



Part 3 of 3

A CATECHISM FOR REVOLUTIONARIES

by Mortimer J. Adler & John N. Deely

It also suggests the answer that I think must be made to our sixth question, which contemporary rhetoric would have us pose thus: *Granted that ours is a sick society, is it curably or incurably sick?*

I have already pointed out that for the model of the normal or really just social order we have nothing to look back toward nothing to integrally restore. That social order exists nowhere as yet save in the intelligence, imagination, and determination of what I have called the human revolutionaries. But if ideal social conditions have never existed in the past and do not yet exist anywhere on earth, it necessarily follows that *all* existing countries, including the United States, are socially defective or pathological. And if the word “pathological” means “sick,” we are also faced with the question as to whether the pathology is remediable, whether the sickness is curable. It seems to me perfectly clear that the existing social pathologies are *all* remediable. If that were not the case, the twentieth century revolution could go no further, as it must and will.

Hence those who call the United States a sick society, and mean by that one that is mortally or incurably ill, are willfully shutting their eyes in my judgment, to all the available facts and refus-

ing to acknowledge obvious trends of change that support reasonably optimistic predictions.

There is a 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 spots of pathology, some curable defects or deficiencies, the seriousness of which it is no less a mistake to underrate than to grossly exaggerate. The importance of recognizing the soundness of the middle ground in criticizing the United States can be illustrated by the difference between two questions that one can ask about a house that one is thinking of buying because one wants to live on the site where it exists. One can ask, “Is it so bad 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 one can ask, “With all its defects, is it nevertheless good enough to remodel, improve, and redecorate?”

The present state of the U. S. A. should inspire us to ask the second of these questions. And we should answer it by saying that the United States, with all its defects, is good enough to deserve our trying to improve it by carrying forward the revolution, especially reform by due process of law, that has been the course—more than that, the genius—of our development from the beginning. Recourse to violence can be justified only when civil or legal measures are not available, but, short of adopting that theory of justice which identifies the just with the legal, what ought to be done with whatever and only what has been legislated,¹ no one can escape the admission that violence *can* be justified.

While saying this, we should also recognize the justifiable impatience of all those who are still oppressed by injustices that are not yet rectified and may not even be rectifiable with sufficient speed to satisfy them, yet not forgetting that while even the blind can destroy, only intelligence can build and guide. The deep unrest that exists among those who are still oppressed, even the revolutionary violence that the wrongs they have long suffered now impel them to incite, is itself a sign that the time is at last ripe for the needed reforms—not for mere change, but for that distinctive mode of change that is truly a progress.² It remains true that *the politically, economically, and socially oppressed*

¹ See Ch. 4 of Otto. A. Bird’s map of *The Idea of Justice*, New York: Praeger, 1968, pp. 43-78.

² See Charles Van Doren’s map of *The Idea of Progress*, New York: Praeger, 1968. esp. the “General Introduction pp. 2-17

have always spearheaded the revolutionary changes needed to right the wrongs that they have suffered and can no longer tolerate. Sometimes the time is not ripe for the changes demanded in justice, and revolution is then bloody and abortive. But today we are confronted with oppressed groups, all over the world as well as in our own country, whose revolutionary impulses are fired by rising expectations—by the great progress that has already been made, which promise the possibility of further progress, and by the possibility, now as never before, of institutional reforms that will make the twentieth century revolution, when completed, the first revolution in the history of mankind that will have really meant “all”—*all without exceptions*—as it moves toward its ultimate goal of an equality of political, economic, and social conditions for every human being on earth.

When and only when that revolutionary goal is reached, will there exist for the first time in human history external conditions that provide for every man the opportunity to make a good life for himself. Unfortunately, opportunity is one thing, and making good use of it is another. Not all who have the opportunity now—such as a large majority of the American people—succeed in making good lives for themselves. A distressingly large number do not understand the problem, do not know how to solve it, and are not even emotionally disposed to learn. Most of them lead unexamined lives, and lives that represent their unwitting adoption of the perverse system of values that is embodied in American culture and is expressed in the prevalent *mores* of our people, particularly, perhaps, the customary association of leisure with idleness and self-indulgence.

This brings us back to the unfinished business of question three above. In answering that question we were led to consider the determining role of the sociocultural value-system underlying the lifeways of a group. That consideration led to the conclusion that the scale of values inculcated in the individual consciousness by all dominant social systems today is by and large an inverted one with respect to the proper order of real goods in human life, and that this inversion is uniquely apparent in the structuration and objectives of our educational system. This twofold conclusion, in my opinion, forces an affirmative answer to the seventh and final—and in some ways most decisive—revolutionary guideline question: *Do we need in addition to continuing social, political, and economic revolution, a more fundamental moral and educational revolution?*

The answer is an unqualified affirmative. Yes, we need a moral revolution from the side of individual consciousness in the

recognition of not only what goods are to be sought, but also in what order and proportion. Yes, we need revolution from the side of the objectives our educational system is designed to serve. Without this twin development, the forces of blind rage are destined to spread and intensify, and to perhaps smother the sparks of enlightenment on which our anger depends for the successful elimination of its' causes.

I would like therefore to spell out this particular need in some detail. The things that are most prized and honored in America are the expanding production of wealth, whether or not the wealth produced satisfies real needs or artificially induced wants; technological advances either for their own sake or for the sake of creature comforts and conveniences that are in excess of genuine need; external or worldly success as measured by the acquisition of money, fame, or power rather than by development of the inner man and the growth of the human being as person; the expansion of the sensate life rather than the intensification of the life of the mind.

The high value set upon these things represents a fundamental disorder of goods, a perverse scale of values, placing lower over higher goods, mistaking merely apparent for real goods, and even erecting goods that are only means into ends to be sought for their own sake as if they constituted the good life as a whole. Whereas the favorable political, economic, and social conditions that have been achieved in our type of society make it possible for a large proportion of our population to make good lives for themselves, this unfavorable moral atmosphere or climate militates against the possibility of their succeeding; it disinclines them to make the effort; it turns their lives in one or another wrong direction.

The unfavorable moral atmosphere and cultural influences that are here being criticized exist, in varying degrees, in all technologically advanced industrial societies. The perverse scale of values that sets up cultural obstacles to leading a good life in the United States today prevails in the *mores* of every other country of the same general type. "Materialism"—a preference for external goods over the goods of the human spirit—is as prevalent in Europe as in the United States, and in Eastern as well as Western Europe. The cult of sensuality, 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 and with no thought of a good life as a whole—these things flourish everywhere, not just in America; and it is to these things that too many of the young, un-

fortunately, tend to turn when they are disaffected with the materialism 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 can begin only after the moral problem is itself understood and the solution of that problem is envisaged in all its details. That, in turn, calls for an educational revolution; but these two revolutions would seem to be so interdependent that, in fact, neither may be possible unless both come into being simultaneously.

I would like to say a few words about the educational revolution that is needed in the United States—one that will reverse the so-called “academic revolution” that Professors Jencks and Reisman have so accurately described in their recent book. I confine my attention to the United States, not necessarily because the educational revolution is most needed here, but because it is here that all the externals of equal educational opportunity have been more fully achieved than anywhere else. This makes the misdirection of our educational system to the wrong ends so great a travesty on our success in the externals.

The rebellion of the students in our colleges and universities, as I have already indicated, is thoroughly justified by wrongs that they are suffering at the hands of their institutions, but wrongs of which most of them are only dimly and, at best, inchoately aware. They are being cheated and defrauded by an educational system that has displaced genuinely liberal and humanistic training by all forms of specialized, technical, and vocational training that is intended to fit the young for their places in the industrial machine rather than to fit them for a good life by preparing them to make a good use of their free time in the pursuits of leisure. As I pointed out earlier, the reform of abuses is usually spearheaded by those who suffer under them. Today the young feel abused, but many of them project their complaints against the wrong objects—the political, economic and social institutions of our society. The root cause of their malaise is rather the cultural disorder of a society that is devoted mainly to technological advances and industrial development, reflected in the misdirection of the educational system to the wrong ends.

The young complain again and again of the inadequacy and irrelevance of the education they are receiving. They are right. They have suffered, and the generations to come will suffer even more, unless the university system is radically reformed, unless colleges are emancipated from the heavy and deadening hand of

graduate and professional schools, and unless the universities themselves become once more communities of scholars and cease to be service stations for the industrial state, R & D agencies for government and private industry, or even havens for professors to pursue their special interest without regard to the best interests of the students whom they should be serving.

It is particularly in the-classrooms of our colleges that the young are suffering the worst abuses. To correct these abuses, not only must curriculums be revised, but faculties must once again consist of teachers, not “professors”—of men interested in liberal and humanistic learning for themselves as well as for others, more than in research or in the advancement of knowledge in some specialized or technical field. Unfortunately, most of the young, precisely because they are so poorly educated, do not and cannot know the kind of education that they so sorely need—the kind that would have maximum relevance not to business or worldly success, but to the business of making good lives for themselves and to success in that effort. As a result their anger tends to take the form of blind rage, even senseless fury. What they need is genuinely liberal and humanistic learning as a means to the good life, the dullest among them as well as the brightest. But the brightest among them do not now want the kind of education that they most need, as is indicated by the types of courses that they themselves arrange for when they set up their own Free Universities. They do not want the kind of education that they need, because they have not been taught the basic moral lessons about the shape of a good human life, about its constituent parts and the means they must employ to achieve it. It is this blindness that poses the most critical threat to the long-range sustenance of the twentieth century revolution.

The foregoing answers to the seven questions that we must all consider and attempt to answer are “catechistic” in the sense that they merely provide a framework within which evidence and reasons can be assembled and marshalled. When that is done, the answers indicated above can, in my judgment, be supported to a degree that is little short of being demonstrative. Perhaps then it would be well to consider still one further question, now in the collective light of the guideline queries just completed. Let me pose this final question thus: *in view of the above considerations, what should be said of and to the generality of critics of our century and our society?*

Many of them, old as well as young, direct their complaints at the wrong objects. One of the most regrettable features of our century and of our society is not the fact that it has a large number of highly vocal critics who complain about it, but rather the often mistaken, unreasonable, and off-the-beam ways in which they voice their complaints.

On the one hand, the dissident young, frequently under the influence of their professors, together with the leaders of the New Left and others who are full of complaints about our century and our society, do not hesitate to make moral pronouncements about social evils that they think must be immediately eliminated—and they make these pronouncements with a dogmatic certitude that is inappropriate to such matters, and with an emotional conviction that is unaccompanied by a commitment of their minds to the moral principles and moral reasoning that underlie their charges of injustice and iniquity. Perhaps they have in common an idea of the responsibility of the intellectual much like the one ascribed by Arthur Schlesinger to Noam Chomsky “soft” New Left idol: “to forswear reasoned analysis, indulge in moralistic declamation, fabricate evidence when necessary and shout always at the top of one’s voice.”³

It is perfectly clear that they do not know or understand the moral principles that would give support to their charges, and that they have not engaged in the moral reasoning that could make their criticisms tenable. Exactly the same principles that might support criticism of the war in Vietnam, of racism, and of poverty, should also lead them to criticize a society that exaggerates the importance of sensual pleasures, that engages in the over-production of superfluous commodities, and that does not draw a line between the frivolous and the serious use of free time. Exactly the same principles and reasoning would also help them to understand what is wrong with being a beatnik, a hippie, a self-alienated refugee from reason, or an existentialist cop-out—wrong in a way that can ruin a human life; or what is wrong with over-indulgence in sex; what is wrong with psychedelic escapism, with attempts to expand the sensate life but not the life of the mind; what is wrong with pure emotionalism, and the rejection of reason; and so on.

On the other hand, the self-appointed guardians of the morals and patriotism of our society are no less dogmatic in their pronouncements, or in their suggested cures for the evils that they pro-

³ From a review of Chomsky’s *American Power and the New Mandarins* in “Book World,” March 23, 1969.

fess to see. They propose, for example, the reinjection of morality of the schools in the form of simple homilies that are as irrelevant today as they were in the past, when they abounded; and they propose, too, that patriotism be taught by distortions of history to emphasize the contributions of persons they think were “patriots,” while ignoring those of persons of whom they disapprove. But morality cannot be taught by homilies, nor patriotism by the example of men who were often foolhardy and sometimes not patriots at all.

It is true of these critics, too, that they do not know or understand the principles that would give moral support to their charges. Exactly the same principles that might support their criticisms of the educational system, or of the young, or of corruption in government, should also lead them to criticize a society that exaggerates the importance of wealth and wealth-getting, and an economy that depends too much on defense contracts. Exactly the same principles would help them to understand what is wrong with being a businessman (when business is considered as an end in itself)—wrong in a way that can ruin a human life; what is wrong with over-indulgence in alcohol or sports or television; what is wrong with intellectual escapism, combined with ignorance of and contempt for the life of the mind; what is wrong with cruelty and the excessive use of force and the rejection of compromise; and so forth.

Most important of all, these critics—all of them—fail to recognize that many of their criticisms, levelled against America and Americans, apply to all societies and to the human race generally.

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 only 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 at all times, because every country is populated by men, not by angels or by Swift’s gentle, rational horses, the Houyhnhnms.

In the course of the centuries, human institutions have been greatly improved, and they might be improved without limit, as William Graham Sumner has remarked, *were it not for folly and vice*. Folly and vice are human defects, not American defects. Twentieth century America has no monopoly on folly and vice; nor do the critics of the twentieth century have a monopoly by conscience-stricken reactions to, human folly and vice, Plato charged the Athenians who condemned Socrates with folly and vice. The dia-

logues of Plato are a more penetrating critique of the false values of Athens, at the time when it was the glory of antiquity, than anything now being said about America, *because Plato had a true scale of values on which to base his criticisms*. That is clearly not the case with the most vociferous and emotional critics of American society today, with their marked penchant for the forswearing of reasoned analysis, indulgence in moralistic declamation, fabrication of evidence when necessary, and presentation of their one side of an issue in a voice calculated to shout down any opposition.

These things being so, let me suggest three considerations that must be born in mind when one examines the current attacks on our society and our century. *First*, one should ask whether or not the objects of attack are simply human folly and vice. *Second*, to put these attacks or criticisms into historical perspective, it is necessary to consider the facts in terms of which the twentieth century must be compared with all earlier centuries, and the United States with all other countries in the world today. Many of the critics of our country seem to be totally oblivious of these facts or emotionally unwilling to acknowledge their obvious significance when they are presented. *Third*, one should ask whether those who criticize their country and their fellow-countrymen have the moral wisdom—a correct understanding of the good life and a reasonably sound plan for achieving it—that would commit them to a really good life for themselves and direct them in its pursuit. In other words, one should ask whether their own scale of values, the end they aim at and the means they employ, betokens their possession of the moral virtues and of prudence. The evidence—too often, I regret to say—suggests that they do not. And the only salvation for them, as 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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