, he asked whether anyone had ever linked "so-called perceptual handicaps with stress." Two persons responded, one saying that he knew about research showing that disabilities vanished in stress-free situations.

FRONTIERS

The Bad and the Good . . .

Two comparatively short but important items which appeared fairly recently deserve attention here, and to make sure they get in we put them at the beginning. First is a report in the July *Harper's*. A senator from Ohio, Howard Metzenbaum, arguing against capital punishment, inserted in the *Congressional Record* brief accounts of forty-eight persons who were "sentenced to death, and in some instances executed, for murders they did not commit." *Harper's* extracted twenty-one cases from this list and printed them. Here are the first four:

> *Will Purvis* (*Mississippi*, 1893). Sentenced to death for murder on the basis of eyewitness testimony. Survived hanging because knot slipped. Pardoned in 1898 and cleared by 1917 death bed confession of true killer.
>
> *Jack O'Neill* (Massachusetts, 1898). Hanged for murder. Months later another confessed.
>
> *J. B. Brown* (Florida, 1901). Sentenced to death for murder. His hanging was averted at gallows because execution warrant listed jury foreman's name. Sentence commuted; released after another confessed in 1913.
>
> *Neil Shumway* (Nebraska, 1907). Hanged for murder in 1909. Three years later, victim's husband confessed to crime.

These legal victims are listed according to date. The last one on the *Harper* list, Robert Henry McDowell, was a black man convicted in North Carolina in 1979 of murder of a four-year-old white girl. During a stay of execution the victim's mother implicated the child's stepfather. The conviction was reversed. Such crimes (mistakes) by the state are not necessary. We don't need to kill people at all. The courts are far from infallible.

The other item comes from the back page of the June 15 *Washington Spectator*, a story put together by one of its readers on "Economic Roots of the Cold War." The point is that when this country's government was trying to get ready to enter the war against Germany, neither the people nor industry was ready for it. The industrialists were doing quite well filling the market for cars, radios, stoves and other consumer products. The government wanted them to switch to guns, tanks, and planes that were needed for the war. Thanks but no thanks, the manufacturers said. This forced the government to offer "the tempting bait of cost-plus contracts to make war goods." It worked, and in time the military industrial elite came into being. We would, they planned, have a military economy forever and ever. And now we do. The Cold War kept production going. *U.S. News and World Report* said in 1950: "Cold war is the catalyst . . . for almost endless good times. . . . Cold war is an automatic pump primer. Turn a spigot, and the public clamors for more arms spending. Turn another, the clamor ceases. . . . Cold war demands, if fully exploited, are almost limitless." Of course, PR specialists worked out this program in detail, managing "public opinion." John W. Sears, the *Spectator* reader, said:

> We needed a permanently frightened public. We also needed periodic military crises sufficiently threatening to justify increases in military spending whenever the economy went into a slump. When our pumps needed priming, if there was no event in reality that could be interpreted as a crisis, we invented one. Imaginary bomber gaps, missile gaps and windows of vulnerability were made to seem very real and frightening.

But now there is no spigot for turning off nuclear fear. And the rich industrialists will die as surely as the masses should nuclear war come. No one will escape. They, with our help and submission, have created a community, a culture, based on fear. The manipulators have a lot to answer for.

So have the victims, for allowing themselves to become victims. The situation calls for heroes and we have hardly any at all. That is what we have been taught by our managers. How did it all begin? As Tristram Coffin, *Spectator* editor, says at the end of this story, repeating Will Rogers,

"Take the profits out of war, and there'll be no war." A nuclear war would do it, all right, but that's quite a price to pay for peace. Peace does not seem the right word for describing the aftermath of a nuclear conflict.

For a change of pace and mood we go to Kirkpatrick Sale's "Letter from America" in the March-April *Resurgence,* in which he tells about the Center for Maximum Potential Building Systems in Austin, Texas. For four years, Sale says, the people there have been publishing papers and pamphlets "exploring in detail the ways the particular resources of the Colorado watershed could be used for local needs." How to use adobe for building homes, and mesquite for charcoal burning, with passive solar designs for heating and cooling. Bioregional plans and self-sufficiency are goals. One project has been to mix "certain enzymes with dirt to increase its soil compaction" and make it a more enduring building material—twice as strong as what the building code requires.

Where did they get this idea? From watching how wasps mixed saliva with mud to make more durable nests.

Then, along the Colorado watershed, mesquite grows profusely and is now destroyed by herbicides. But in Latin American countries mesquite is used as parquet floor tile in homes and offices. The amount of these floor tile in Argentina is about equal to the carpeting imported for use in the Austin region of Texas, all of which could be replaced with handsome mesquite parquet. As Kirkpatrick Sale puts it:

> Self-sufficiency does not preclude the borrowing of ideas and experiences—indeed, it encourages it. What it does preclude is the *imposition* of those ideas and experiences: what we know as imperialism.

This idea is in line with a recent recommendation by Jane Jacobs: For economic health, replace imports with ingenious home production. It is of course a Gandhian idea, a Schumacher idea, a commonsense idea.