

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Oct '06

Nº 391



THE BEST AND WORST OF TIMES

Mortimer J. Adler

In many respects, the twentieth century is a turning point in history. It marks a great divide between the past and the future—*if we have a future.*

Our most pessimistic outlook is that we may do ourselves and civilization in with a nuclear holocaust. If we manage to prevent that from occurring, then we have many reasons for thinking that the progress we have made in the twentieth century promises a future brighter than any time in the past.

Let us first consider the problems that now confront us, problems that have arisen for the first time in the twentieth century. Then let us take account of all the steps forward that have been taken since 1900.

In the opening page of *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens, the hero of that novel said: "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times." He was speaking of the eighteenth century. Similar remarks have been made about other centuries. But that comment is more applicable to the twentieth century than to any of its predecessors.

The Disasters That Confront Us

The threat of a nuclear holocaust that might bring an end to life on Earth has already been mentioned. It is, beyond all question, the most serious problem that confronts us. Unless we solve it, none of the other serious problems we face matter, because we will not be here to try to solve them.

Another, almost equally serious, problem is environmental pollution—the pollution of our air, our seas, lakes, and rivers, the Earth and its agricultural products. Should we be unable to check and control this, it may become so extreme as to threaten life on Earth or cause climatic changes that would make large portions of the Earth uninhabitable.

Less extreme, but no less serious, are the consequences of increased population and diminishing food supplies, of our exhausting the available energy for our advanced technology, and of the massive unemployment that may result from undreamed-of technological innovations.

All of these problems, like the threat of a nuclear holocaust, have arisen to confront mankind for the first time in the twentieth century. They are not just local problems, weighing heavily on this nation or that. They are all global problems, involving the future of the human race as a whole.

It is with terrifying precision that we are impelled to say that these problems make the twentieth century the worst of times. To remain optimistic in the face of these dire threats of doom requires us to believe that none of these problems is insoluble. I have written elsewhere that human intelligence and rationality are capable of solving all of them, but *only on condition* that intelligence and reason are used for the good of the human race as a whole—for the salvation of mankind and for carrying forward into the future the extraordinary progress that makes the twentieth century a turning point in history.

At the end of the last century, William Graham Sumner said of society's problems in his day, much less serious than the ones we face, that all of them could be solved "if it were not for folly and vice." That still holds true today with regard to the problems that confront us, even though they may be very much more difficult to solve.

If it were not for folly and vice! If reason and intelligence are not blocked or diverted from beneficent use by unenlightened self-interest; by blind passions; by the hatred of foreigners; by irrational prejudices; by the lust for naked might, unchecked by considerations of right; and by the short-run seeking after profit and gains at the cost of long-run losses and failures.

Any optimism about the future that we preserve and cherish must be accompanied by the hope that we can somehow overcome these inveterate human tendencies to thwart the efforts of intelligence and goodwill to solve our problems.

The Advances We Have Made

The steps forward that we have taken in this century make it undoubtedly the best of times. As pointed out in *Viewpoint No. 1*, we have, by virtue of the extraordinary technological progress that has been made in this century, eliminated or alleviated much of the drudgery and backbreaking toil that in the past have prevented a large part of the human race from even thinking about the pursuit of happiness, let alone provided them the free time to engage in its pursuit.

We have, by means of the same technological progress, been able to produce enough real wealth to eliminate dire poverty and to distribute widely the ownership of productive property in capital-intensive economies. We have not yet won a complete victory in the war against poverty, but in some parts of the West we are mak-

ing headway in the fight.

In all the technologically advanced nations of the Earth, we are more and more closely approximating the ideal that will be fully realized only when all individuals or families are able to participate in the general economic welfare. If it were not for the conflict between guns and butter—between our expenditures for national security and the use of our economic resources for human welfare—we would be much nearer to realizing that ideal right now.

This is the first century in which the commitment to human rights has become an international concern. In our own country, the political rights that our Constitution sought to safeguard in its first ten amendments have at last been supplemented by a bill of economic rights.

This is the first century in which anything that might be called a “world war” has occurred. The second of our two world wars was much more global than the first. The occurrence of world wars can be the harbinger of world peace.

For the first time in history, our thinking about war and peace has ceased to be parochial and has become global. For the first time in history, our use of the word “world” as an adjective modifying such other terms as “state,” “society,” and “government” has drastically altered our understanding of war and peace.

With regard to war itself, our use of the term “cold war” indicates that we at last realize that a state of war exists between hostile nations even when they are not shooting at one another. Actual warfare is the war conducted by military forces. Cold war is conducted by diplomats. Actual warfare is always latent in the cold war because hostile nations that fail to settle their differences by diplomacy must ultimately resort to force in order to do so.

The twentieth century is the first century in which political democracy has finally come into existence. The republics or constitutional governments of all prior centuries were in fact oligarchies in which considerably fewer than half of the people were enfranchised as citizens with political rights and powers.

Democracy, properly conceived, is constitutional government with truly universal suffrage—with infancy, hospitalized feeble-mindedness or insanity, and incarcerated felonious criminality as the only grounds for disfranchisement. It is also government that secures all human rights, economic as well as political.

Democracy, thus defined, is less than fifty years old in the United States. The female portion of the population obtained suffrage as recently as the second decade of this century. In many states, the property qualification for suffrage was abolished later than that. In the fourth decade, in the wake of the Great Depression, we sought to secure economic rights for everyone. Even later came the struggle to secure civil rights for the blacks in our population. Until all these steps were taken by constitutional amendments and by the enactment of various pieces of legislation, we did not have political democracy in this country even on paper, much less in fact.


In all prior centuries, all the civilized societies of the world had populations sharply divided into a very small privileged minority and a very large oppressed majority. Today for the first time, in our country and in some other nations as well, this has been reversed. We now live in a society in which we have a privileged majority, comprising more than 85 percent of our population, and several oppressed minorities, altogether comprising less than 15 percent.

Moving in this direction, we have not yet reached the end of the line, but the progress we have made indicates a bright possibility for the future—the further reduction and, ultimately, the total elimination of all oppression of minorities.

Grounds for Optimism

Our vision of the future is limited and conditioned by our knowledge of the past and present. The people of earlier centuries, with their vision of the future thus conditioned and limited, could not have imagined either the problems that now confront us or the extraordinary steps of progress we have made in the twentieth century. When we think about the next century and the centuries to come, we, too, cannot imagine what lies ahead. We need only consider the startling, almost unimaginable, technological advances that have occurred in the last ten years to recognize that even writers of science fiction cannot dream up the things that might happen before the end of this century, not to mention what might happen beyond that. Of course, we must *have* a future in order to be optimistic about the shape it will take. That depends on our being able to avoid the totally destructive consequences of an all-out thermonuclear war. Assuming our success in that respect, we must in addition succeed in solving the other serious problems that confront us, at least in a measure sufficient to prevent the destructive consequences of our failing to solve them.

If it be granted that these two things can be accomplished, than the progress we have made in the twentieth century gives us reasonable assurance that steps of further progress in the same direction can be made in the future.

Such optimism as we may derive from that assurance must be accompanied by a resolution on our part to act with enlightened self-interest for the good of mankind. If we fail, it will not be because our intelligence is unequal to the task, but only because we have not conquered folly and vice. 

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Encyclopedia Britannica: “Human Rights,” Vol. 20

Mortimer J. Adler: *A Vision of the Future*: Epilogue

Ecclesiastes

Henry George: *Progress and Poverty*

T.R. Malthus: *An Essay on Population*

George Bernard Shaw: *Back to Methuselah*

Oswald Spengler: *The Decline of the West*

VIEWPOINT Vol. 4, published by Britannica Home Library Service (1985)

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Marie E. Cotter, Editorial Assistant

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.