

SEARCH FOR AN IMAGE

Jacques Ellul

The Western world, argues Ellul, has no common values for constructing an efficacious view of the future. We can, however, begin a project which eventually might lead to a new view of the future. To forestall a Third World without a future, we need a total reconversion of the West's economic and technical system. This project is essential to our survival and in order to give us a reason for being. But, we must confront the "will to transgress" and build upon a reasserted individualism.

I am not going to present any image of the future, for I do not think that an intellectual can form out of his dreams or imagination any useful image of it. The views of the future held by Tommaso Campanella, Thomas More, or Charles Fourier do not seem to have played the slightest historical role in the past nor foretold any future reality. If, on the contrary, it is claimed that Jesus at least presented a real view of the future, I would reply that in fact he did no such thing, since his was an eschatological conception, the very opposite of an "image of the future." If anything, it is through his life, and his resurrection, that some concept of the future imposed itself on his disciples, but never through his searching, his problems, or his themes.

In other words, all that the reveries and imagination of a group of intellectuals can represent is a literary product for internal consumption, quite without potential for providing society with either energy or goal. As to the images of the future of Huxley, Orwell, or Kafka, they only produce negative reactions among intellectuals. It is certainly not without importance to learn at least about the kind of future we should avoid. But the problem remains that artists and intellectuals who denounce a negative future are those least likely to modify the structure and operation of the powers that produce it, and those who have such power ignore the work of an Orwell or a Kafka.

What it comes to is this: a view of the future cannot—if it is to be meaningful—result from the effort of a single mind. It cannot be produced by arbitrary or artificial means or arrive from nowhere. A certain number of conditions must be satisfied if one's



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view of the future is to be more than poetry or make-believe. By not taking into account the conditions for forming an effective view of the future, one is left to choose between two points of departure.

The first is that of Utopia; but, unlike many writers, I fail to see a positive value in Utopian views. They do humanity no good. Whenever men have taken Utopian descriptions seriously, the result has been disastrous. From an ideological angle, the crimes of liberal capitalism are partly explained by the seriousness with which Robinson Crusoe is treated, and the fact that Etienne Cabet and Fourier have been taken seriously has certainly hampered the development of socialism. It took Marx to put socialism back on the track. He investigated the socio-economic reality of his time and foresaw its probable evolution, but never did he describe a desirable view of the future. He never stated explicitly what he meant by a "socialist" society.

The construction of a Utopia always seems an attempt to avoid reality. It is true that a society that lacks a living image of the future is condemned to disappear. On the other hand, the efforts of some intellectuals to provide such an image will scarcely be enough to save a society.

In fact, intellectuals, contemplating the failure of their society, realize their political impotence and characteristically prefer to create Utopias. This is much easier than appraising reality and its probabilities, which in themselves never represent futuristic concepts. Prediction, an operation by which the probable evolution of a system is calculated, is unable to produce an image that gives meaning to society. It represents either a concrete presentation of rational choices (which P. Masse has claimed to do for planification) or an unconquerable determinism, in whose presence man revolts. Utopianism is the remedy chosen by intellectuals to cure their impotence, but it is without any use for society as a whole.

It is true, however, that a view of the future held by a single man can involve the whole of society and direct it forward. That is, by using propaganda for purposes of indoctrination, power can be gained and held. Perhaps it was because Plato did not use propaganda (the Socratic method did not prepare him to become a Pericles) that he failed to transform Syracuse into his image of an ideal city. We saw Hitler impose on an immense collectivity an image of the future manufactured solely by himself; he produced and directed the future experienced by the whole world—not exactly what ideologists had foreseen but the result nonetheless of propaganda.

Beliefs in a millennium are generally of this kind. We associate this kind of belief with an image of the future shared by an important group of people. However, it is brought about by propaganda, a fact as much ignored as it is decisive. The idea of a millennium is never a spontaneous group creation; the group is in fact dominated by propaganda. But propaganda for a chiliastic ideology is successful only as it reflects views already present in the conscious mind, and this was true for Hitler also. Hitler, in his visions of the future, gave concrete form to an ensemble of beliefs and opinions, sentiments, desires, and hates held by the Germans of his time. Before Hitler, these feelings and sentiments were essentially amorphous and had little effect. It was by taking existing values, synthesizing them into a compelling form, and equipping them with instruments of power that Hitler's vision of the future began to seem viable. He did the reverse of what intellectuals are tempted to do for their Utopias.

Three Conditions

One must consider, then, actual conditions for forming an image of the future that is to be socially effective. There are a great many such conditions. A true image of the future must depend, first of

all, on the real experience of a people, on their feelings, and on the manner in which they represent these feelings. For the way they represent them is often more important than reality itself.

Second, one must take into account the range of the possible as it is imagined. What counts is not the individual imagination but the collective one. What we have to consider is neither the desirable, as such, nor the simple, scientifically calculated possibility. We then have something situated between these two poles which, if it is not on the point of realization, is still more serious than a fairy tale. It is essential to take into account the kind of possibility imagined by the collectivity. Otherwise our image of the future will never see the light of day.

Finally, one must consider the existence of values held in common by the group. A view of the future rests always on the totality, or scale, of values held collectively and questioned by no one. If a group has no values of that kind, it can have no view of the future. What one might propose when values are not shared will never be anything but the affirmation of one group against the social body, a group which may perhaps impose its goals but can never truly represent the future image of society.

If all three factors are not present, or if the second and third are lacking, no invented concept of the future could possibly be implemented. None would possess the power to put the social body into motion, give it meaning and direction—a *raison de vivre*. For an image of the future to have some real value, it must appear capable of being lived, and not only desired—not only by the individuals who believe in it but by the social body as a whole.

We must energetically reject the irresponsible attitude that says: "We don't know what is really efficacious. Let us dream up any image of the future that appeals to us; let us throw the bottle into the sea; it may reach land somewhere. An idea seemingly devoid of all consequence eventually will have, perhaps only after centuries, immense repercussions; therefore, let us not bother with real consequences but rather hold to our dreams and desires."

This sort of attitude seems completely undesirable, because we cannot expect to see a slow, secret evolution of the futuristic views of intellectuals suddenly explode after centuries to give new shape to reality. If we are responsible intellectuals, we should abstain from launching all sorts of images and ideas. Instead we ought to rigorously seek out the *one* concept that can be implemented effectively, allowing our society to continue to create its future, giving it a reason for being and some force of will. It is not a dilettante's or an uncommitted artist's attitude which brings this about. It is simply that, in a society characterized by its power of action and which strives indefinitely toward rationality without ever reaching it, the projection of the purely imaginary appears to be totally inadequate.

Our primary difficulty then—and one on which I shall not elaborate because it is self-evident—is that in the Western world commonly shared values have disappeared. Ancient traditional values are out of date, and it is impossible to revive values that have been rejected by society. When a society has lived by certain values and then has progressively stopped believing in them, it is absolutely useless to defend them or try to re-create them. There is no point in saying that Justice and Truth are always Justice and Truth, and so forth. To the extent that it is possible to give definition to these words, it serves no purpose to believe in their perennial value.

In fact, when there is no longer consensus on the *meaning* of a value, its content or its richness, it cannot be re-created artificially. The group must then work to create new values, to reach a consensus on a new meaning, to create new symbols. And, if society is not successful, it surely will disintegrate. In other words, it is now a

time for invention, and we must stop acting as if traditional values still existed. But outside the classical problems often enunciated in this context, it seems necessary to bring up three present-day difficulties—perhaps impossibilities.

Difficulties in Inventing New Values

The first difficulty is that in our society—perhaps because of its bigness or variety, its internationalization, or perhaps because of the mass media—there is a disassociation between real problems objectively posed by situations and often formulated by specialists, on one hand, and what public opinion generally considers to be a problem, on the other. The latter often takes the form of politics.

An image of the future should be constructed in the light of real problems, but, ignored by the masses, these are seldom taken into consideration. For example, a real problem that affects the world is the structure of technology as an autonomous system; a fictitious problem, one that excites public opinion, is the Vietnam War. I do not say that there is no drama in the war, but it is not in terms of dramas of this sort that one can conceive the future. One can only present as an image of the future one that has roots in popular concepts. But popular opinion—polarized as it is over current events, with passionate feelings tending to obliterate the truth—is incapable of comprehending a view of the future that attempts to deal dispassionately with fundamental problems.

Never before in history has this kind of situation existed, whether because the community used to be smaller, because it dealt with down-to-earth problems, or because the mass of the population accepted established authority and there was no division between the views of the governing and the governed.

"Utopia is the panacea for the intellectuals' lack of power."

A second difficulty lies in the acceleration of history. In traditional societies an image of the future was formed slowly through an accumulation of experiences, a deep consciousness of reality, habitual presentation of competing ideas (with confirmed attempts at synthesizing them), and a progressive working out of details for the future society. All of this sometimes went on for generations. Men used to move slowly, advancing toward the future step by step, taking their time to approach their ideal, changing it little by little as they went along, adapting it to changing circumstances without ever annihilating it.

But, in our technological society, everything changes quickly. What we are being asked for is a dynamic view of the future that can be presented immediately and widely for exposure to criticism and experiment. And it must be capable of quick implementation. As soon as one points out that it is impossible to solve in a day the problems engendered by technology, that what is involved is, rather, an enterprise of long duration, requiring the progressive modification of social structures, behavior patterns, and the prevailing mentality, then immediately one discerns a lack of interest in the whole proposition. All problems must be solved tomorrow, and social patterns fitting the preconceived project must be constructed artificially. This attitude derives not only from the accelerated pace of modern life but also from the proliferation of means to accomplish things. One knows that everything needed can immediately be brought into being (or should be!); thus the realization of an idea should be within grasp of fulfillment.

And so, one finds serious projects for a future world raised to the heights, only to disappear quickly. For, faced with the test of immediate applicability, an image of the future soon loses its mobilizing power.

It is sufficient to compare the slow evolution of the Christian view of the future, which took four centuries to elaborate, with the revolutionary socialist view, developed in less than half a century, which, according to its partisans, can be made operative in a few years. Nevertheless, socialism too is a concept obeying a slow evolutionary rhythm. Since World War II, we have seen in France at least three concepts of the future emerge. They generated enthusiasm, united the young, filled the newspapers, took on a mystical importance, entered the stage of practical application, and then quickly lost their appeal and disappeared. All of this in a few years! Those who went through one of these "waves of the future" are now profoundly skeptical and disabused, and no new view of the future could move them, give them new hope, or provoke them into action. An experience of this sort is generally sufficient for one lifetime. Those who lived under the image of the future spawned by Hitler were capable of nothing more than a closed, self-centered existence, rejecting any kind of novelty.

Finally, the third difficulty in producing a coherent image of the future is the division between two major possibilities, which are antithetical and irreconcilable.

On one hand, we find an image of the future attainable with the means at our disposal. This one belongs to the domain of prediction, the important elements here being the means and their possibilities. Such would be, for instance, the idea of the Great Society, a society producing well-being, leisure, consumption, and so forth, or, at a higher level, the concept of the scientific society, a society representing a rational equilibrium in growth.

This is the idea of a reasonable and "normal" future, but it is interesting to observe that this is not the view generally found in anticipatory novels and in science fiction, because it arouses little general interest. Nobody reads a novel to find out that we will soon have a six-hour workweek and that leisure will have to be organized. This view is a bit like that of the horse pulling the plow that makes the furrow; it contains nothing very exciting and is effortless. When progress has such an inevitability, interest in the future is destroyed and passivity results. Why should one search for the meaning of life in what is only a path that unrolls automatically?

Nevertheless, full of goodwill, adults do attempt to make real this progress and potential. We did engage in a great adventure, man mastering matter and society becoming a world of abundance, and now, although this goal is almost reached, nobody is interested any longer.

Opposing this approach and in total disagreement with it is the other quest for the future, conducted without considering the means available and the social reality, but with man and his potential for growth in mind. This approach, favoring contemplation, an affirmation of the "I" and its amplification, has been called the "counterculture."

It is evident that we are confronted by two tendencies so radically opposed to each other that it is impossible to formulate clearly a view of the future acceptable to both.

The tragedy in all this is that those who control the means and make the machine run no longer have an acceptable view of the future to propose—not because of a lack of intelligence or imagination but from the very fact that they belong to a technological system which, to function properly, renders all finalities, such as judgments and proposals about the future, evanescent and obsolete. In opposition are those who, while capable of formulating a view of the future clearly desired by a great many, are at the same time ignorant of social organization; but above all they are an adjunct to the technological society and a supplement to the consumer society, without which they could not survive. The legend of the economic autonomy of hippies as artisans is just that—a legend.

Torn between these two orientations, modern man simply refuses to think about the future or to escape it, jumps into some unverifiable beyond—into Utopia and the irrational.

Western Society and the Third World

It is undoubtedly easier to explain why a concept of the future is practically impossible to develop than it is to attempt to propose one. I think it necessary that we resolutely discard everything that refers to yesterday's values or beliefs. We can no longer speak of happiness in regard to the future. Happiness does not have meaning any more, for its content is too vague and its association with consumption too close. The concept of happiness has lost its credibility and its activating powers, and as a consequence we can do away with those things associated with it—leisure, consumption, and so forth.

Those hopes and formulas belonging to the past can no longer activate humanity, develop a society, generate great ardor. The same holds true for the ideologies of equality and socialism. We are speaking of myths, which, acceptable at one time, are today outdated. One should not make the mistake of believing that the great movements in the Third World have anything to do with the post-Marxist scientific socialism. They come closer to an emotional, spontaneous form of socialism that consists less of planning a fundamental reorganization of the world than of beginning an equitable distribution of the world's riches and resources. This is the equivalent in the Third World of the *partageux* of the 1830s. That all this represents perfectly valid and sufficient reasons to mobilize and fight is evident. It is, however, not a view of the future and is useless for the Western world.

What should concern us are the impulses toward generosity, solidarity, and fraternity that the West feels toward the Third World. If we want to avoid having a Third World without a future, engaging in mere revolt, it is necessary to consider a total reconversion of the West's economic and technical system. We are facing, not a view of the future, but a reason for continuing to exist, change, and live. If we feel really responsible for the Third World's achievement of some kind of affluence and also the possibility of future development in the social, political, and human sense (and I want to stress that here I am much closer to Ivan Illich than to anyone else), then we have good reason for continuing to develop our own industrial power in order to put it at the further service of the underdeveloped world.

Let us not take the problem lightly; this is not a matter of handing out surplus goods. What we have to do is to totally reconvert our financial, economic, and even technological system—and without setting up a socialist regime. Our aims can be achieved perfectly well under a semicapitalist type of organization. The difficulty is not in the technical and organizational aspects of reconversion; we have done many more difficult things since 1938. The difficulty lies in the lack of support for a project of this type. Think of the support the French gave to Cartier's campaign against aid to Africa in *Paris-Match*.

Think, too, of the unbearable difficulties that come up in fighting racism. It is incontestable that, as long as we continue to have violent reactions on the basis of color, no healthy relations can exist between the West and the Third World. In fact, the only project that seems capable of giving meaning to technological growth and of inducing the young to interest themselves in such growth comes up against a fundamental obstacle—an obstacle at once psychological and ideological. This is no doubt a barrier that is primarily the outgrowth of an interior block. And here we encounter a tendency that is becoming decisive with modern man, the will to transgress.

From different starting points, we are all now on the same road. Our real desire is to transgress—laws, limits, taboos. We will not put up with limitations. And I include all of us, not just the young. This is a powerful movement supported by every social stratum and by all generations. In the main, its discoveries have been bitter. The transgression of sexual taboos leads to discovery of the essential sterility of eroticism, even as the use of drugs leads to an even greater enslavement. For the real limit that Western man seeks to transgress, and around which he fumbles desperately, is himself. His error consists in believing that he goes beyond his limits when he denies his condition as a creature and hopes to become an angel. His real limit is self-imposed. It is his enclosure, not in the social context, but in an impatience to give himself to another being, to someone who is different, who does not resemble him. There lies the barrier.

Such is today the real problem for Western man. We are actually facing a "new frontier." We have to rediscover the life-style of frontier days, push it back ceaselessly, or transcend it. But there are only two possibilities for transcendence: one can either increase his power and possessions or give meaning to his life. Now modern man suffers from having precisely such power and wealth but is quite without power to give meaning to his life. The only chance our society has of surviving is to adopt the project I have outlined. Perhaps it is old-fashioned to talk about a "conversion of the heart," but it is precisely this we need—nothing less than repentance.

If this reorientation of our economic and technical power in terms of cooperation rather than in terms of aid or charity does indeed imply a transformation of our structures and institutions, it can represent for present-day man the Great Crusade he requires. This is one of the typical errors made by all governments in their confrontation with youth: the latter are told how laws, organizations, and so forth, are going to be changed.

A New View of the Future

An image of the future for modern man must be something more than the description of a society of well-oiled machines whose legal foundation is satisfactory and in which problems are resolved by law. Our image of the future has to be a dynamic one. We cannot be satisfied with the ideal society of Plato in which everything is fixed and unchanging. What matters is a movement forward, the question being: toward what? That toward which we move cannot be a mountain placed before us nor a heavenly Jerusalem all decked out to delight us. That toward which we move must come into existence as we live and advance toward it. This is why the young try to experience what adults often reproach them with: a revolt that does not appear to have any goal and is without any kind of program. What matters is to live and not to attain an objective; the objective creates itself through lived experience. This in turn implies the complete subordination of all organizational means to our project.

When we talk about an image of the future we must think of a unanimous rather than a uniform society, in which the Third World will be able to *develop* (and not by merely committing itself to economic progress) in all its own dimensions, independently of and in cooperation with the West. I do not have in mind the creation of an international fund for food or development nor even new institutions to aid Third World countries. An institutional project can only be supported if the people have accepted it, been convinced by it, been converted to this image of the future—if the people see in this image their *raison d'être*. Here is a way to resolve one of the most difficult problems of the West—that posed by the autonomy of its technique. If however, a Great Crusade with ma-

terial consequences stirs the souls of Western people, then the autonomy of technique will be put in question.

But the Great Crusade cannot be directed toward increased power and well-being; in such an orientation, the autonomy of the technological system can only grow. The technological system cannot develop in any way other than by making itself autonomous; it is a power directed toward power and cannot forbid itself means or sums. The Great Crusade must be resolutely oriented toward a decrease in power among the present holders of power and toward the nonenrichment of the owners of capital. This certainly implies a change of heart, but by this I do not mean some pious vow or spiritual appeal. What we are faced with is a matter of life or death; if the people of the West do not find a project worthy of maintaining their society then the West, not having found some reason for living, will die—and this without a new war or a revolt of the Third World.

This crusade will not come about simply as a result of propaganda. No propaganda can lead to comprehension of the Other. It is necessary to start at the most profound human level; the collective project can only be stirred by a new thrust of the individual. If we do not want a mere propagandist's image of the future, we must have one that results from the individual's will to reassert himself in the etymological sense of the word (*individuum*: the central kernel that cannot be divided). We must think of a human being in this sense in thinking of the future, for without such an individual there will be nothing but the blind growth of the system behind the smokescreen of good intentions and idealistic chatter—proof of the impotence of man hidden by the multiplication of his powerful mechanism.

This is why I appeal to the individual. He is in danger of being destroyed as much by the system as by psychopedagogical means of influencing and manipulating him. Our first measure should be to stop the flood of psychological and psychoanalytical activities, the wave of pseudo-Freudism and Marxo-Freudism, and the tendency to rely on the psychoanalyst and group dynamics. Otherwise the West will miss its only chance, which requires the return of the individual to the struggle, a struggle conducted for him and by him. We must start with the individual, for he is the one most threatened. Our appeal corresponds to the appeal of today's youth and to their project; above all else they want to be individuals, even when they form communities. They want to be different, authenticate themselves! But the young wish to be individuals with an unhappy consciousness, imbued with a feeling of fatality; theirs is a flight from rationality. We must now turn back to the individual in a critical, constructive, and creative way and rediscover the road—the oldest in the world and one least followed—of cooperation with and understanding of others.

Translated from the French by Henry Darcy, and Gloria and Lionel Abel.

