

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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From the Editors of Harper's:

Mortimer J. Adler's "This Pre-War Generation" is another chapter in the story that began when Archibald MacLeish, in the course of an address given on the 23d of May before the American Association for Adult Education, attacked the antiwar writers of the '20s and accused these writers of being responsible for a state of "moral unpreparedness" in the United States. Since then the intellectuals have been busy with the theme. Our leading article last month, Roy Helton's "The Inner Threat: Our Own Softness," dealt with it.

Mr. Adler is Professor of the Philosophy of Law at the University of Chicago and was appointed to that position shortly after Robert Hutchins became President of the University in 1929. A great deal has been written and said about the interest of the two men in "the great books." Early in the '20s John Erskine had a course in the great books at Columbia and Adler was one of the instructors in the course. From 1929 until 1930 he was Instructor in Experimental Psychology at Columbia, going from there to Chicago. In 1937 St. John's College at Annapolis was reorganized on the great books plan with Mr. Hutchins as a member of the Board. Simultaneously Professor Adler was appointed Visiting Lecturer and in that capacity he goes to St. John's half a dozen times a year from Chicago. Professor Adler was born in New York in 1902. Between the ages of thirteen and fifteen he was secretary to Edward Page Mitchell, Editor of the New York *Sun*, and wrote editorial copy for the *Sun*.

From 1928 to 1930 he was Assistant Director of People's Institute in New York. He is married and has two adopted children. His books include *Dialectic*, *Diagrammatics*—written in collaboration with Maude Hutchins, *Art and Prudence*, *What Man Has Made of Man*, *St. Thomas and the Gentiles*, and *Problems for Thomists: The Problem of Species*. His *How to Read a Book*, published last spring, has been a popular success.

Professor Adler says: "I have just finished a technical monograph, entitled *The Demonstration of Democracy*, and am continuing now to work out every detail of the proof—and I mean proof—that Democracy is the best form of political community. I am a member of the Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion, meeting in New York September 9-11, where I shall read a paper entitled 'God and the Professors' in which I shall excoriate the American academic mind more fully even than I did in the *Harper* article."

NOTE: If enough of you are interested in this subject, we will republish, 'God and the Professors'. Let us know?

THIS PRE-WAR GENERATION

MORTIMER ADLER

1 of 2

The First World War produced a postwar generation, its young men won a fight but lost what they were fighting for. Their lives had been interrupted, their purposes undermined, and their eyes opened. They were self-conscious of their disillusionment and demoralization, and their spokesmen—the artists and journalists among them—publicized their cynicism so successfully that it came to be regarded as the mood of a whole decade.

The Second World War finds us with a prewar generation. It consists of the youngsters still in college and the graduates of the past ten years. Considering their state of mind, one is tempted to say that the fathers have tasted war and the children's teeth are set on edge. Archibald MacLeish has in fact suggested that the temper of the postwar generation communicated itself and formed the temperament of youth today.

The facts of resemblance must not lead us, however, to a hasty conclusion about causes, for there is one remarkable difference between the two generations. The veterans of the last war had had "illusions"; they had pledged themselves in the name of "ideals." They were a lost generation because they had lost something. But it would be incorrect to speak of the present generation as disillusioned or demoralized. They seem to have grown up without any allegiances that could be betrayed, without a moral philosophy to renounce. They talk like calloused realists, though their actual experience of life cannot account for their imperviousness to traditional appeals.

This prewar generation has obviously not been produced by the present conflict in Europe nor by the threat of America's involvement. It existed five years ago, ten years ago, but it took the dire calamities of May 1940 to make us generally aware of the characteristics of our college-bred youth. The commencement orators last June spoke with an amazing uniformity on this one point. Whatever type of foreign policy they favored, they all recognized a danger sign in the disaffection of youth, its distrust of any cause which spoke the language of principles. In address after address the country over, college presidents or their surrogates appealed for a re-

vival of idealism; tried to persuade the young that there are things worth living, and hence dying, for; pleaded for courage and self-sacrifice in devotion to the common good. They argued against what they called the prevalent materialism, the single-minded self-interest of the college graduate's aim—to take care of himself and let the rest go hang, to get ahead in the world by beating his neighbor. And most tragically significant of all, they begged the youth of the country “to have faith in democracy.”

In most cases the commencement orators were thinking of preparedness, of national defense or active participation in the war. They asked for faith in democracy with an ulterior purpose. Congressional appropriations for armament are not enough, nor even the armaments themselves, built at any speed and in any quantity. Wars, especially modern, total wars, are waged with the energy of youth. Though it seldom became explicit, the speeches last June evoked the contrasting images of Hitler's youth and ours. Of course Hitler's youth were regimented and hop-fed, but they had some “virtues” after all. They were loyal and resolute. If only we could generate overnight a faith in democracy that would equal the faith in fascism, with its spirit of self-sacrificing devotion to a cause!

The educators or leaders who spoke to America's young men last June were so anxious about the immediate consequences of their audience's mood that they did not stop to inquire into its causes. Obsessed with the urgent need for change, they forgot that only by altering causes can one control effects. In their impatience, however sincere, they committed a basic error in rhetoric. They did not even ask themselves why all their words would fall upon deaf ears, why stirring phrases would not stir, why not even the loftiest visions would inspire.

II

What are the causes? How did this prewar generation come to be what it is? Since no one can pretend to know the etiology of a whole generation, I claim no more for what I have to say than that it is a guess based on more than fifteen years of classroom experience with the disease I am trying to diagnose. But before I tell my story let me consider some of the other guesses which have recently been aired.

In his now famous address on postwar writers and prewar readers, Mr. MacLeish claimed that the one had contaminated the other, that literature was the avenue of infection, especially the novels of

such men as Latzko, Dos Passos, Hemingway, Remarque, and Aldington. I do not know whether MacLeish had the parallel in mind, but he was repeating Plato's charge that the poets, the storytellers, the tellers of half-truths, were the corrupters of youth. I have never thought that Plato was right about the poets. His characterization of them was right, but not his judgment of their influence. They are storytellers; they are men of imagination rather than of thought; they certainly cannot be relied upon to give youth sound moral and political instruction; but they are not important as compared with other educational influences, much less so in our day than in earlier times.

The writers themselves seem to agree with me on this point. Mr. Robert Sherwood said: "Archibald MacLeish is right in his conclusions, but he exaggerates the influence exerted by writers of our generation. By far the most successful of antiwar books, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, failed to convert young Germans to pacifism." Mr. Richard Aldington dismissed the notion that authors really affect the national state of mind as a typical highbrow delusion: "most people in America have never heard of the writers MacLeish mentions and could not have been influenced by them." I am sure that most college students have not read these novels. Even allowing for the influence they may have worked through the movies, or by indirect communication, I cannot agree that they are the major cause.

The writers who commented on MacLeish's speech had guesses of their own to offer. Again I quote Mr. Sherwood, who felt that youth considered "democracy a decadent mess—and no wonder, in view of the environment in which they grew up: the jazz age of the early 20s, the hypocrisy and crime of prohibition, the drunken sailorism of the Coolidge boom, and the wailing defeatism of depression." Another author placed the blame on young men's doubts about their economic or spiritual stake in American democracy. And still another said that they had "lost faith in democracy. It is up to democracy to show it is worth fighting for."

There is some truth in all these remarks, but I do not think they go to the root of the trouble. There is no question that the spectacle of democracy malpracticed may have killed some youthful enthusiasm for its cause, no question that the go-getting materialism of the American environment has corrupted youth more than novelists ever could, no question that the young have felt themselves betrayed by their elders. But it is not the failure of democracy to solve its economic problems, nor the shallowness and stupidity of its political leadership which has caused the disaffection.

The real trouble is that our college students and recent graduates do not take *any* moral issues seriously, whether about their personal affairs or the economic and political problems of the nation. Their only principle is that there are no moral principles at all, their only slogan that all statements of policy, all appeals to standards, are nothing but slogans, and hence frauds and deceptions. They are sophists in the most invidious sense of that term which connotes an unqualified skepticism about all moral judgments. Such skepticism leads naturally to *realpolitik*: in the game of power politics—and there is no other—only force and propaganda count. The issue between fascism and democracy can not be argued as if there were a right and wrong to it. Whoever wins is right; whatever works is good. Our college students today, like Thrasymachus of old, regard justice as nothing but the will of the stronger; but unlike the ancient sophist, they cannot make the point as clearly or defend it as well.

What, then, is the difference between our youth and Hitler's? Even if ours have not read *Mein Kampf* or been inoculated with the revolutionary spirit of nihilism, they have become "realists" of the same sort, believing only in the tangible rewards of success—money, fame, and power. Unlike Hitler's youth, however, they mean by success their own personal advancement, not nationalistic aggrandizement. Hitler's young men, through a mystical identification of personal with national success, work for Germany. Our young men work for themselves, and they will continue to suffer democracy—which, remember, they do not think can be *proved* to be intrinsically better than fascism—only so long as it works for them. True, at the present moment, they *feel* that Hitler is a bad man and say they don't *like* totalitarianism; but if pressed for reasons they will repeat phrases such as "civil liberties" or "human rights," the meaning of which they cannot explain, the justification for which they cannot give. They can readily be pushed to admit that these too are only opinions, which happen to be theirs by the accident of birthplace.

Here precisely lies the danger. The present generation has been immunized against anyone who might really try to argue for democracy in terms of justice, but not against the attractions of success and security. The only slogans they have learned to suspect are those which claim the approval of reason; and the thing which seems most like propaganda to them is what "pretends" to offer rational arguments for a course of action—as right rather than expedient. They have no sales resistance against the appeal of promises to gain for them the things every animal wants. They will even have "faith" in democracy if such promises can be made in its

name. They are ready to have faith in any program which does not insist that it is right by reason. Let America cease to be the land of opportunity for individual success, let another and much worse depression increase the number who are hopelessly insecure, and our young men may find a leader who can change their "faith." They are democrats now only by feeling and opinion. Feelings and opinions are easily changed by force of circumstances and by rhetoric which mocks at reason, as Hitler's did. If some form of fascism offers immediate fruits, they who have forsaken the way of principles and reasoning will not see that democracy is better in principle, despite abuses which impair its beneficence in practice.

Mr. MacLeish diagnosed the disease correctly but he failed to trace its causes to their roots. John Chamberlain had observed that the younger generation "needs none of Mr. Stuart Chase's semantic discipline. The boys and girls tend to distrust all slogans, all tags—even all words." Agreeing to this, MacLeish went further. He saw that their basic distrust is of "all statements of principle and conviction, all declarations of moral purpose"—for it is only such statements and declarations that they regard as slogans. But he merely scratched the surface when he supposed that it was the literature of our period that "was disastrous as education for a generation which would be obliged to face the threat of fascism in its adult years." The education of this prewar generation has been disastrous indeed; but the calamity has been caused by our schools and colleges, not by our novelists. Even if the First World War had never happened, even if there had been no postwar generation to spread its disillusionment, even if such phrases as "making the world safe for democracy" had not come to symbolize how men can mistake empty slogans for sacred shibboleths, the present generation would be as full of sophistry and skepticism. For the past forty years there have been forces at work in American education which had to culminate in this result.

III

The factors operating in the current situation have been prepared by centuries of cultural change. What has been happening in American education since 1900, what has finally achieved its full effect in the present generation, flows with tragic inevitability from the seeds of modern culture as they have developed in the past three hundred years. The very things which constituted the cultural departure that we call modern times have eventuated, not only in the perverted education of American youth today, but also in the crises they are unprepared to face. That fascism should have reached its stride in Europe at the same time that pseudo-

liberalism—the kind Lewis Mumford denounces as corrupt, pragmatic liberalism—has demoralized us, is a historic accident. Only the timing is a coincidence, however, for both the European and the American maladies arise from the same causes. They are both the last fruitions of modern man's exclusive trust in science and his gradual disavowal of whatever lies beyond the field of science as irrational prejudice, as opinion emotionally held.

I do not wish to make science itself the villain of this essay. It is the misuse of science, intellectually as well as practically, which is to blame. We do not blame science for the murderous tools it has enabled men to make; neither should we blame science, or for that matter scientists, for the destructive doctrines men have made in its name, men who are for the most part philosophers and educators, not scientists. All these doctrines have a common center—positively, the exclusive adoration of science; negatively, the denial that philosophy or theology can have any independent authority. We can regard this intellectual misuse of science as another one of the false modern religions—the religion of science, closely related to the religion of the state. We can group all these doctrines together and call them by names which have become current: positivism and scientism. And again we can see a deep irony in the historic coincidence that just when the practical misuse of science has armed men for wholesale slaughter, scientism—the intellectual misuse of science—has all but disarmed them morally.

Let me see if I can explain the mind of this prewar generation by the scientism which dominates American education. I am also concerned to show how the semanticism, which Messrs. Chamberlain and MacLeish noted in the youthful distrust of all language, is a closely related phenomenon. Just as scientism is a misuse of science, in itself good, so semanticism names the excessive exploitation of semantics, which in itself is a good discipline concerned with the criteria for determining the significance of words.

An American college student who, under the elective system, samples courses in the natural and social sciences, in history, philosophy, and the humanities gradually accumulates the following notions: (1) that the only valid knowledge of the nature of the world and man is obtained by the methods of experimentation or empirical research; (2) that questions which cannot be answered by the methods of the natural and social sciences cannot be answered at all in any trustworthy or convincing way; or, in other words, answers to such questions are only arbitrary and unfounded opinions; (3) that the great achievement of the modern era is not simply the accumulation of scientific knowledge, but, more radically, the rec-

ognition of the scientific method (of research and experimentation) as the only dependable way to solve problems; and, in consequence of this, that modern times have seen man's emancipation from the superstitions of religion, the dogmatisms of theology, and the arm-chair speculations of philosophers; (4) that the study of social phenomena became scientific when research divorced itself entirely from normative considerations, when economists and students of politics no longer asked about the justice of social arrangements, but only who gets what, when, and how.

A bright college student will readily draw certain inferences from these few basic notions that get dinned into him from every source of his education. He will see for himself that moral questions, questions of good and bad, right and wrong, cannot be answered by the methods of natural or social science. He will conclude that "value judgments" cannot be made, except of course as expressions of personal prejudice. He will extend this conclusion to cover not only decisions about his own conduct but also moral judgments about economic systems and political programs. He will accept without question the complete divorce of economics from ethics and, in discipleship to Machiavelli, he will become as much a realist in politics as Hitler and Mussolini. If, in addition to being bright, he is proud of his modernity, he will regard anyone who talks about standards of goodness, principles of justice, moral virtues as an unregenerate old fogey; and he will express his aversion for such outmoded opinions by the *ad hominem* use of epithets like "medieval" or "scholastic" or "mystic."

Even those who are not bright enough to draw their own conclusions from the main tenets of a college education get them ready-made in certain courses. They are told by the teachers of social science that all "systems of morality" reduce to tribal mores, conventional taboos and prescriptions which govern the culture of a given time and place. They learn, as a result of this complete moral relativism, that they must respect their "ethnocentric predicament," which simply means that they, who belong to a given culture or system, cannot judge the right and wrong of any other without begging the question, without taking their own point of view for granted, though it is neither better nor worse than the contrary assumptions of those whom they judge. They are told, in so many words, that anyone who proceeds otherwise is an absolutist. To suppose that all men living at any time or place are subject to the same fundamental canons of right and wrong, however diverse their manners or mores; to suppose that all men, precisely because they are all men, sharing equally the same human nature, should be motivated by the same ideals of truth and goodness—that is the

demon of absolutism which every social science course in the curriculum tries to exorcise. When they succeed, as they usually do by sheer weight of unopposed prestige, the college student who has been thus indoctrinated even dislikes using such words as “truth” and “goodness” because they sound like “absolute values.”

I said a moment ago that the teaching pronounced in unison by the social scientists is unopposed. You may think that opposition must come from at least one quarter of the campus—obviously from the philosophy department. But, paradox of paradoxes, if the student is not already thoroughly debunked, rid of all “medieval superstitions” and “absolutisms,” he gets the finishing touches of his modern education in the philosophy courses. While it is not unanimously accepted, the doctrine of scientism is certainly the dominant dogma of American philosophy today. The degenerative tendency of modern philosophy to move in this direction reached its culmination in American pragmatism and all its sequelae—the numerous varieties of positivism. All the varieties agree on one point: that only science gives us valid knowledge of reality. Hence philosophy, at its best, can be nothing more than a sort of commentary on the findings of science; and at its worst, when it refuses to acknowledge the exclusive right of scientific method to marshal evidence and draw conclusions therefrom, philosophy is either mere opinion or nonsensical verbiage. The history of philosophy, especially in the primitive times before the scientific era, is told as a history of guesses, some bright, some wild, but all equally unworthy of modern credence.

Far from opposing the social scientists, their colleagues in the philosophy department support the derogation of “systems of morality” as so many ways of rationalizing emotional fixations and cultural complexes. (Ethics becomes a sort of psychoanalysis). It is in the philosophy course that the student really learns how to argue like a sophist against all “values” as subjective and relative. Far from being the last bulwark against the scientism professed or insinuated by every other part of the curriculum, the philosophy courses reinforce the *negativism* of this doctrine by inspiring disrespect for any philosophy which claims to be independent knowledge. And, to complete the job, the ancient sophistries which our philosophy departments have revived are implemented by semantics. The student learns to suspect all words, especially abstract words. Statements which cannot be scientifically verified are meaningless. The abstract words which enter into moral judgments—such words as “justice” and “right” or even “liberty” and “happiness”—have only rhetorical meaning. Denuded of deceptive

verbiage, all such judgments can be reduced to statements of what I like or what displeases me. There is no “should” or “ought.”

Concerning the intellectual character of this generation, there appears to be agreement. Certainly the most plausible explanation of that character is in terms of the education youth has received. If I have fairly summarized the impact of a college education have I not accounted for the state of mind which seemed to worry the commencement orators last June, and which Mr. MacLeish attributed to the insidious effects of postwar novels?

Whether or not they go to war, irreparable damage has been done to the young men of this generation. They have been misled by their teachers into giving up their birthright. Education has failed democracy as well. When men no longer have confidence that right decisions in moral and political matters can be rationally arrived at, when they no longer regard themselves as rational animals, but as rationalizing brutes, the institutions of democracy are the walls of an empty house which will collapse under pressure from without because of the vacuum within.

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