

# Saturday Review



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## Modern Man Is Obsolete

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Twenty-five years ago this month, the Saturday Review published an editorial on the implications of the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and the advent of nuclear energy. That editorial marked a new philosophical course for the magazine, a course that has persisted this past quarter-century. On the anniversary of Hiroshima, the editors republish herewith the bulk of that editorial as a restatement of SR's editorial aims.*

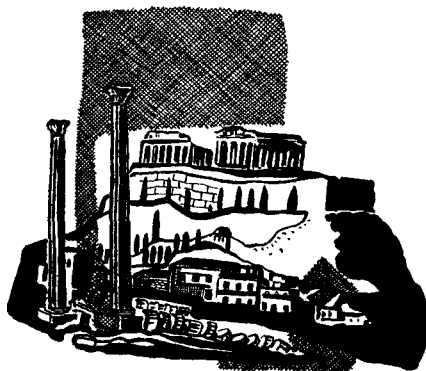
Whatever elation there is in the world today because of final victory in the war is severely tempered by fear. It is a primitive fear, the fear of the unknown, the fear of forces man can neither channel nor comprehend. This fear is not new; in its classical form it is the fear of irrational death. But overnight it has become intensified, magnified. It has burst out of the subconscious and into the conscious, filling the mind with primordial apprehensions. It is thus that man stumbles fitfully into a new age of atomic energy for which he is ill-equipped to accept its potential blessings as he is to counteract or control its present dangers.

Where man can find no answer, he will find fear. While the dust was still settling over Hiroshima, he was asking himself questions and finding no answers. The biggest question of these concerns the nature of man. Is war in the nature of man? If so, how much time has he left before he employs the means he has already devised for the ultimate in self-destruction—extinc-

tion? And now that the science of warfare has reached the point where it threatens the planet itself, is it possible that man is destined to return the earth to its aboriginal incandescent mass blazing at fifty million degrees? If not—that is, if war is not in the nature of man—then how is he to interpret his own experience, which tells him that in all of recorded history there have been only 300 years in the aggregate during which he has been free of war?

Closely following upon these are other questions, flowing out endlessly from his fears and without prospect of definitive answer. Even assuming that he could hold destructive science in check, what changes would the new age bring or demand in his everyday life? What changes would it bring or demand in his culture, his education, his philosophy, his religion, his relationships with other human beings?

In speculating upon these questions, it should not be necessary to prove that



on August 6, 1945, a new age was born. That day marks the violent death of one stage in man's history and the beginning of another. Nor should it be necessary to prove the saturating effect of the new age, permeating every aspect of man's activities, from machines to morals, from physics to philosophy, from politics to poetry; in sum, it is an effect creating a blanket of obsolescence not only over the methods and the products of man but over man himself.

It is a curious phenomenon of nature that only two species practice the art of war—men and ants, both of which, ironically, maintain complex social organizations. This does not mean that only men and ants engage in the murder of their own kind. Many animals of the same species kill each other, but only men and ants have practiced the science of organized destruction, employing their massed numbers in violent combat and relying on strategy and tactics to meet developing situations or to capitalize on the weaknesses in the strategy and tactics of the other side. The longest continuous war ever fought between men lasted thirty years. The longest ant war ever recorded lasted six-and-a-half weeks, or whatever the corresponding units would be in ant reckoning.

It is encouraging to note that while all entomologists are agreed that war is instinctive with ants, not all anthropologists and biologists are agreed that war is instinctive with men. The strict empiricists, of course, find everything in man's history to indicate that war is locked up with his nature. But a broader and more generous, certainly more philosophical, view is held by those scientists who claim that the evidence to date is incomplete and misleading, and that man *does* have within him the power of abolishing war. Prominent among these is Julian Huxley, who draws a sharp distinction between human nature and the *expression* of human nature. Thus, war is not a reflection but an expression of his nature. Moreover, the expression may change, as the factors that lead to war may change. "In man, as in ants, war in any serious sense is bound up with the existence of accumulations of property to fight about. . . . As for human nature, it contains no specific war instinct, as does the nature of harvester ants. There is in man's makeup a general aggressive tendency, but this, like all other human urges, is not a specific and unvarying instinct; it can be molded into the most varied forms."

But even if this gives us a reassuring answer to the question—is war inevitable because of man's nature?—it still leaves unanswered the question concerning the causes leading up to war. The expression of man's nature will

continue to be warlike if the same conditions are continued that have provoked warlike expressions in him in the past. And since man's survival on earth is now absolutely dependent on his ability to avoid a new war, he is faced with the so-far insoluble problem of eliminating those causes.

In the most primitive sense, war in man is an expression of his competitive impulses. Like everything else in nature, he has had to fight for existence; but the battle against other animals, once won, gave way in his evolution to battle against his own kind. Darwin called it the survival of the fittest, and its most overstretched interpretation is to be found in *Mein Kampf*, with its naked glorification of brute force and the complete worship of might makes right. In the political and national sense, it has been the attempt of the "have-nots" to take from the "haves," or the attempt of the "haves" to add further to their lot at the expense of the "have-nots." Not always was property at stake; comparative advantages were measured in terms of power, and in terms of tribal or national superiority. The good luck of one nation became the hard luck of another. The good fortune of the Western powers in obtaining "concessions" in China at the turn of the century was the ill fortune of the Chinese. The power that Germany stripped from Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and France at the beginning of World War II, she added to her own.

What does it matter, then, if war is not in the nature of man so long as man continues through the expression of his nature to be a viciously competitive animal? The effect is the same, and therefore the result must be as conclusive—war being the effect, and complete obliteration of the human species being the result.

If this reasoning is correct, then modern man is obsolete, a self-made anachronism becoming more incongruous by the minute. He has exalted change in everything but himself. He has leaped centuries ahead in inventing a new world to live in, but he knows little or nothing about his own part in that world. He has surrounded and confounded himself with gaps—gaps between revolutionary science and evolutionary anthropology, between cosmic gadgets and human wisdom, between intellect and conscience. The struggle between science and morals that Henry Thomas Buckle foresaw a century ago has been all but won by science. Given time, man might be expected to bridge those gaps normally; but by his own hand, he is destroying even time. Communication, transportation, war no longer wait on time. Decision and execution in the



modern world are becoming virtually synchronous. Thus, whatever bridges man has to build and cross he will have to build and cross immediately.

This involves both biology and will. If he lacks the actual and potential biological equipment to build those bridges, then the birth certificate of the Atomic Age is in reality a *memento mori*. But even if he possesses the necessary biological equipment, he must still make the decision which says that he is to apply himself to the challenge. Capability without decision is inaction and inconsequence.

Man is left, then, with a crisis in decision. The main test before him involves his will to change rather than his ability to change. That he is capable of change is certain. For there is no more mutable or adaptable animal in the world. We have seen him migrate from one extreme clime to another. We have seen him step out of backward societies and join advanced groups. We have seen, within the space of a single generation, tribes of head-hunters spurn their acephalous pastimes and rituals and become purveyors of the Western arts. This is not to imply that the change was necessarily for the better; only that change was possible. Changeability with the head-hunters proceeded from external pressure and fear of punishment, true, and was only secondarily a matter of voluntary decision. But the stimulus was there; and mankind today need look no further for stimulus than its own desire to stay alive. The critical power of change, says Spengler, is directly linked to the survival drive. Once the instinct for survival is stimulated, the basic condition for change can be met.

That is why the quintessence of destruction as potentially represented by modern science must be dramatized and kept in the forefront of public opinion. The full dimensions of the peril must be seen and recognized. Then and only then will man realize that the first order of business is the question of continued existence. Then and only then will he be prepared to make the decisions necessary to assure that survival.

In making these decisions, there are two principal courses that are open to him. Both will keep him alive for an indefinite or at least a reasonably long period. These courses, however, are directly contradictory and represent polar extremes of approach.

The first course is the positive approach. It begins with a careful survey and appraisal of the obsolescences that constitute the afterbirth of the new age. The survey must begin with man himself. "The proper study of Mankind is Man," said Pope. No amount of tinkering with his institutions will be sufficient to insure his survival unless he can make the necessary adjustments in his own relationship to the world and to society.

The first adjustment or mutation needed in the expression of his nature, to use Huxley's words, is his savagely competitive impulses. In the pre-Atomic Age, those impulses were natural and occasionally justifiable, though they often led to war. But the rise of materialistic man had reasons behind it and must be viewed against its natural setting. Lyell, Spencer, Darwin, Lamarck, Malthus, and others have concerned themselves with various aspects of this natural setting, but its dominant feature was an insufficiency of the goods and the needs of life. From biblical history right up through the present, there was never time when starvation and economic suffering were not acute somewhere in the world.

This is only part of the story, of course, for it is dangerous to apply an economic interpretation indiscriminately to all history. Politics, religion, force for force's sake, jealousy, ambition, love of conquest, love of reform—all these and others have figured in the equations of history and war. But the economic factor was seldom if ever absent, even when it was not the prime mover. Populations frequently increased more rapidly than available land, goods, or wealth. Malthus believed that they increased so rapidly at times that war or plague became nature's safety valve. This interpretation has undergone some revision, but it is not the interpretation but the circumstances that raise the problem.

Yet, all this has been—or can be—

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**M**an is but a reed, the most feeble thing in nature, but he is a thinking reed. The entire universe need not arm itself to crush him. A vapor, a drop of water suffices to kill him. . . . All our dignity, then, consists of thought. By it we must elevate ourselves, and not by space and time which we cannot fill. Let us endeavor then to think well: this is the principle of morality. By space the universe encompasses and swallows me up like an atom; by thought I comprehend the world.

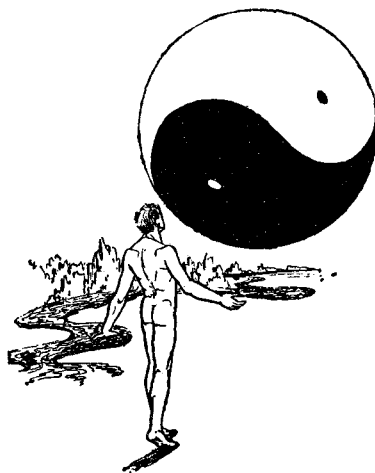
—Blaise Pascal, *The Philosophers* (1670).

changed by the new age. Man now has it within his grasp to emancipate himself economically. If he wills it, he is in a position to refine his competitive impulse; he can take the step from competitive man to cooperative man. He has at last unlocked enough of the earth's secrets to provide for his needs on a world scale. The same atomic and electrical energy that can destroy a city can also usher in an age of economic sufficiency. It need no longer be a question as to which peoples shall prosper and which shall be deprived. There is power enough and resources enough for all.

It is here that man's survey of himself needs the severest scrutiny, for he is his own greatest obstacle to the achievement of those attainable and necessary goals. While he is willing to mobilize all his scientific and intellectual energies for purposes of death, he is unwilling to undertake any comparable mobilization for purposes of life. He has shattered the atom and harnessed its fabulous power to a bomb, but he balks—or allows himself to be balked—when it comes to harnessing that power for human progress. Even as man stands on the threshold of a new age, he is being pulled back by his coattails and told to look the other way, told that he must not allow his imagination to get out of hand—all this at a time when he should know almost instinctively that if he can put the same courage, daring, imagination, ingenuity, and skill that he demonstrated in winning the war into meeting the problems of the new age, he can win the peace as well.

He must believe, too, that mobilization of science and knowledge in peace should not be confined to cosmic forces, but must be extended to his other needs, principally health. What a fantastic irony that organized science knows the secret of the atom but as yet knows not a fig about the common cold! Who can tell what advances in medical knowledge might accrue to the welfare of mankind if as much mobilized effort were put into the study of man as there has been of matter! Cancer, heart disease, nephritis, leukemia, encephalitis, poliomyelitis, arteriosclerosis, aplastic anemia—all these are anomalies in the modern world; there is no reason why mobilized research should not be directed at their causes and cure. Nor is there any reason why even old age should not be regarded as a disease to be attacked by science in the same intensive fashion.

Surveying other adjustments he will have to make if he chooses the positive course, man must consider himself in relation to his individual development. He can have the limitless opportunities that can come with time to think. The trend during the last fifty years toward



shorter work weeks and shorter hours will be not only continued but sharply accelerated. Not more than half of each week will be spent earning a living. But a revolution is needed in his leisure-time activities—which so far have come to be associated almost entirely with the commodities of vended amusement. Once before, the world knew a Golden Age where the development of the individual—his mind and his body—was considered the first law of life. In Greece, it took the form of the revolution of awareness, the emancipation of the intellect from the limitations of corroding ignorance and prejudice.

Once again, if man wills it, he can be in a position to restore that first law of life. But he will have to effect a radical transformation in his approach to and philosophy of education, which must prepare him for the opportunities and responsibilities of not only his chosen work but the business

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**T**o see creatures, wiser indeed than the monkey, and more active than the oyster, claiming to themselves the mastery of heaven; minims, the tenants of an atom, thus arrogating a partnership in the creation of universal Nature!

—Oliver Goldsmith, *The Citizen of the World* (1762).

**T**he first and last of all life's complicated circumstances, the presiding fact, utterly astonishing, even stupefying, is that we are wholly in the dark about everything. Blank ignorance is our portion. In reasoning from the experience of nature and ourselves, we have all the evidence there is. We can add none. There remains, then, the reasoning itself, which is philosophy.

—W. Macneile Dixon, *The Human Situation* (1937).

of living itself. The primary aim should be the development of a critical intelligence. The futile war now going on between specialization and general study must be stopped. There need no longer be any conflict between the two. The individual will need both—specialization for the requirements of research, general knowledge for the requirements of living.

We have saved for last the most crucial aspect of this general survey relating to the first course: the transformation or adjustment from national man to world man. Already he has become a world warrior; it is but one additional step—though a long one—for him to develop a world conscience. This is not vaporous idealism, but sheer driving necessity. It bears directly on the prospects of his own survival. He will have to recognize the flat truth that the greatest obsolescence of all in the Atomic Age is national sovereignty. Even back in the old-fashioned rocket age before August 6, 1945, strict national sovereignty was an anomalous and preposterous holdover from the tribal instinct in nations. If it was anomalous then, it is the quintessence of anomaly now. The world is a geographic entity. This is not only the basic requisite for world government but the basic reason behind the need. A common ground of destiny is not too large a site for the founding of any community.

Reject all other arguments for *real* world government—reject the economic, the ideological, the sociological, the humanitarian arguments, valid though they may be. Consider only the towering problem of policing the atom—the problem of keeping the smallest particle of matter from destroying all matter. We are building on soap bubbles if we expect this problem to be automatically solved by having America, Britain, and Canada keep the secret to themselves. That is not only highly improbable, but would in itself stimulate the other nations to undertake whatever additional research might be necessary over their present experimentation to yield the desired results. In all history, there is not a single instance of a new weapon being kept exclusively by any power or powers; sooner or later either the basic principles become generally known or parallel devices are invented. Before long, the atomic bomb will follow the jet plane, the rocket bomb, radar, and the flame thrower into general circulation. We must not forget that we were not the only horse in the atomic derby; we just happened to finish first. The others will be along in due time.

Nor can we rely on destructive atomic energy to take care of itself. Already there is the tempting but dan-

(Continued on page 53)



# Letters to the Editor

## TV, FCC, et al.

ALL VERY WELL for Nicholas Johnson in "What Do We Do About Television?" [SR, July 11] to chide critics of TV for not pushing hard enough against the corporate barons we abhor; but it is curious that he neglects to criticize the FCC's role (for which, I realize, he carries but a minority responsibility).

In the same issue, SR's TV-Radio columnist, Robert Lewis Shayon, reports on a grassroots attempt to challenge right-wing control of radio, and on the FCC's dilatory tactics in response. Such tactics, or nontactics, are far from unusual; they are, indeed, the FCC's rule, and reflect the fact that the commission is responsible to the barons, not the public. Reports like Mr. Shayon's help to clarify why critics tend to be driven in one of two directions: toward more forceful ("extreme") demonstrations of opposition, or toward a cavalier apathy.

TODD GITLIN,  
Carmel, Calif.

NICHOLAS JOHNSON may have done better by following his own advice: petition ABC, CBS, NBC, et al., for an hour of prime time in which to deliver his message.

CHRISTOPHER W. BURDICK,  
Fair Lawn, N.J.

## Clarification

THIS LETTER is to draw attention to two errors in David Dempsey's article "Libraries and the Inner City" [SR, Apr. 18].

Mr. Dempsey stated that "Last year, the city of Roswell, New Mexico, fired librarian Gordon McShean for. . . ." This is entirely inaccurate. On September 25, 1967, I submitted my resignation to the Board of Trustees of the Roswell Public Library. This was refused, and at that meeting the Library Board also passed unanimously a resolution criticizing pressure from special interest groups and hasty, erroneous, and ill-considered action of the City Council opposing the library program. However, after receiving physically threatening phone calls, my wife and I felt that it would be personally dangerous for us to remain in the community, and for that reason I submitted a second resignation, with the explanation to the board that we appreciated their desire for us to stay but we felt forced to leave the community even if the resignation were not accepted. On that basis, the resignation was accepted.

Mr. Dempsey continues the previous statement by stating that my leaving was for "bad judgment." At no time was the phrase "bad judgment" suggested to me, and the reaction of the board was generally that the series of poetry readings and their handling was entirely appropriate, and the particular program in question, as well as its title, had been discussed with the Library Board president in advance of its announcement. Furthermore, numerous expressions of professional sup-

port were received from local, state, and national library quarters, including a resolution of the Executive Board of the New Mexico Library Association stating that "Imaginative library programs of all sorts are important to the intellectual well-being of any community." In general, the professional opinion was entirely supporting of the program in the manner in which it was handled.

For a periodical as significant in library circles as SR I feel it is especially important to report accurately those facts which reflect upon the careers of library professionals. The response to my professional activities in Roswell was excellent, and my support by the Library Board was most encouraging. The only reason for my leaving was the threat of personal physical attack by a few emotionally distraught individuals.

GORDON MCSHEAN,  
Dundee, Ill.

## Score Half a Point

WILBUR M. SMITH, in his comments [LETTERS TO THE EDITOR, July 4] on my remarks about the Reading Room of the British Museum library, has made a point. Half

a point, anyway. One doesn't really have to begin queuing at 9 in the morning in order to get a seat in the Reading Room. It just happens to be *desirable*, if you want to be sure (although August is an almost impossible month, when the library is so heavily patronized by on-vacation students). As for being ejected for chewing gum, of course I was having a little fun. I've never seen anybody put out for that revolting practice; on the other hand, I've never *seen* anybody chewing gum in the Reading Room. The library's printed rules specifically forbid it. Also, visitors come in with clean hands. They seem to know *all* the rules, which, among many other strictures, even forbid a visitor to lay a piece of paper on the open pages of a book.

Finally, the matter of talking. Mr. Smith states he has seen husbands and wives frequently consulting each other. I don't have Mr. Smith's ability for knowing which Reading Room visitors are married to one another. My own experience is that there simply is no talking whatsoever. Next time Mr. Smith comes to London, I'll be happy to go to the library with him. Then he can talk to me. At first he will be warned. If he persists, he will be thrown out; and I will be there to catch him.

HERBERT R. MAYES,  
London, England.

