



Part 1 of 3

## **A CATECHISM FOR REVOLUTIONARIES**

**by Mortimer J. Adler & John N. Deely**

An oppressive sense of insecurity and dissatisfaction arising from unresolved problems seems to characterize the time of our lives. For most of us the atomic age, the space age, the age of technology, is also the age of frustration. And frustration gives rise to anger.

When the frustrations seem impersonal or irremediable, anger gives way to resignation, sometimes listlessness and ennui. That however is not the fate of anger typical of our times, for the frustrations that beset us no longer seem really beyond remedy, nor even so impersonal as once they were taken to be.

The anger that wells up in our time is wrathful, an anger permeated by an intent to resolve the problems which threaten us, and to avenge or punish all those who side with the *status quo* even at the expense of perpetuating the inequalities and injustices of their milieu.

Few would deny that the problems underlying our broad and deep frustrations are fundamental human problems of social equity; this is also why the wave of wrathful anger sweeping our consciousness cannot be dismissed or suppressed. Since the widespread anger

is justified, and those under its sway are determined to seize control of their destiny, the time of frustration has given place to a period of revolution. Such is the time of our lives. Inevitably, therefore, the age of frustration will spend itself in revolution, very precisely understood as a renunciation of allegiance to any form of authority which does not heartily and effectively commit itself to the elimination of the sociological and cultural sources of our frustrations and anger.

Just here is the heart of our difficulties. Wrath, the unleashed anger of our time, may take either of two forms: it may become blind rage or fury, an anger striking out in brute fashion with the indiscriminacy characteristic of blindness; or it may become purposive indignation, a righteous anger at the prevalence of what is seen to be unfair, mean, or shameful, rooted in a determination to change the face of such an earth. The revolution will spend itself either purposively or destructively; and the problem of our lives is how to enlighten our wrath, so that the twentieth century revolution may prove the social revolution to end all need for revolution, rather than spend itself in a blind fury which can only make further revolution that more necessary and the less likely to achieve a common welfare.

Since the frustrations are so widespread and deep that we cannot escape the throes of revolution, our only hope is in the future; and our only security is to strike out under the guidance of intelligence in a revolution to end all revolutions.

What then are the landmarks by which our intelligence is to guide us in this enterprise? What are the criteria for such a revolution? I think there are fundamentally seven, which I shall try to pose in the form of questions, so formulated that each by being answered throws light on the answers to follow. And I go further. I say that anyone who takes political action without having thought on these matters sufficiently to have answers for the questions I am going to pose is an enemy of the human good. By "answers" I do not mean lopsided or gratuitous assertions or professions of faith, but conclusions of reason, supported by fact and amenable to discussion, demonstrably sensitive to the weight of argument and evidence. The man who purveys pseudo-solutions for modern problems is as dangerous to our future as the man who places financial well-being for himself and his chosen few above the imperative need for the radical structural alterations plainly in demand. Just as the latter type can only be the agent of a repressive anger, securing himself at the needless expense of others, so the former type is ca-

pable of no more than brute revolt, disastrous in its inability to discriminate and justify.

Unfortunately, it is true that many if not most of the critics of our time belong as yet in this category of brute revolutionaries, when what is needed are human, i. e., intelligently guided revolutionaries. I will return to this point after having first attempted to indicate the guidelines or framework within which the course of necessary revolution may be intelligently and hopefully plotted. (Unfortunately, there is no way to *safely* plot a revolution: safety or security is one luxury that belongs exclusively to the aristocratic classes of the irrevocable past, or perhaps to a future that for certain lies beyond the horizon of the lives of each of us now breathing.)

To begin with, then, each of us must either acknowledge the primacy of the arbitrary and the justice of caprice in the management of social affairs, or be prepared to present and defend a positive answer to the question: *By what standard can we judge the relative merits of different centuries, societies, and cultures?*

My own answer to this question is as follows. One cultural epoch is better than another in proportion as its technological conditions, its political, economic, and social institutions, and its actual value-system promote or facilitate a really good life for a larger proportion of its human beings. The converse of course holds equally: a cultural epoch is inferior or worse in proportion as it deprives its members of the outward conditions needed to make a good life, or impedes or discourages reasonable efforts in this direction. The ideal, of course—if this is the guideline for our revolutionary’s revolution—is a society and culture that provides all its members *without exception* with propitious external conditions together with encouragement for the pursuit of the genuinely good life as I shall limn it in the pages that follow.

It should be clear that the term “ideal” here is not applied in any utopian, unattainable sense. It is used rather in a sense synonymous with “normal” or “healthy.” For example: if one of the primary ends of human association is the communal good of peace, then war in any form represents a pathological social condition defeating the very purpose for which men associate. A society rent by civil strife or engaged in external war—however justly and perforce—is in a state of malfunction and is, in this medical sense of the term, pathological or abnormal. Equally clearly, the word “normal” in its primary sense is distinct from statistical prevalence:

almost all societies since the beginning of history have been unable to function under the prevailing circumstances in a normal, i.e., peaceful, condition.

Another example should help to reinforce my usage of the word “ideal.” The purpose of men in associating in families, tribes (gangs), or states is not only to enjoy peace but also to achieve prosperity beyond what the isolated individual could enjoy. When the conditions between states make relative prosperity for one possible only through war with another, and the lives of man or most men are consumed in executing the strategy of military enterprises; or when the technological conditions within a society are such that widespread poverty or destitution cannot be eliminated, and the lives of most men are consumed back-breaking toil or abject servitude, then the society is pathological or abnormal in the indicated sense. It is not serving adequately the purposes of human development through association.

From this point of view, the best of the good old days appear rather bleak. Throughout most of man’s two million odd years, the conditions of social life have been so poor and primitive that no man then and there alive could make a good life for himself; and even in those periods of recorded history when the pathology was less extreme, the external aspects of a good life, a life befitting man, have been available only to the few. If we can agree that happiness presupposes not only a developed and controlled character, but also the benefits of friendship and fortune enjoyed over most of one’s life course, then we must also recognize that in the whole of human history the social conditions of human life have been, in marked but varying degree, defective from the point of view of human happiness; and this constitutes a judgment on *all* historic societies by reference to the real goods that go to make up a good human life as a whole, which judgment transcends the celebrated “ethnocentric predicament” by reference to a scale of values that is relative only to the developing nature of man, and not to any historic culture as paradigmatic.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In this regard, the following comment by C. H. Waddington, a leading geneticist, in his book, *The Ethical Animal*, bears noting: “it must be recognized that the conventional response of modern western intellectuals to the idea of progress is an exceedingly provincial one. The hundreds of millions of people living in India and China have still an expectation of life at birth which is only about half of that of the western European. The major political force which is shaping man’s history in our time is the conviction of these people that to die at eighty after a healthy life using

The question which uncovers the second of the final revolution's guidelines can be worded thus: *What should the state do in shaping the political, economic, and social institutions of a society in order to safeguard and facilitate the pursuit of happiness, i.e., of an integrally good human life, by each of its citizens?*

I would answer this question by averring that, *on the conceptual plane*, there can hardly be a better statement of the objectives of government than the one made in the "Preamble" to the Constitution of the United States, specifically, "to establish justice, ensure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty. "Taken together with the proposition in the Declaration of Independence that all men, being by nature equal, are equal in all their natural rights or needs—rights which a just government must seek to secure, equally for all—the objectives set forth in the "Preamble" provide a standard for measuring the goodness of *any* government. *On the historical plane*, accordingly, I would say that the extent to which our own government at the various stages in our history has fallen short of these objectives, for whatever reasons, provides an index of the genesis and extent of our own pathological state or condition as one among the historical societies.

Let us therefore consider these objectives of the government or state in relation to the integral parts of a fully human life—the means that the individual must be able to employ in order to make a good life for himself. These means can be variously arranged, but for our purposes it is convenient to arrange them in terms of those that can be secured by state action only indirectly, and those that can be directly so secured.

Under goods that can be secured by government only indirectly are subsumed those factors which belong to the inner or private life of the individual inasmuch as they are acquired and preserved by a man in consequence of the way in which he conducts himself, employs his abilities, and husband his resources. Nonetheless, it is further helpful to recognize a subdivision of this class of goods, according as it is made up of factors which, while

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inanimate sources of power is, in same real and undeniable sense, better than to die at forty after a life of back-breaking labour, hunger and sickness. It is, in my opinion, merely a confession of intellectual inadequacy if the western intellectual finds himself forced to confess that he cannot see any way in which this belief can be rationally justified."

mainly dependent on the individual as such, are more or less dependent also on the good fortune of a favorable social environment. What we may call the “goods of character,” such as the qualities of temperance, fortitude, sound judgment, and just dealing in relation to others’ individual rights or needs and the common good; and the “goods of personal association,” such as kinship ties and friendships, are distinguished by the fact that they are of all goods the least dependent on favorable external circumstance. By contrast, with regard to what we may call the “goods of the body,” such as health, vigor, and the pleasures of sense; and the “goods of the mind,” such as knowledge, understanding, even a modicum of wisdom, together with such qualities of the mind’s activity as skills of inquiry and of critical and judgment the arts of creative production, while principally dependent on the individual’s own athletic, assimilative, and critical activities, nonetheless are highly dependent also on favorable external conditions—on conditions conducive to health and provisions for medical care, in the case of bodily goods; on opportunities for schooling, learning, creative work, and on having enough free time to really take advantage of these opportunities, in the case of the goods of the mind.

Such are the four basic types of human goods linked in the fact that with regard to all of them the actions of the state are provisory rather than initiative: with regard to all of them, government can do no more than abet the pursuit of happiness indirectly by the actions it takes.

Under the goods which the state can secure for its citizens directly are included all those factors for the individual possession of which we are entirely dependent on the particular form of socio-political organization within which we live. Three principal types or categories of good belong here: “political goods,” such as domestic tranquillity—both civil and external peace—and political liberty; “economic goods,” such as a decent supply of means of subsistence, opportunities for and access to aesthetic as well as sensual pleasure, opportunities for access to the goods of the mind through educational facilities in youth and in adult life, and enough free time to take full advantage of these opportunities; and “juridical goods,” such as equality of status, of opportunity (from which equality of achievement does not follow), and of treatment in all matters affecting human dignity.

These three classes of basic human goods are thus all linked in the fact that the presence or absence of nearly all of them in an individual’s life is mainly dependent on the outer or public

conditions of his life. For example: unless he is fortunate enough to live in a republic—under constitutional government or a government of laws—and unless he is among those who are enfranchised as citizens with suffrage under that constitution, he will be deprived of political liberty. Unless he either has income-producing property or has what I am going to call the “economic equivalents of property,” he will not have, through forms of wealth and the things that wealth can provide, the economic goods that he needs for the pursuit of happiness—things that are good not only because they maintain his life and health, but also because they facilitate his acquirement of other goods, especially the goods of the mind or the goods of leisure. Unless he enjoys equality of status, opportunity, and treatment, he will, in varying degrees, be deprived of access to the goods he needs for his personal development and for the enhancement of his dignity as a person.

Hence, so far as government can shape and control the political, economic, and social institutions of the community, it secures the individual’s right to make a good life for himself largely through measures that directly affect his possession of political, economic, and social goods and, indirectly, through them, other goods that are not wholly within the power of the individual, as, perhaps, only the goods of his own character are.

It is not difficult to see in all this how harsh must be the judgment on all past and present societies when the attitudes and actions of their governments are judged against this second guideline of the revolutionary ideal. The harshness of this judgment must be tempered respecting past governments and even some present ones in view of the technological poverty of their social system; respecting our own present government there are no longer major mitigating factors: the revolutionary ideal presents itself in this society’s technological wealth as fully implementable, and takes on the character of a demand for immediate realization—and woe to those recalcitrant to the authority of this just demand.

It is largely practicable now, as it largely was not in the past, for modern government to see that no individual starves or is under-nourished (though no government, now or ever, can see to it that he is temperate and does not ruin his health by gluttony); it is largely practicable now, as it was largely not in the past, for modern government to provide adequate educational facilities and guarantee sufficient free time for every adult and child to take advantage of them (though no government can effectively prevent an individual from neglecting these opportunities or compel him to acquire and use the goods of the mind); it is practicable for modern

government, as it was never before, to ensure to every man access to sufficient material wealth to subsist and to travel with reasonable freedom (though no government can ensure a citizen will husband his wealth well or spend his minimum wisely); it is practicable now, as it perhaps was not formerly, for modern government to give every man suffrage and therewith political liberty (though government can no more give a citizen the civic virtue to use that freedom well than it can make him just in his use of other forms of freedom that it grants and safeguards); and so on.

With regard to this question of political liberty, there is one observation that ought to be made. The critics of our political system often tend to focus on two issues, equally eccentric, in my opinion. One form of criticism focusses on the failure of a significant percentage of the citizenry to vote in any given election; the other focusses on the fact that major candidates often express views so similar *as* to make the choice between them a matter of heads or tails—drawing the conclusion that our citizenry has no more actual say in the tack of its government than do the citizens of socialist states operating under an ideologically controlled one-party system.

Both of these criticisms tend to miss the main point of constitutional democracy as a political form. Under present conditions, it is not seriously possible for the individual citizen to cast a well-informed ballot in every election category, from county clerk, sheriff and alderman to senator and president. One would have to make a full-time job of politics to be an “informed voter” in the sense that these critics crusade for. At the opposite end of the critical spectrum, it is by no means clear that at all times and under all circumstances of national life, political opponents ought to expound radically divergent views of the country’s real needs nor is it clear that their failure to do so means that the citizenry is dominated by an entrenched and ideologically oriented political bureaucracy. What is essential in government under a constitutional democracy is neither a 100% informed turnout of registered voters, nor a constant wide divergence in views of national leaders of differing political alignments, but the possibility recurrent at each election period of turning *any* candidate or party out of office once the citizenry has been convinced in sufficient numbers that its trust has been betrayed. That is what is really the decisive advance of constitutional democracy over every other political form.



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