

Soviet Union has developed into the more significant one between Moscow and Peking.

It may well be that this U.S. policy reflects an inadequate grasp of the real threat of communism. As a policy it may well have its risks and distasteful aspects. But the point here is that if this is so, then it is to be criticized as misguided, quixotic, fruitless, but not as immoral.

Does this mean then that once a policy is decided upon according to some general moral principle it is henceforth saved from becoming immoral? Not at all. It can indeed become immoral if in carrying out that policy a nation or group is led into specifically immoral positions. Certainly aiding a Communist nation is a type of policy which involves this kind of risk. But any policy is capable of being vitiated. A clear example is to be found in the case of using foreign aid as an instrument for spreading the practice of birth control. Here a good policy would be turned into an evil one by being given an explicitly immoral direction.

In large numbers of cases, when men disagree on what policies to follow, their differences are political or practical. They have to do with the means of carrying out objectives which are agreed upon, or they have to do with distinct objectives within a generally accepted moral framework.

Even when only one principle is involved, there is still possibility for distinct approaches and mu-

tually exclusive solutions to practical problems. All may readily agree that a worker deserves a fair wage. But it may be difficult to get agreement on what that wage should be in a specific instance. And even if agreement is reached on the amount of the wage, it could happen that there was disagreement on the methods used to arrive at a solution. It frequently happens, then, that the choice between one means and another is morally neutral. In most instances there is more than one legitimate way to reach a legitimate goal.

Differences of this kind arise because individual men find themselves in very distinct circumstances. It is a myth to think that if all men were morally perfect, and all moral principles perfectly well known and applied, there would be no disagreement. Even when they are viewing the same circumstances, different men bring to bear a variety of experience, education and talent, distinctive outlooks and approaches, differing appraisals of the practical possibilities. They will necessarily weigh different aspects of the problems they face in different ways. Moral standards provide a guide and rule of action; and they demand that this action be responsible. But they do not dictate policy in specific details, even if they can draw the limits between morality and immorality in details. The area of freedom in proceeding from principle to practical programs is very large.

Individual Excellence and Public Happiness

Excellence by John W. Gardner. Colophone Books, 171 pp., \$1.35. *The Public Happiness* by August Heckscher. Atheneum, 320 pp., \$5.75.

by Michael Harrington

Since the end of World War II, a kind of genteel and middle-class radicalism has gained ground in America. It criticizes the society from the point of view of beauty, thoughtfulness, mental

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health and personal peace rather than from that of economics or legislation. In part it is a product of almost two decades of relative domestic tranquility (the obvious exception of the Negro revolution did not generally burst upon contented whites until the sixties) and a time in which the readers and writers of books were enjoying a higher standard of living than ever before.

There were, to be sure, traditional radicals who participated in this mood (Erich Fromm and Henry Miller come to mind) and

liberals (one thinks of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s 1960 policy memo for the Democratic Party). But most of the other thinkers in this tendency shared a major premise of separating economic issues, which they presumed the mixed economies of the West were solving, from the spiritual uneasiness. In a context of dealing with two books, *Excellence* by John W. Gardner and *The Public Happiness* by August Heckscher, I want to suggest that this latter assumption is one-sided and quite dangerous. Or, to

put the point positively, the future of contemplation and loveliness and enlightenment is today probably more vulgarly economic and political than ever before.

For August Heckscher, America is losing its very sense of objective reality: services are bureaucratized, the consumer is as much owned by his possessions as owning them, leisure degenerates into mass orgies and mass boredom. To save ourselves from being routinized and rationalized to death, there must be more irony, detachment, art must become more meaningful and politics more individual. These observations are obviously accurate and Heckscher has a considerable gift for formulating them cogently. But how, then, do we proceed toward Mr. Heckscher's virtues? He is clearly aware of the historical and social background of the problem which he defines, yet when he moves from pathology to cure he drops these factors out of sight. "The public happiness can be approached," he writes, "when men, and women attain a kind of equilibrium amid the flux and motion of the world . . . as men and women undertake significant tasks in the public sphere . . . it can be approached, under creative political leadership, in the fulfillment of national obligations at home and in the world."

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Almost everyone would wish the public to choose Mr. Heckscher's values. But then, the serious question becomes, Why do they refuse to do so? What would motivate them in this direction? At this point, *The Public Happiness*, and almost all the other books in the genre, become hortatory: the people *should* choose well. Some of the more pessimistic, like William H. Whyte in *The Organization Man*, settle for a kind of affluent anarchism, for corporate Good Soldier Schweikism, as their way out. It is Heckscher's merit that he accepts the responsibility of a public response

to his critique; it is his flaw that he can find nothing more powerful to recommend than a series of discrete individual decisions.

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Standing in the way of such personal choices are powerful institutions. The most obvious, and over-dramatized, is the advertising industry which devotes more than twelve billion dollars a year to socialize the American mind and to minimize consumer freedom as far as is possible. Since it is so visible and ubiquitous, Madison Avenue is often mistaken as the cause of our woes rather than as a symptom of them. It brainwashes, distorts and debases, to be sure, but this is hardly to be explained by a malevolent, diabolic conspiracy of hucksters. Why is the creation of pseudo-needs through advertising, and the ignoring of real needs in the process, so important to American society?

Advertising's function is to rationalize the mis-allocation of resources. It gives an appearance of personal choice to consumer decisions which are, as far as possible, scientifically pre-determined, and not on the basis of individual or social need. The function of the mis-allocation of resources is to make more money, it being well known that second phones, third cars and fourth television sets yield a higher rate of return than low cost housing, education or other such useful services. So long as this basic economic principle of setting priorities according to corporate gain is in effect, so long will it make sense to spend billions of dollars on advertising, and, at third remove, the spiritual texture of the entire society will be incidentally and systematically flawed.

So the child, in Riesman's brilliant phrase, is made a consumer trainee, and there is this tremendous educational effort in brand loyalty. In the Ortega y

Gasset theory, the brutishness of the "mass man" is to be sought in his own disrespect for tradition and values. If he is naturally that way, it is puzzling that so many billions are spent on educating him to his innate qualities. But, in any case, advertising is only an obvious, eminently discussable, part of the problem. The other aspects of our spiritual emptiness—the loneliness of cities, the alienation of work, the political charade—are also deeply, if intricately, related to vulgar decisions about who has the most money and determines how it shall be used. In some ways, though certainly not in all, the public happiness and the price of steel are arrived at by the same calculus of profit.

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Mr. Heckscher is, of course, under no responsibility to come up with a utopian blueprint for the transformation of the world. But he should, I think, more clearly realize that the ills which he describes are not a simple sum of individual choices but a social product, and that their cure therefore requires a ranging social program. In short, if there are to be new modes of ethical and aesthetic choice for people, there must be new institutions, new habits of life and daily choice which might evoke detachment, irony, philosophy.

As it is now, no end of individual resolutions will make cities more beautiful and less alienated so long as real estate speculation remains our main tool for city planning. It is not a paradox that the American automobile industry receives a collective Federal-State subsidy about equal to that given to education. Making cars, or rather making money on cars, is a more important principle of American society than spiritualizing the young.

Our valuation of education is important when turning to Mr. Gardner's book. A consideration of *Excellence* inevitably involves

thoughts on the school and college system.

For Mr. Gardner, three principles may be present in a society: hereditary privilege, equalitarianism and competitive performance. Hereditary privilege was more or less, though not completely, abolished by the rise of capitalism. We remain with a tension between competitive performance, which exalts the individual and his ambition, and equalitarianism which restrains performance in the name of the common good. An utterly egalitarian society would be without excellence since it would level the entire population down to a lowest common denominator. A society of utter competitiveness would be, on the other hand, savage, unfeeling and it is to be rejected too.

In the American educational system, Gardner continues, one sees the working of these two antagonistic principles. On the one hand, there are those who seek a college education for every child, even those not intellectually capable of it, and thereby threaten to destroy the very possibility of excellence by making mediocrity an official norm and policy. On the other hand, some favor a sharp and early separation of the most talented from the rest, with ten and eleven year olds being decisively rated on their performance and put into a defined educational groove. In this approach, the potential of slowly maturing excellence (the "late blooming" child) is lost, and a certain richness of social as well as intellectual experience is denied to all of the students.

In practical terms, this analysis leads Gardner to favor a comprehensive school, in which there is the greatest talent "mix" compatible with making the best use of native ability. For those who do not qualify for college, he asks for respect, a sort of status pluralism in which a bachelor's degree is not a necessity if one is to have a responsible and honored

position in the community.

To begin with, Gardner's conception of the "equalitarian" position is typically American and, for me at least, typically fuzzy and wrong. Given everything else about present American society as a constant, then an attempt to introduce universal higher education would unquestionably confirm Gardner's worst fears. But assuming that changes can be made—that much more money can be devoted to neighborhoods and schools, that Conant's slum exposition of the underprivileged children can really be avoided—that need not be true at all. One version of equalitarianism is to pull the top down; and another is to raise the bottom up. In this regard, Gardner's philosophic principles are dependent on a given situation, the American present, and upon a pessimistic assumption that there will be little or no change.

Such a conservative premise is no crime. With it, however, the reality is much more disturbing than Gardner can admit. His solution to the current problem is to inculcate American society with a greater respect for the non-college graduate. But the status drives of the American people about education, and college degrees in particular, are not simply a matter of frivolous snobism. One's education in the United States is the key to one's job. Two generations ago, a grade school diploma could be the beginning of a responsible life as a citizen; a generation ago, the requirement moved up to high school; in the automated and completely technological economy it has become college.

Radical as these changes have been, even more basic shifts would seem to be in store in the near future. Only a few years back, various social scientists had decided that the most secure semi-skilled job in the automated society was a card puncher for an

automated machine. Today, scanning machines read the cards and that secure occupation is finished before it really started. Under such circumstances does not a liberal education approach for all become much more realistic than that of trade schools which cannot possibly keep up with the changes in the skill and job structure? Should not the tendency of the society be to increase the number of years in school for economic, as well as educational, reasons?

Gardner is asking a society which assumes that technology is a high, if not the highest, value to deny this most fundamental assumption in its attitudes toward people. Yet, in such a setting is it not clear that the technologist will have both money and status, and that the non-technologist might be condemned to a new "underclass," a "non-revolutionary proletariat" (both terms are Gunnar Myrdal's)? My point is that the pursuit of excellence in a time as revolutionary as ours cannot be carried out by neat, symmetrical balancings of competitiveness and equalitarianism. The options are not as calm as Gardner conceives them.

I have been harsh to both of these books, perhaps unfairly so. Each of them contains so much with which I sympathize and agree. Yet there is an important critical point to be made. It is too easy an out to separate the problematic higher values of our times (excellence, irony, detachment) from the problematic lower activities (the basic way in which resources are allocated and the manufactured environment shaped, the relative priorities as between autos and students). If, as now seems possible, the sixties are to see a revival of social thought, if the United States is about to confront some of its unfinished business, then this concern for our spiritual plight must be integrated with a new awareness of our material plight. The two are not so distant as it seems.

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