COMING HOME TO A NEW AMERICA

Thomas Molnar

I returned only recently from an eight-month round-the-world trip which took me to large parts of Africa, some islands in the Indian Ocean, Australia and New Zealand, all of Southeast Asia, and the Far East. One can observe these parts of the world with an exhausted curiosity, the more so if one has seen them several times in the past. While at first it is amply noticeable that many of these lands are still below the threshold of economic development, a second or third visit also reveals hitherto unsuspected signs of social stability—acting, to be sure, as a brake on rapid progress, but also helping to maintain a kind of steadiness in people's attitudes and worldviews.

I mention this steadiness because upon returning to the United States (even from Japan, where economic development is the world's fastest) I was struck by America's state of spiritual disarray, its obsessed striking out in all directions to reach for nobody-knows-what. On any scale of modern achievements, like gross national product, full employment, number of cars and telephones owned or moon trips accomplished, America is, of course, on top; but after many months' immersion in African and Asian realities, I came back with the suspicion that human beings may be better served by other "priorities." Given the fact that man is a problem-solving animal, I suspect it is better for his moral health to have real problems to face than to produce mainly artificial ones, invented or enlarged by his tortured inner dissatisfaction.

This observation leads me to the two statements that underlie this article. The first is that I find American reaction to the world's problems a gravely misled one, something worked out from sets of erroneous information and distorted assumptions. Simply put, it seems that our public opinion, tired of "organizing" the world since 1945, has concluded that the world is in worse shape than ever, curable only by some incantation or miracle drug. This may be a way of rationalizing our new isolationism, but it may also be motivated by our strange rites designed to exorcise the Devil (the Establishment? Racism? Lack of love?) from world affairs.

The second point is that, even after only eight months' absence, I returned to find the country's temper saturated with radicalism, which is in no small part promoted by its intellectual output: books, magazines, pamphlets, even posters, slogans, and public speeches. When I speak of radical outpourings, however, I do not have in mind the open incitement to violence, Abbie Hoffman's call to the young to kill their parents, or the Black Panthers' charge that America is bent on genocide. Certainly a violence is in these statements and in the acts they inspire; but the real terror—i.e., the systematization of violence—is in the general acceptance of these words and acts by even respectable publications (and less respectable public officials) which regard them as amounting to a culture now being born, to a series of birth pangs of a new America, more free, more just, more democratic.

Now I cannot help seeing a certain connection between the two observations: the fair degree of spiritual calm in the non-Western world, and the violence; incited and accepted, in the West, specifically in the United States. America, in spite of thirty years' involvement in the world, has been unable to lose its provincialism, or, to use the new term, its ghetto mentality. Applied to what I am discussing here, this means that our reaction to "world affairs" is habitually out of proportion—it is an "over-reaction"—this time in the sense that we transfer our lugubrious sense of alienation from American society to the world's other nations, as if they too suffered from the same problems (or pseudo-problems), as if they too were desperate, nihilistic, and irrational about their condition, as if they too were in need of being saved from themselves. This is not to deny the harsh difficulties among which people live: the wars in Vietnam and Laos and the Middle East, the racial clashes in Malaysia, the social injustice in the Philippines, and the other, less noticed but equally serious hardships; yet the reality of these difficulties gives the populations involved no time for the luxury of translating them into the kind of sophisticated Weltenschmerz we in America indulge in.

I have no desire to minimize the troubles of the universe: like Frantz Fanon or Che Guevara, I could, perhaps with a less burning rhetoric, put together volumes about people's lack of food, safety, communications possibilities, health, freedom, and decent

Dr. Molnar teaches French literature and intellectual history at Brooklyn and C. W. Post colleges. He is the author, most recently, of The Counter-Revolution (Funk & Wagnalls).

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treatment; but these evils are in no need of being romanticized, they suffice to themselves; what is more, their concreteness compels the victims to seek remedies which are also concrete, derived neither from the panacea of democracy offered a decade ago, nor from the drug of alienation revolution urged upon them nowadays. I suggest that the Fanon Guevara type literature, in contrast to the authors' wishes, tends to "reassure" Americans that, indeed, there is no cure except a series of do-it-yourself cataclysms, wiping out this whole no-good world.

I confess that at times the shadow of a big fear has accompanied me on my travels. I caught myself wishing that the professionals of alienation back home would not get hold of the troubles besetting Filipino farmers, Malaysian rubber plantation workers, Hong Kong traders or Malawian tribes—for they would find in people's struggles for a better life excuses for further outpourings of terrorist literature, not only irrelevant but also disturbing of processes begun and generally promising.

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It is time now that I define "radical" or "terrorist" literature. I indicated above that I mean less the provocateur's violent words and acts than the general acceptance of such appeals, a resigned acceptance on the part of the silent majority, an exultant one on the part of the minority of opinion-makers. But I do not think the welcome mat laid out to violence and terror by our intellectuals is just a passing phase, indicative of "birth pangs"; we have reason to suspect that it is the symptom of social collapse, and more—of times of trouble, as Toynbee and Voegelin call such phenomena in history. In such periods the experiential link with the order of existence is subjected to intolerable stress, or, to put it in more accessible terms, no meaning is found in communal life; life is then governed by fear that the transcendent no longer offers meaning and protection, and that man must shoulder all responsibilities. At times like this, it is not surprising to find side by side a literature of obsessed vaticination designed to shock and upset, and its twin genre, a utopian literature impressing readers with the excessive affirmation of man's ability to change his condition and even the nature of existence.

The presence of a literature of vaticination is obvious enough: it pretends to have evaluated all our sins which cry to heaven, and promises punishment in the form of race war, nuclear holocaust, revolt of the damned of the earth, two, three Vietnams, invasion of suburbia by inner-city incendiaries, and the like. I let the reader supply names of authors, titles, theatre plays, television interviews, discourses at lavishly arranged congresses—instances of end-of-the-world literature painting the horizon with apocalyptic colors. It should be noted, however, that all of this literature is a product of a Western intellectual "superstructure," and that it fails to describe the "infrastructure" of real life in the Third World, although this literature ultimately rests its case on the assumed reconversion of human values therein. In other words, in these works, the West contemplates itself and its mood, expresses its own sense of futility, and adumbrates its own loss of symbols which could recognizably transcribe its experience. One needs no psychoanalysis to find that the general vituperation against the state of the world is a form of self-aggression, bitterness felt over the loss of self-sustaining symbols of belief.

But next to the vaticinatory literature, utopian literature is just as indicative of the contemporary American mood. I do not mean novels or other forms of fiction; in fact, the literature of vaticination is not characterized by such works either. The greatest part of the latter's production could be listed as subjective documentary (a display of the author's indignation, with some questionably selected environmental details), or as revolutionary programme (where the indignation is spelled out as a series of demands). Utopian literature is colder, more philosophical than the naturally fiery stuff of emotional outpourings; but it is just as representative of the "times of trouble," of our refusal (inability?) to face reality and work within the rightly conceived experiential order.

The essence of utopian forms is a false orientedness toward the future. False, because the utopian thinker does not start from the platform of the present on which hopefully to build reasonable forecasts; in fact, he is impatient and contemptuous of the present, preferring to leap over it, as it were, and to forecast forms through an arbitrary selection of elements out of which the "future" will be, according to him, constituted. The choice is, of course, not quite his own, for every age provides a set of idées reçues, notions in the
air, on the basis of which the future is imagined, or, rather, an illusion about it is verbalized. Yet the thinker himself bears full responsibility for not really observing and studying his time, and for assuming that human beings may be forced into his arbitrary molds.

Theologians and religious thinkers seem to be in the forefront of this neo-utopianism. With faith in a transcendental divinity apparently exhausted, they put the energy generated by religious belief in worldly constructs, not sufficiently differentiating between loyalty to human institutions and faith in God. For example, this year the organizers of the Semaine des Intellectuels Catholiques have chosen “Yes to Happiness” (Oui au bonheur!) as a theme of their debates —more appropriate as the motto of a teenage party than as a topic for an assembly of scholars and priests. But perhaps the responsibility for so much indulgence towards “modern man” belongs to theologians who now conceive of Christianity as not founded in the past, at a given historical moment, but as being born in each of us, all the time (“all moments are eschatological”), namely, in proportion as we get rid of the past, our own included, and project ourselves as a “gift of the future” (R. Bultmann). Or to other theologians who teach that “the real nature of man can be defined as the possibility of attaining the absolute future” (K. Rahner). As a result of such theories, man becomes, so to speak, exorbited, but instead of being coerced, or called forth at will. Xlen like Lowith, Voegelein and Tresmontant, philosophers of history and religion, have shown that history has no meaning inside itself but points to an outside meaning, inaccessible to man within history, and hardly describable as an “absolute future.” When writers of lesser scope than theologians seize upon the project of forecasting change, they remain inevitably prisoners of present ideological fashion. In “times of trouble” they too are tempted to urge a reconversion of reality, since their spiritually tired contemporaries are not expected to convert themselves. The conclusion is then reached that man possesses Faustian powers to change radically the meaning and character of existence. Since our idées reçues today are mostly scientific, the utopian writer assumes that a series of breakthroughs (in electronics, biochemistry, genetics) will propel mankind from the threshold of transformation where it now stands, in the direction of a new world. He further assumes that the technological breakthroughs will then engender moral breakthroughs toward deeper social insights, better ethical norms, wider democratic consensus. Several authors writing or reviewed on the pages of worldview have recently engaged in just this kind of manufacture of illusions, and, alas, such is the neo-conformist temper of the times that nobody dare openly question what they say about man’s ability “to produce a new framework for values,” “to master his psychophysiological structure as he already masters his environment,” “to create his own future so that he may turn to the cultivation of the depth of his own and society’s inner space.”

Let these authors remain un-named, for it would be unjust to pillory them and leave unidentified the thousand others who propound similar formulas. They all point to the coming autonomous man, man as demiurgos, master of his destiny. If many of them welcome violence and terror, it is because the autonomous man, also known as Ubermensch, is expected to arrive as a great disturber of peace. Are the most probable candidates not the biggest noise makers?

Do these utopian writers, any more than the radical litterateurs, speak of man’s true and concrete problems? Are they offering advice and comfort in the daily struggle of Asians and Africans, even of Americans? As intellectuals, have they worked out a set of symbols transcribing satisfactorily the twentieth-century little-man’s experience and hopes, or have they not, rather, looked at him as an abstraction, as if his preoccupation were with “controlling his development in the context of a genuine philosophy of the role of technology in human evolution”? (another quotation from a recent issue). The philosopher is, naturally, entitled to his terminology; but the authors I am discussing take the easy way out when they refuse to follow men as they are, in their daily expectations of the next improvement or the next failure. Nothing is saved by a leap into utopia, chasing after phantoms like the technological, the electronic, the biologically reconstructed man.

To sum it up, what I find so frightening is not the terrorists or the utopians per se, but the incredible discrepancy between their universe of discourse (always some variation of Western urban bourgeois discourse) and the state of the world. Let us agree that their professed love and generosity for people is, at least, not hypocrisy; but if predilection for utopia is a sign of exhaustion of a civilization in times of trouble, they have no right to camouflage it as human solidarity. Human solidarity is not served by offering our furtif prognosis to active people struggling in the world. We may choose to live in utopia; but they live in history.