



# LET'S **NOT** SAVE THE WORLD!

STATUS QUO is a Latin phrase meaning, in a modern translation, "the mess we are in." A great number of our contemporaries must understand it so, because never have so many persons and organizations come forward with such a variety of schemes for reforming other people and improving the world. This is the age of the Man with the Plan. The reformer, with his blueprints for social uplift, is in his heyday.

I suppose that I too would be classified by some as a reformer, for I travel around the country making speeches and taking part in seminars. And the gist of what I have to say is that, indeed, things *are* in bad shape, but that they might be improved if we ap-

proached economic and political problems in a different spirit. If the distinguishing mark of a reformer is his yen to save the world, then I am not a reformer – in this sense. The principal reform I seek is the reformation of reformers! But I live close enough to the tribe so that many of them send me their literature.

Across my desk come the outpourings of many earnest souls, offering salvation to the world if only the world will embrace their particular panacea. The panaceas peddled by these folk come in all sizes and styles, ranging from world government to a low cholesterol diet. In between are the socialists, the land reformers, the money reformers, the prohibitionists, the vegetarians, and those who believe that the world is in the strangling clutch of a far-flung conspiracy of sinister men who operate anonymously behind the

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scenes. As I read this material, I am thankful that the world has so far refused to let itself be saved on the terms each and every one of these reformers lay down. These people differ wildly among themselves as to the details and precise nature of the remedy; but they are in basic agreement as to the general pattern reform should take. Reform — as they understand it — consists of A and B putting their heads together and deciding what C should be forced to do for D. William Graham Sumner said something like this about a century ago, which means that this reformist mood has been with us for a long time.

### ***People Are the Basic Ingredient***

Every reformer, presumably, yearns for the good society — however much reformers might differ among themselves as to the earmarks of the good society and the appropriate means for reaching it. Each reformer is confident, however, that all we have to do is install his machinery and utopia will arrive tomorrow.

But in his preoccupation with the apparatus for making society over, the reformer omits one important factor from his calculations: he omits people. It is the people comprising a given society who make that society what it is, and it is they who distinguish it

from other societies made up of people of a different sort. Chinese society is unlike Hindu society; and how different is each of these from Western society as we know it in New York or Montreal! The characteristics of a given society are derived from the nature of its people; a society is warlike if its members are belligerent; an agricultural society is one in which people are farmers; a society whose members go down to the sea for trading or fishing is a maritime society; and so on.

It follows from this, that a good society is not to be achieved by any kind of social apparatus or political machinery, however elaborate; a good society is the happy by-product of good people functioning at par, and it comes about in no other way. If you have good people — defining “goodness” so as to include a modicum of intelligence — a good society follows automatically. But without the right kind of people, a good society is impossible.

### ***A Parable***

Let me, at this point, offer you a little parable. This story has to do with a bright boy of five whose mother took him to a toy store and asked the proprietor for a challenging toy for the young man. The owner of the shop brought out an elaborate gadget, loaded with

levers, buttons, coils of wire, and many movable parts. The mother examined the complicated piece of apparatus and shook her head. "Jack is a bright boy," she said, "but I fear that he is not old enough for a toy like this."

"Madam," said the proprietor, "this toy has been designed by a panel of psychologists to help the growing child of today adjust to the frustrations of the contemporary world: No matter how he puts it together, it won't come out right."

The world never has come out right, despite the best efforts of countless men, but this very fact incites every new generation of reformers to even more frantic applications of their esoteric cures. Utopians, dreaming of an earthly paradise, have drawn up their blueprints for a heaven on earth, but in practice, every attempt to realize a perfect society has resulted in an intolerable society. Newfangled heavens on earth—as exemplified in the totalitarian countries—resemble nothing so much as the old-fashioned hell.

My idea, on the other hand, is to seek—not a perfect society—but merely a tolerable one. If we cut our garments to fit the cloth and work toward a tolerable society, we may yet achieve it.

In other words, I am deeply distrustful of any and every "per-

fect" solution for social problems. Human life, as a matter of fact, is not a problem to be solved; it is a reality to be lived.

I am defining the reformer as a type of man who is determined to save the world, even to the point of disregarding the wishes of the people involved. His opposite number is one who believes that people have a right to live their own lives, and that when their lives are lived in a truly human way the good society will appear as a bonus or dividend.

### **Three Reformers**

Reform is in the air in the modern world, and most of us absorb some of it through our pores by a kind of osmosis. The average man, whenever anything goes wrong, says, "There ought to be a law...." But the reformer mentality is best understood by examining several fully developed examples of this type of mind.

American politics for more than a generation has been dominated by the New Deal-New Frontier-New Republicanism psychology. As the proponents of this doctrine view the matter, society is to be masterminded by a political quarterback calling plays from Washington. Join scientific humanism to majoritarian political processes, they say, and achieve peace, progress, and plenty. One of the lead-

ers of the early New Deal Brain Trust was a professor of economics named Rexford Guy Tugwell, who poetically acknowledged:

I have gathered my tools and my charts;  
My plans are fashioned and practical;  
I shall roll up my sleeves —  
make America over.

Somewhat earlier, there was the philosopher and educator, John Dewey. Dewey introduced many changes into the curricula of our schools; he is thought of as the godfather of progressive education and the classroom emphasis on adjustment to the group. But more fundamental than even these things, Dewey was a prime mover in the installation of a new *Weltanschauung*. John Dewey worked out a major reconstruction of philosophy, life, and society, and himself best articulated the new mood and temper which he championed. This new outlook, in his own words, "marks a revolution in the whole spirit of life, in the entire attitude taken toward whatever is found in existence." What is this revolution? It is "a change from knowledge as an esthetic enjoyment of the properties of nature regarded as a work of divine art, to knowing as a means of secular control. . . . (Nature) is now something to be modified, to be intentionally controlled. . . . Ideas are worthless except as they pass

into actions which rearrange and reconstruct in some way, be it little or large, the world in which we live. . . . Modern experimental science is an art of control."

Carry this matter back to the middle of the nineteenth century and we come to the man from whom so many twentieth century problems stem — Karl Marx. The determining factor for men, Marx wrote, is "the mode of production in material life." A man's very consciousness is determined by his social existence. "Men's ideas," he added, "are the most direct emanation of their material state." The logic of this is fantastic, for according to Marx's own statement, he himself is a mere mouthpiece for the material productive factors of 1859; Marx's mouth may frame the words, but his mind does not generate the ideas. The ideas come from "the mode of production in material life."

Marx does not stop here; he goes on to fashion an idol. Declaring himself an atheist, he excoriates those who do not "recognize as the highest divinity the human self-consciousness itself." This new mortal god has only one obligation to the world: Change it! Aristotle's god, the Prime Mover, derived esthetic enjoyment from contemplating the world he had made; and many philosophers, and ordinary folk as well, have enjoyed

the starry heavens and the glories of nature.

But if Marx were to have his way, such pleasures would be prohibited. "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways," he wrote; "the point, however, is to *change* it." (1845) A contemporary of ours, Bertram Wolfe, writing critically of Marxism, gives us this interpretation: "History was to be given a new meaning, a new goal, and a new end in Time. . . . At last man would become as God, master of his own destiny, maker of his own future, conscious architect of his world."

From now on a kind of activism will take over in human affairs. Everyone is supposed to be doing something all the time. In the United States, if anyone wants to apply a withering epithet to Congress, he calls it "a do-nothing congress." We are so busy acting that we have no time for thinking. We don't much care where we are going, just so long as we can get there in a hurry. With the result that nearly everyone is afflicted with a bad case of the jitters. The mood of our time may be summed up in one word — disenchantment. The recurring theme of our literature is "alienation." Modern man, who should be the proud, upright lord of creation, has to be kept going by increasing doses of as-

pirin, tranquilizers, and psychoanalysis. We're in the position of the man riding a tiger; we don't like the ride, but fear we'll be worse off if we dismount. We know there's something wrong with us, but we've learned to live so well with our illness that we're afraid the cure would kill us!

### **Letting Things Alone**

Well, what's the alternative? The journal with which I am associated is called THE FREEMAN. Between 1920 and 1924, the editor of THE FREEMAN was a unique personality named Albert Jay Nock. Associated with Nock was a group of young writers such as Suzanne LaFollette, Van Wyck Brooks, and Lewis Mumford. Someone remarked to Nock, "You've done wonderful things for these young people."

"Nonsense," said Nock, "all I've done was to let them alone."

"True," replied his friend, "but it would have been different if someone else had been letting them alone."

Letting someone alone is not the same thing as doing nothing. It requires great effort on the part of parents properly to let our children alone, so that they will grow up, not as carbon copies of ourselves, but as their own unique personalities.

Rightfully letting things alone,

in statecraft, is Edmund Burke's policy of "a wise and salutary neglect." But it is to medicine that we must turn for the clinching illustration of this technique.

Certain medical theorists of about a century ago examined the human organism and found it a crude contrivance of pipes, tubes, levers, and dead weight. This botched mechanism could be kept going only if someone constantly patched and repaired it. Writing of this antiquated medical theory, an historian says: "This held that the body was a faulty machine and Nature a blind worker. The student made an inventory of the body's contents and found, as he expected, some out of place, some wearing out, some clumsy make-shifts . . . and some mischievous survivals left over." Medical practice, based on this theory, was to interfere with the body's working by probing, operating, removing, and altering. The practice often proved disastrous to the patient!

Medical theory has changed in the past fifty years. The modern theory, according to the same historian, regards the body as "a single unit, health a general condition natural to the organism . . . and the best diet and regime, to live naturally." This new theory regards the body as a self-regulating, and for the most part, a self-curative organism. It need not be

interfered with except to repair or remove an obstruction that prevents the free flow of the healing power of nature. Medical or surgical ministrations do not create health; the body does that of itself if let alone.

The new outlook in medicine is summed up by the title of a famous book by Harvard professor, Walter B. Cannon: *The Wisdom of the Body*. I believe it was Dr. Cannon who introduced the concept of "homeostasis," the idea that the human body maintains all the balances necessary to health unless something interferes.

### **Freedom in Society**

There is a striking analogy between present-day theories of health and the ideal of freedom in human affairs. The believer in freedom is one who has come to the realization that society is a delicately articulated thing, each part depending on every other. Hence, arbitrary interference with anyone's peaceable willed action not only diminishes the freedom of the person restrained but affects all other men in society. The attempt to masterplan society upsets the balance which every part of society naturally has with every other part.

Nearly everyone favors freedom in the abstract. Most intellectuals champion freedom of speech, aca-

demic freedom, freedom of the press, and freedom of worship. The only freedom which is everywhere under fire is economic freedom. Why is this? Following the analysis I have been using, it is self-evident that those who would deny men freedom in the market place assume that, in the absence of political controls, economic life would be chaotic. Karl Marx indeed did speak of the anarchy of the free market. The assumption, in other words, is that manufacturers would not produce the goods consumers want unless government stepped in and told them what to make, and in what sizes, styles, and colors. The assumption is that farmers would grow nothing but weeds and brambles unless crops were assigned and acreages allotted. The assumption is that the vast transportation industry — which can jet us across the ocean, take us by rail or bus wherever we want to go, provide us with millions of automobiles — would still be using wheelbarrows and the oxcart if government did not direct it. Merely to state these assumptions is to expose their absurdity, but we have to go one stage further in order to make the absurdity manifest.

### ***What Is Economics?***

Why is there economics, and what is the economic problem? On

the human side of the economic question is man, a creature of insatiable needs and desires but with only limited energy. On the other side of this equation is the world of raw materials. Very few things in their natural state can be used or consumed directly; human effort must be expended on them in the form of the work required to grow, manufacture, or transport them. Raw materials are scarce, relative to human demands for them, and finished products are even scarcer. And this means that there will always be unsatisfied human wants; people will always want more.

For a thing to qualify as an economic good, two requirements must be met: the item must be needed or wanted and it must be in short supply. Air, despite the fact that it is necessary to our lives, is not an economic good, for it is not in short supply; under normal conditions there is enough air for everyone and lots left over. But conditioned air *is* an economic good, even though it is not necessary for life but only ministers to our comfort. Conditioned air is in short supply, there is not as much of it as people want, merely for the taking, and so they have to pay for it; that is to say, they have to give up something in exchange for it.

Economics, then, is the disci-

pline which deals with goods in short supply; and the problem it faces is how to allocate scarce goods so as to best satisfy the most urgent human wants. The free market approach to this problem is to rely on the individual free choice of consumers, as manifested in their buying or abstention from buying. The buying habits of people form a pattern which tells entrepreneurs what to produce, and in what quantities, sizes, and so on.

This is the tactic of liberty as applied to the workaday world; this is the market economy, or the price system, and if government merely protects people in their productive activities, and in their buying and selling — protects them by curbing predation and fraud — the economic activities of man are self-starting, self-operating, and self-regulating. The free market is the only device available to men for allocating scarce resources equitably; its performance is so efficient and so intelligent that it has excited the admiration of those who have studied and understood its workings. Virtually every one of the charges that has ever been directed against the free economy proves, upon examination, to be aimed at a problem caused by some misguided political interference with the free economy.

In the United States, no one likes the term, socialized medicine, but there are many people — including some doctors — who support a thing called Medicare. The professed aim of Medicare is to increase the availability of medical and dental services, and Medicare seeks to do this by political interventions and subsidies. Now medical and dental services are in short supply, relative to the demand for them. This is to say that medical and dental services are economic goods, and — because they are scarce — a way must be found to allocate them. The free market is the only efficient and fair way to allocate scarce goods, and therefore the free market can be relied upon to furnish the greatest quantity of high grade medical and dental service at the lowest possible price, to a citizenry which has a great variety of other needs and desires to satisfy as well. Every political alternative to the market means a wastage of economic goods and resources; it means less for all.

### **An Orderly Universe**

Examine any area of life you wish; events on the surface may not appear to exhibit a pattern, but dig deep and you find order, harmony, and balance. This is a *universe* we live in, not a *multi-universe* or a chaos. The discovery of



orderliness in nature together with better means of cooperating with that order has resulted in the great progress of the natural sciences during recent centuries. The human sciences and the social sciences are somewhat more complex, and therefore we have a little more trouble in these areas. For thousands of years we have known what we *ought* to do in the moral and spiritual dimensions of our lives, but we find it difficult to perform as we should at this level. Man likes to think that he can "get away" with things, and so he ignores or defies the Purpose which manifests itself in and through the universe. The universe tolerates wayward man up to a point, but if man does not learn his own lessons from his waywardness, he is taught the hard way. "Things won't be mismanaged long," said Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Victor Hugo in his great novel,

*Les Misérables*, put the matter more dramatically. You recall his long description of the Battle of Waterloo and the downfall of Napoleon. "Why Napoleon's Waterloo?" Hugo asks. "Was it possible that Napoleon should gain this battle? We answer No. Why? Because of Wellington? Because of Blucher? No; because of God! Bonaparte victor at Waterloo — that was no longer according to the law of the nineteenth century. Another series of events was preparing wherein Napoleon had no further place. . . . Napoleon had been denounced in the infinite and his downfall was resolved. He bothered God. Waterloo is not a battle; it is the universe changing front."

And so I say, Let's not try to save the world! Saving the world is God's job; our job — yours and mine — is to make the world worth saving. ♦

#### IDEAS ON LIBERTY

#### *Hot and Cold*

THE STURDY INDIVIDUALISTS in the country who resent any political interference apply for it every week. The manufacturers, whom I will call the sturdy believers in private enterprise, think Government ought to keep out of it, are with us every week or with the Tariff Board every week or with something or other every week.

There is hardly a section in the community today that does not in one breath protest its undying hostility to Government activity and in the next breath pray for it.

Australian Prime Minister, ROBERT G. MENZIES,  
before the National Press Club in Canberra, September 14, 1964



# LET'S *First* MEND TOMMY'S TROUSERS

W. A. PATON

A STORY that was one of my grandfather's favorites, and which he enjoyed embellishing with local color and varying details, needs retelling. The yarn, in a nutshell, was as follows:

*Little Tommy was out on the street, very dirty and with both the knees and seat of his pants in tatters. A passing neighbor, noting that the youngster's condition was somewhat more disreputable than usual, complained: "For heaven's sake, Tommy, why doesn't your mother mend your trousers?" To which query Tommy replied cheerfully: "Oh, my mother is too busy*

*to do that. She's over at the parsonage sewing for the heathen."*

The lesson to be learned from this miniature tale is quite obvious, but nevertheless seems to have been widely forgotten — along with many other pearls in our accumulated stock of common sense — at this juncture. The point to be made, of course, is the desirability of putting one's own house in order before tackling the chore of redding up either the place next door or a more distant establishment, at home or abroad. This bit of homely wisdom is age-old and is reflected in many familiar adages and admonitions that have come down through the centuries. "Let every man mind his own business" is the blunt and

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