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Responsible versus Irresponsible Dissent

For a long time we have fondly preserved the fiction that the drama of social change is a conflict between dissenters and the top layers of the Establishment. But as the critics fling themselves in Kamikaze-like assaults on sluggish institutions, they eventually come into head-on collision with the people who are most deeply implicated in the sluggishness, namely, the great majority. The stone wall against which many radical reforms shatter is the indifference (or downright hostility) of that majority.

The collision between dissenters and lower middle class opponents is exceedingly dangerous. As long as the dissenters are confronting the top layers of the power structure, they are dealing with people who are reasonably secure, often willing to compromise, able to yield ground without anxiety. But when the dissenters collide with the lower middle class, they confront an insecure opponent, quick to anger and not prepared to yield an inch.

It is at this point that young rebels find great appeal in Herbert Marcuse's ideas. When they think they are attacking the fat cats at the top of the social structure, democratic doctrine seems a serviceable banner to wrap themselves in. But democratic doctrine suddenly becomes a considerable embarrassment when they discover that "the people" they seek to liberate are in fact bitterly opposed to them.

Marcuse deals with that difficulty by saying that democracy and tolerance are themselves barriers to the overthrow of an evil society. He favors a more "directed" society. In doing so, he makes the assumption made by all who fall into authoritarian doctrines—that, in the "directed" society he envisages, people who share his values will be calling the tune. So thought the businessmen who supported Hitler.

The debasement of the critical role makes responsible action for social change increasingly difficult. The irresponsible critic never exposes himself to the tough tests of reality. He doesn't limit himself to feasible options. He doesn't subject his view of the world to the cleansing discipline of historical perspective or contemporary relevance. He defines the problem to suit himself. It's a hard game to lose. If he takes care to stay outside the arena of action and decision, his judgment and integrity will never be tested, never risked, never laid on the line. He can feel a limitless moral superiority to the mere mortals who put their reputation at hazard every day in accountable action.

The consequences of such reckless radicalism are predictable. Out of such self-indulgence come few victories. The model of the ineffectual radical is the man or woman who spends a few brief years exploding in indignation, posturing, attitudinizing, oversimplifying, shooting at the wrong targets, unwilling to address himself to the exacting business of understanding the machinery of society, unwilling to undergo the arduous training necessary to master the processes he hopes to change.

Those who are engaged in the grueling work of accomplishing institutional change are in desperate need of allies. Responsible social critics can be of enormous help in identifying targets for action, in clarifying and focusing issues, in formulating significant goals and mobilizing support for those goals. The responsible critic comes to understand the complex machinery by which change must be accomplished, finds the key points of leverage, identifies feasible alternatives, and measures his work by real results. We have many such critics, and we owe them a great debt.—JOHN W. GARDNER

Adapted from the Godkin Lectures, Harvard University, 27 March 1969. Copyright © 1969 by John W. Gardner.