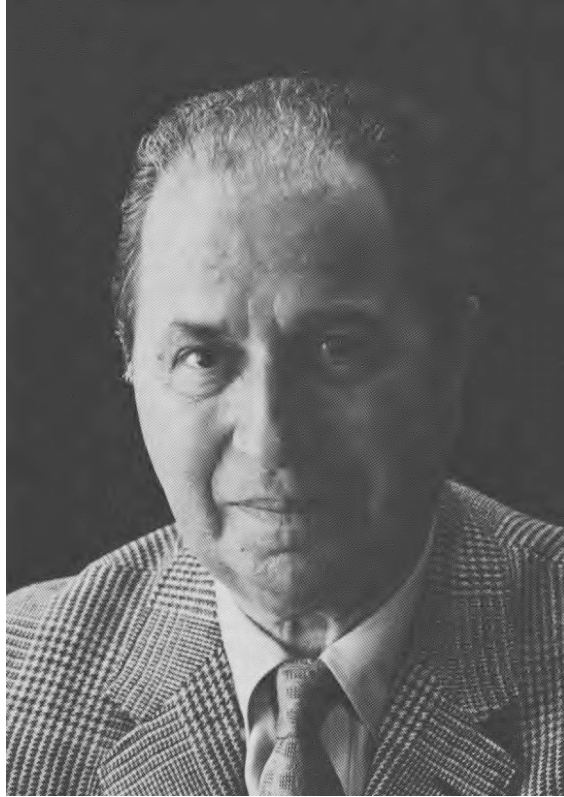


# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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Nov '07

Nº 449



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## THE TIME OF OUR LIVES

**A Lecture by Mortimer J. Adler  
at The Aspen Institute  
(August, 1968)**

Part 3 of 3

Let us now apply that non-relative standard—non-relative because it is relative only to our common human nature, and not to individual differences or to the quite various social and cultural circumstances under which men live. One society or culture is better than another in proportion as its technological conditions, its political

and economic institutions, and its actual value-system promotes or facilitates a really good life for a *larger* proportion of its human beings.

One society or culture is worse than another in proportion as its various components, just mentioned, work in the opposite way—to deprive a greater proportion of its members of the external conditions they need to make good lives for themselves, or to impede or interfere with or even discourage their efforts in this direction.

The ideal, of course, is a society that both provides all its members with the external conditions they need, and at the same time encourages them in their pursuit of the good life. (*Reminder:* Under such ideal conditions, it would be completely possible for each individual to make a good life for himself without doing so at the expense of failure or frustration on the part of others.)

The point I have been trying to make should be immediately clear with reference to the technological, economic, and political conditions that individuals need for the sake of making a good life—such conditions as health; a maximum amount of free time from subsistence-work; a decent supply of the means of subsistence, certainly above the bare subsistence level; good educational facilities and equal educational opportunities; adequate recreational facilities; freedom from coercion and political liberty; access to enjoyment of the arts; personal and economic security; domestic tranquility and external peace (the absence of internal violence and external war); and so on.

But it may not be so clear on the side of cultural conditions; yet the value-system that obtains in a society may discourage or interfere with an individual's making a good life for himself.

*I would like to make a brief explanation;* Walter Paepeke's favorite remark by Plato: "What is honored in a society is cultivated there." Few individuals can be expected to have the heroic virtue needed to be such complete non-conformists that they will seek what they ought to seek in their own lives, against the overbearing pressure of social disapproval.

It is extremely difficult for the individual to seek for himself the things that are not honored or valued in society, or completely to turn his back on the things that are honored there, but wrongly so.

In conclusion: Is this a good time to be alive, and is ours a good society to be alive in? Preliminary remark: I am going to deal first

with our century in relation to all earlier periods of human life on earth; second, with our type of society—the kind we have in the United States, but which is to be found in many other nations as well; third, with the United States in relation to other societies of the same type; fourth and finally; some closing comments on those, both at home and abroad, who in various ways and varying degrees express their dissatisfaction with our time and our country.

Is this, our century, a good time to be alive? The answer is unqualifiedly YES. It is better than any earlier period of human life—better in that it provides the external conditions of a good human life to a greater extent and for more human beings than ever before on earth. To make this clear, let me briefly summarize a whole lecture that I gave here in Aspen four years ago, on the future of man. For the first million to two million years of human life on earth, members of the hominid family led bestial, not characteristically human, lives—that is, they lived mainly, if not exclusively, on the bare subsistence level: two-part-lives of sleep and toil. Beginning 35,000 years ago, technological progress began to be made which brought man to the verge of civilization: the domestication of animals; the transition from stone to iron implements; the establishment of permanent settlements, etc.

But not until 6,000 years ago, with the emergence of civilized societies, with superior agricultural technology, with political or quasi-political institutions, with an increased division of labor, and almost always with human slave labor, not until then were the external conditions of a good human life provided for a fortunate and privileged few.

In short, from the beginning until 6,000 years ago, the external conditions for leading a good human life were available *to no one*. Beginning 6,000 years ago, with the rise of cities and civilized societies (which is the same thing), and from then until now—or rather until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century—we have had all over the world what I am going to call the parochial civilizations of privilege, based on an inequality of conditions for their human members.

In all these historical parochial civilizations of privilege, the external conditions of a good human life were provided only for the few, at the expense of misery for all the rest. And it seems fair to say that, under the circumstances of the time, especially the poor technology of the time, these inequalities of condition could not have been rectified—except, perhaps, by going backward to a state of affairs in which no one could lead a good human life.

The second great revolution in human affairs began yesterday—with the opening of this century. The 20th century revolution, which began first in the United States and Western Europe, is now sweeping the world. Please note that I said “began”; for the 20th century revolution has only just started even in the countries where it first began. It may take anywhere from 100 to 500 years, maybe even 1,000 before this revolution yields its full results on a worldwide basis, with the emergence, for the first time, of a world civilization that is based on universal conditions of equality for every human being on earth—*all* men with no exceptions.

What is this 20th century revolution? It involves, first of all, extraordinary advances in science and technology, resulting in vastly increased power to produce wealth, in the elimination of inhuman forms of subsistence-work at the level of sheer drudgery, the reduction in the amount of time that must be spent in producing wealth, etc. All these changes indicate that it may at least be possible to eliminate slavery, poverty, unequal educational opportunities, unequal conditions of health, etc.

Second, it involves dedication, in varying degrees, to the democratic principle that all men, being by nature equal, are entitled to an equality of social, economic, and political conditions. It calls for the elimination of all class-divisions, especially the division between the economic haves and have-nots. It calls for political equality—the equality of citizenship, with political rights, liberties, and privileges for all. It is not only democratic but socialistic in that it accepts the ruling principle of the welfare state: that the state should make every effort to promote the general economic welfare, in which all citizens shall participate up to at least the minimum level of a decent and secure standard of living.

This 20<sup>th</sup> century revolution was first foreshadowed in that single great second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence, which starts with the proposition that all men are born equal, and then conceives the just society as one that will secure to every man his natural rights, among which the primary one is his right to the pursuit of happiness, from which all his other rights flow. But these truths, however self-evident, could not have been realized under the technological conditions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Hence Lincoln’s remark about the Declaration: a pledge to the future. And Tocqueville’s vision of that future in which the revolution that began in America would, under God’s providence, ultimately sweep the world.

One need only compare the best country in the world in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century—whichever one you wish to choose—with a dozen or more states today, in which the 20<sup>th</sup> century revolution has begun and taken hold, to *see* that in the latter the external conditions of a good human life are provided for more human beings than ever before on earth. Note: I did not say that all of them or most of them made good use of their opportunity. I will come back to this in a moment.

Let us now briefly consider the states or countries in which the 20<sup>th</sup> century revolution has begun and taken hold. What characterizes, all these states are the following things in varying degrees: political democracy, economic welfare programs the broadening of public education, public health programs, reduction in the hours of human labor, improvement in the types and conditions of subsistence-work, increase in recreational facilities and participation in the enjoyment of the arts, etc.

Let me designate this type of state as the technologically advanced, democratic, welfare state, moving toward, approximating but not yet fully achieving, the ideal of the classless society, with a universal equality of conditions and with ample free time for all.

In the world as it is today, we find this type of state realized, again in varying degrees and ways, by: U. S. A.; the states of the British Commonwealth; most of the states of Western Europe (Spain?); and in the Far East, in Japan; U. S. S. R. and some of its satellites, especially Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and perhaps Poland; some few states, though to a much less degree, in Central and South America; but not yet to any appreciable degree in Africa, north or south of the Sahara; the Middle East, China, India, Southeast Asia.

All of the states in which the 20<sup>th</sup> century revolution is now underway and moving forward are vastly superior to any societies that ever existed on earth before—vastly superior to the best of ancient societies, to the Athens of Plato, the Rome of Cicero, or the China of Confucius, in which the conditions of a good life were accessible only to the *very few*.

Now let us consider the United States in comparison with other leading states of the same type—states that are technologically advanced and that have begun to approximate an equality of conditions, politically, economically, and socially. The comparison is difficult to make, because it is multidimensional. Thus, for example, the United States is much less class structured than England, has a higher median income than Sweden, has achieved a greater

equality of educational opportunity than most European countries, though not more than Australia or Canada, and so on. It also has more political equality and liberty than the U. S. S. R. and its satellites.

On the other hand, economic equality may be more fully achieved in Sweden and in New Zealand; public health may be better cared for in any number of European countries; political democracy may work more responsibly in England; and so on.

With all such considerations in mind, I still think it is fair to say that, from the point of view of providing the external conditions of a good human life for a larger proportion of its citizens, the United States is, *on balance*, as good as, if not better than, any other country in the world today, and vastly better than any state that ever existed in the past.

This brings me, finally, to the adverse criticisms of the United States—the complaints and dissatisfactions—that are so widely and emotionally voiced on all sides, at home and abroad, by the dissident young and by their disaffected professors, and by the New Left in all its varieties.

In the first place, let me point out that I have said that the 20<sup>th</sup> century revolution has just begun, even in the United States, and that it has a long way to go before it reaches its full fruition the full realization of all the sound principles to which it is dedicated. Hence when I say that the United States is as good as or better than any other country in the world today, I am not saying that it is perfect. *Far from it.*

The war on poverty has just begun; so has the struggle against racism in all its forms. These efforts must be carried forward; and it may take some years to see them through to complete success.

No country is free from the evils of war or the chicanery of foreign policy, and none can be, as long as the jungle or anarchy of sovereign states exists. Foreign affairs is the domain of power politics, and will always remain so until we have advanced to world peace secured in the only way it can be secured—*by world government.*

That, by the way, is the next revolution that lies ahead—the step forward from our parochial societies, always in a state of war with one another, and with an irremediable inequality of conditions as between the have and the have-not nations—forward to a world society, under world government, with an equality of conditions

for all men everywhere.

But, until that happens, all sovereign states, vis-à-vis one another, are about equally bad; and the United States is no worse than the rest.

The second point I would like to make is that with all its present and past imperfections, the United States has shown itself more susceptible to social change than any other country, has accomplished important social improvements with less violence than other countries, and holds out a greater promise for further positive developments than most other countries.

Hence, to call the United States a “sick society” as it is now so fashionable to do, is preposterous if one means by that a society that is mortally or incurably ill. Yet that is precisely what seems to be meant by those whose only aim is the destructive one of tearing down the so-called Establishment—and having laid everything to waste or rubble, to start again from scratch, *but without any positive program in hand*.

There is an obvious middle ground between the perfection of blooming health and mortal or incurable disease. And that is where we are—a relatively healthy society with some curable defects or deficiencies. This is the middle ground between the *chauvinism* of saying my country is right in every way, and the *Norman-Mailerism* of saying my country is wrong in every way.

The importance of recognizing the soundness of the middle ground in criticizing the United States can be illustrated by the two attitudes one can take toward a house that one is thinking of buying because one wants to live on the site where it exists. Is it so had a house that the only thing to do with it is to tear it down or gut it, and start from the ground up? Or with all its defects, is it nevertheless good enough to remodel, improve, and redecorate? I say that the United States, with all its defects, is good enough to deserve the second choice—the choice of trying to improve it by carrying forward the peaceful revolution, reform by due process of law, that has been the course—more than that, the genius—of its development from the beginning.

Let me make just two concluding comments. First, does the prevalent value-system that obtains in the United States encourage or discourage those whom it provides with the external conditions of a good human life to make good use of these favorable circumstances? I am sorry to say that it does not. We place too high a

value on the production of commodities, many of which are superfluous for a good life; we place too high a value on having a good time—on sensual indulgences, play, fun, and frolic of all sorts.

This criticism, that Herbert Marcuse, the Pied Piper of the younger generation, has leveled against the technologically advanced society, applied not only to the United States, but to all other states of the same type as well. The complaint in essence is that technology, which should have freed human time for engagement in meaningful human pursuits—pursuits that result in the genuine improvement of human beings, not the multiplication of goods and services—seems to have done just the opposite. If Marcuse means, as in part he does, that there is not enough time devoted to play or sensual indulgences of all sorts, he is wrong both in principle and as a matter of fact. But if he means what Lewis Mumford meant years before him, that the increase in labor saving devices has resulted in more human time being devoted to producing and consuming superfluous commodities instead of being devoted to genuine leisure-work, then he is quite right. And all such criticism, on his part or on the part of Kenneth Galbraith who also voices it, has real validity only if it is based on moral principles that would lead them to criticize other aspects of contemporary society as well.

That, however is not the case. Liberals like Galbraith and revolutionaries like Marcuse sometimes have their hearts in the right place, but unfortunately they are unable to put their minds where their hearts are.

The main point I would like to make here is that a moral revolution, not an economic, political, or social revolution is needed to reform the new industrial state and to turn technological advances into advantages rather than disadvantages. A moral revolution—a fundamental change in our scale of values—is needed to correct the errors of an ever expanding economy.

Some years ago in Aspen, Clarence Randall, then President of Inland Steel, proclaimed in the Wheeler Opera House that productivity is *the* end of life. The next day, Jacques Barzun and I, on the lawn of Pioneer Park, taught Mr. Randall that productivity is not the end of life, but only one of its means. He may have learned that lesson, but most Americans have not learned it yet. I just said “most Americans,” but the point is true of most Englishmen today, most Swedes, most Germans, most Frenchmen, most Russians, and so on. The perverse and corrupt scale of values that is the cultural obstacle to leading a good life in the United States today dominates



every other country of the same general type—neither more nor less. Europe is as materialistic as the United States, if not more so.

On the other hand, the cult of sensuality, the addiction to a life of play and frivolity, the existentialist cop-out which consists in living from day to day, with no accounts carried forward—these things are flourishing everywhere, not just in the United States, and it is to these things that the young turn as the only real values when they are disaffected with the materialism and hypocrisy of their elders, not only in the United States, but in Europe as well.

What all this calls for is a moral revolution, but a moral revolution that can begin only after the moral problem is itself understood and the solution of that problem is seen in all its details.


My last point is that many of the criticisms that are now leveled against America and Americans apply to all societies and to the human race generally. All human institutions can be improved, said William Graham Sumner; we can remove all human poverty and misery, *were it not for folly and vice*. Folly and vice are human defects, not American defects. Twentieth century America has no monopoly of folly and vice. Nor do those who complain about folly and vice in America have a monopoly on the moral conscious.

Plato charged the Athenians who condemned Socrates with folly and vice. The dialogues of Plato are a more penetrating critique of the false values of Athens than anything now being said about America, because Plato, and after him Aristotle, had a true scale of values on which to base their criticisms. This is not the case with the present-day critics of the United States, least of all with the most vocal and vociferous young.

The one and only great satire on the human race that has ever been written—*Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift—would be egregiously misread if it were interpreted as being an attack on 18th century England and Englishmen. It is the great diatribe against mankind that it is, because the follies and vices that it satirizes are all human—to be found in every country and at all times, because they are populated by men, not by angels or by Swift's gentle rational horses, the Hyouyhnyms.

When you listen to the attacks on America and Americans—from our college students and from their professors, or from anybody else, ask yourself whether or not the object of the attack is simply human folly and vice. That is one thing that will put them into per-

spective. A second thing to consider, to put the attacks or criticisms into perspective, are the facts, the kind of facts I laid out for you a moment ago, in terms of which the 20<sup>th</sup> century must be compared with all earlier centuries, and the United States with all other countries in the world today. We have not yet achieved perfection, in this century or this country, but we are further along in the march toward it than any earlier century and than most other countries in the world today. This is indisputable. Only ignorance of the facts can lead to the opposite conclusion.

And, finally ask yourselves whether those who criticize their country and their fellowmen have standards, the scale of values—that would enable them to make a good life for themselves. The evidence is ample, the evidence is overwhelming, that they do not. They are as subject to folly and vice as the objects of their criticism. And the only salvation for them and for all the rest of us is the moral wisdom that must be learned to correct the folly and the moral discipline that must be cultivated to correct the vice. 

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## THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

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

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