"EXPANDING IDEAS IN A SHRINKING WORLD"

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EXPANDING IDEAS IN A SHRINKING WORLD

The topic you have chosen for discussion is flawless: it opens the way for each speaker to say whatever he or she has on his mind.

I accept, without quibble, that the world is shrinking when you can go around it in 90 minutes--as has now been done many times by both Russians and Americans--the shrinkage, not only in my lifetime but even in yours, is sensational. I rode the elevated in New York when the train was drawn by a steam engine. I rode horse cars in New York. I can remember the first flight of the Wright Brothers, and watched the first man to fly the British Channel, Bleriot, manœuvre his fragile plane around a fixed course in Boston. One of the first men to fly around the world was in college with me. Yet, only last Sunday I flew from London to New York in 7 hours. Were I to doubt that the world has shrunk, is shrinking, and will continue to shrink, I should deny my birthright and my experience.

When we turn to the other half of your topic we enter an area of dispute. A good many ideas that are often called expanding are really old ideas--inflated with verbal hot air until their walls are tissue thin, ready to burst at the prick of a logical pin.

In all fairness, one field of thought--science--has expanded so rapidly as to amount to an explosion. In the last half of the 19th Century, and the first half of the 20th there has been a vast expansion of ideas, symbolized by the revolutionary formulae of Einstein. There were authentic intellectual advances that radically altered our perspective on the world and its contents, the universe and its dimensions, the atom and its structu
Even in science we have to be careful to recognize the distinction between new ideas—genuine expansions of our intellectual horizon—and clever applications of those basic innovations. Many of the things that are most exciting and occasion the most public applause are technological. They are applications of the relatively few, though infinitely vital, new ideas to practical instruments, or gadgets! These are not expanding ideas, but an ingenious employment of them—a quite different matter. What excites us are airplanes, rockets, computers, telephones, radio, television, radar, sonar, laser beams, and a thousand more. The technological use of the great ideas is what is shrinking the globe, and enlarging our powers. Behind these obvious, visible marvels lie those expansive ideas of which we have heard, but which most of us cannot comprehend.

Some, perhaps most, of the genuinely new ideas are capable not alone of use, but of abuse. Sigmund Freud was an authentic genius whose name evokes a whole new world of psychological ideas. Of their profound importance there can be no question. But they were singularly open to abuse. Barbara Tuchman, in the January Atlantic quotes a confession of Freud's of great candor: "I am not really a man of science...I am by temperament a conquista an adventurer if you want to translate the word—with the curiosity, the boldness, and the tenacity that belong to that type of being." His insights did, indubitably, expand ideas. But the insistence that his intuitive perceptions were scientific truth has led to wild extrapolations that are invalid. So we have a generation which acts as though it was the first to discover sex and, more particularly, its abnormal manifestations. Historically that is arrant nonsense—as anyone who ever read of Sappho or in the Bible well knows.

Medicine, and more especially surgery, reveal fresh miracles almost
daily. But like other marvels, the amazing feats of surgery are the refined application and manipulation of ideas already available. Great discoveries are being made in bio-physics, and bio-chemistry, in genetics, and a vast range of other fields of research. They are vital to your future, but, again, for the most part they are a search for facts, though the ideas which stimulated the research along the frontiers of knowledge were truly expansive.

If you start searching for expanding ideas in the social studies, you had best practice on some such simple exercise as looking for the proverbial needle in the classic haystack. Yet half (or more) of the world's population live under the illusion that they are guided by the ideas of Karl Marx. At the Salzburg Seminar in Austria, from which I have just returned, there were a number of the Fellows from Eastern Europe who insisted that they were so guided. But Marx proclaimed his dogmas before the shrinkage of the world was so rapid. His ideas were based partly upon data now so obsolete as to be virtually irrelevant, partly upon errors in observation, partly upon logic marked by serious defects. Efforts have been made to "Interpret" and update him by Lennist writings, and the now famous "Thoughts of Mao, as well as by less famous expositors. Not all, by any means, but much that pretends to novelty is merely new phraseology--such as "Dialectica materialism," if you have any idea what that means. The Marxian dogma speak of "scientific history"--a contradiction in terms; it argues that there is such a thing as "historical inevitability," another contradiction in terms. History is the past, and what's past is prologue. What is to come has never been foreseen with any precision, and seldom with any significant insight save in highly specific cases. History is not like physics or chemistry where a reaction follows a well defined path. History is made by people,
and people are unpredictable. One perceptive author has just written: "In the tempest in China, the unexpected keeps happening."

The practical programs of the Marxists do not obey the "scientific" projections of their leaders. In 1959 Mao announced the "Great Leap Forward. Pig iron was to be produced in great quantities in back-yard furnaces. The program was proclaimed with complete assurance, and pictures were shown of the process in action. Too many in the West believed it all. In the event the program not only failed; it proved to be a great leap backward. It shook the faith of the participants. The ideology which seemed so tough, so infallible; proved to be brittle and mistaken.

The amazing Red Guards and other phenomena reveal the ruling party in China to be riven by faction. For the present, at least, Mao's iron control is no longer managing the country. He seems to regain mastery by the only method available to a Communist boss--a purge, a polite name for a blooc bath.

To cap the climax Mao has now quarreled with the U.S.S.R., insulted the families of Russian diplomats. His only remaining ally is Albania, which adds nothing but weakness, and a loud mouth. He has lost ground even in Cuba. In effect China has isolated itself from its "natural" allies.

If you are looking for expanding ideas in a shrinking world, it is vain to look to Karl Marx.

Where then? Certainly not to what are mistakenly called the Social Sciences. They are boiling with fancy terms such as an "empathetic approach to cross cultural relations" and many another evidence of semantic gilding applied thinly over old ideas. Facts, data, statistics are gathered and piled mountain high. Computers assimilate and manipulate them with incredible speed. But if you ask the computer a fatuous question, you get
a meaningless answer. The Pentagon has an appropriate aphorism: "Garbage in, Garbage out." In short everything depends upon wise and perceptive programming. That requires skill, some ideas (though seldom expansive ones.) If the social studies would abandon the false worship of science, and pursue their own disciplines by their own means, the hope for some genuinely expensive ideas would rapidly improve.

If you look to philosophy for expanding ideas, the search is almost sure to be disappointing. Philosophy, also, has been bemused by the glamour of science, and has insisted that it is scientific. It is a false ideal—an attempt to "mathematicalize" thought. They have resorted to symbolic logic—a manifestation of great precision and assured accuracy without deep meaning for life.

Esthetics, historically one of the most rewarding branches of philosophy, is, in the classic phrase drawn from Sean O'Casey's Juno and The Paycock, in "A State of Chassis." The chads in this field finds expression in all kinds of lunging about—poetry without rhyme or rhythm, painting utterly without form and void of meaning, sculpture made of junk and showing it all too plainly, music where dissonance has overcome harmony and where noise has replaced more sensitive appeals to the ear. To all these generalizations there are brilliant exceptions and a number of fresh and suggestive ideas. But I am speaking of the dominant esthetic disorder.

In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance there were central themes of deep human significance. There was no fear of beauty; indeed it was exalted. I am not decrying experimentation, or novelty. I am simply pointing out that all true experiment has a philosophic basis—a desired end. We would rightly regard as mad a chemist who took bottles of reagents helter skelter off the shelves, and tossed them into a retort to see what
would happen. No more can an artist in any field throw things together mindlessly and without discipline.

Yet that is precisely what is found too frequently in the world of esthetics. In revolt against the academic, the constrictive bonds of discipline, there are clear manifestations of rebellion for rebellion's sake—a directionless groping, often incompetent technically, intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. There is a renunciation of the harsh necessity for self-discipline, without which no enduring greatness can be achieved. Clearly the esthetic world is passing through an era of confusion and disorder. The artist seems to be confessing to a meaninglessness that he finds in an ill disciplined life.

There is a new foundation (not sponsored by the CIA) which promises to seek the "creative hero"... "identifying his work and play" as "central to the sounds and silences of our meaning." I suppose I should have been flattered at the invitation to join the hunt for creative heroes.

I declined for I have not met any creative heroes in the world of politics, domestic or international. All yesterdays heroes are looking for new feet: their old ones proved to be made of clay—Sukarno, Castro, Nkrumah, Toure, Stalin, Kruschev, Mao. There are some survivors—Salazar, Franco, Haile Selassi. But surely they do not represent expanding ideas; they more nearly fit the category of museum pieces. The only surviving hero with a shred of charisma is De Gaulle. He is the symbol not of expanding ideas, such as the union of Europe as an economic, political, and military balance for the United States. Instead he calls for shrinking ideas—narrow French nationalism, seeking to recall La Gloire of a day long gone, and which was more glamorous in retrospective myth than in historical fact.
As for economics, there is expansion indeed. But it is expansion in size, acceleration in speed, refinements in practices, energy in growth. Lord Keynes seems to have been the last economist with expanding ideas. And his major book was written before any of you were born—so is definitely not modern!

In politics and economics there is plenty of action, but of ideas none truly original, none that possess the elasticity the theme of your symposium demands. I do not go as far as Harold MacMillan, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. He said that save in science and technology there is nothing of particular value "which is being thought or said today which is not contained either in classical or Biblical literature two thousand years or more ago." I repeat, I think he overstates the case, yet I am forced to admit that his gloomy comment contains more of substance than I wish it did.

It would be improper to end on so negative a view. Therefore, I shall resort to an old device. Erasmus, the great scholar who spanned the 15th and 16th centuries wrote a book: "In Praise of Folly." Let me say a word in praise of ignorance. This may sound like heresy in a seat of learning. Nevertheless, there is a high degree of utility in error.

Let me prove it. Over 100 years ago Froude developed a theory of ship construction. He posited a rigid body (i.e. a ship) in a "regular trochoïdal pattern of waves." Probably you have never met a trochoïd; it is something like a wheel "admitting of rotation on a longitudinal axis". Now you know. But as a description of waves through which his rigid ship must pass, it is so utterly inadequate as to be wrong. Perhaps you think I am brash to make so bold a statement. Therefore, I appeal to the authority of Nicholai Minorsky. He said: The theory is confronted by a
"problem of a non-linear differential equation with complicated conditions of stability in the vicinity of its singularities, where an insignificant change in one parameter is capable of producing widely different results."

There is more proof that Froude was wrong. If you want that proof you will have to ask Minorsky.

Even I know Froude was wrong. A ship is not a rigid body. We crossed the North Atlantic during a winter storm on the Queen Elizabeth and I watched the steel plates at an expansion joint move as much as an inch or more—at least so it seemed. If the ship had been rigid, it would have broken up, for the sea was far from regular and the waves definitely not trochoidal. What with wind, tide, surface waves, subsurface waves, the thrust of the propellers, the pull of gravity, the viscosity of the water, there were an almost infinite number of variables of which Froude took no account.

Why do I inflict all his complicated errors upon you? It is to point out that if men had waited to perfect the theory and eliminate all error, they would never have built a ship. They did build many thousands of ships, using his theory, despite its shortcomings as a basis.

Your lives will be spent in a shrinking world. But do not try to hold your breath until there are new expanding ideas. It is fashionable just now to insist upon instant answers to questions that have never yet been perfectly phrased. The foundation which I had the dubious honor of being invited to join asked three such questions for my consideration. "How is it that I happen to be at all?" Second, "Why should I happen to be now?" The prospectus went on: There is the amazing fact that we are here, and there is the difficulty that obtains when we try to determine who and what we are. We discover that we cannot place the intellectual finger upon any central ego whatever."
As I said, those are fashionable questions right now. Answers have been offered by the existentialists. Some have sought answers in Zen Buddhism. Others turn to L.S.D. and other hallucogens or to narcotics. Some have tried the psychoanalyst's couch. Some have resorted to art that is inchoate, to literature overloaded with symbolic puzzles, to music that evokes confusion. All these are efforts to get final answers—or to evade the questions. Efforts at simple answers are not expanding ideas, but mere groping—the best somewhat challenging, the worst nonsense or raw charlatanism.

You can find some pre-existentialist explanations 2000 years before Sartre in "The Wisdom of Solomon." "By mere chance were we born, and hereafter we shall be as though we had never been; because the breath of our nostrils is smoke, and while our heart beateth reason is a spark, which, being extinguished, the body shall be turned into ashes, and the spirit shall be dispersed as thin air." The conclusion is equally old, summed up in a simple phrase—simple in structure and mindlessly simple: "Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die."

The sum of my counsel is different. Do what shipbuilders have done with Froude's theory. Use it; and do not wait for a more perfect theory of life. Do not try amateurishly to improve upon the basic theory. To put it bluntly, you are not equipped for that task. Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas and a host of successors have sought the answers. What makes you pretend you can outthink them?

As men have built ships without a perfect theory, so millions upon millions have lived and labored and made the world better without knowing all the answers. Above all do not look for simple answers. Some of those who were shrinking the world so industriously and so effectively thought
they had a great idea which would meet the demands of the other half of your topic: if people were brought into closer contact they would get to know and appreciate each other. Thus prejudice, bias, bigotry and all the black arts of hatred would give way to understanding, friendship, compassion and all the blessed fruits of love.

"People to people" would supply the catalyst to produce all these blessings. Did it happen? No, and our own domestic experience should have warned them of failure. The negro "who knew his place" in the South (that is to say a life without hope) came North. Then the very ones who had denounced the South for its treatment of the negro began to fear that the newcomers would impair property values. Downgrade the schools, increase the crime rate--and bring other troubles. As for the disillusioned negroes who hoped to find a better life, they fulfilled the ancient (Biblical) saying "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick."

The British were long censorious of American treatment of the negro. Then the shrinking world brought dark skinned British citizens in swarms to the tight little isle. There was "people to people" contact. All of a sudden the white backlash erupted in violence. Restrictions were put upon the inflow of dark people, and Englishmen fled to all white Australia and New Zealand--not to speak of Rhodesia, half of whose whites have gone there since World War II.

Instances of failure of contact to result in understanding are endless. The United States has poured out untold billions in what we grand call "foreign aid." If we had any knowledge of history we would have recalled a very ancient saying: "We fear the Greeks even when they come bearing gifts." But history was a blank page to us so we were shocked with the modern version of the same sentiment: "Yankee, Go Home." De Gaulle, whose
country was saved by American arms and money led the chorus.

The shrinking world brought us to Korea, Laos, Vietnam--none of them precisely the promised land. The contact was more like opening Pandora Box than a return to Eden, where, before the serpent got in his dirty work, all was peace.

Therefore, look neither to the earth shrinkers nor the head shrinkers for a program for your lives. What then? Have I painted myself into a corner? By no means. Two keys have been mentioned.

The first was supplied by the fallible Froude. Despite his ignorance, which Minorsky and I showed to be monumental, ships today are vastly bigger, much faster, far safer and more economical than they ever were before. The first key, then, is this: Experience based upon the best we know (however imperfect) makes our achievements better and better. Water, as you all know, is H₂O, but for thousands of years men used water and enjoyed it before it was broken down into two cases in a laboratory. In fact if you possessed two tanks, one with hydrogen and the other with oxygen, you would not know the process or the proportions to produce water.

Even my friends in the new Foundation do not know how or why they are here--and more particularly--now. They are a little like Tab--the now drink, or Rambler--the now car. They simply state the (to them) "amazing fact that we are here "NOW." They could have discovered that much by looking in a mirror, or, better, pinching themselves, **HARD**

Your reasonable service is to make life in the NOW world better than it was before. And, despite all our troubles, it is **now** better than ever before.

Let me stress also the second key--like the writer of detective stories I showed it to you earlier, but without calling your attention to
It lay hidden in the quotation of Harold MacMillan that, save for science and technology there has been no significant expansion of thought over that which is "contained either in classical or Biblical literature."

He was saying about political thought what Minorsky was saying about Froude: it is imperfect, but if we use it with energy and intelligence we can make headway in mastering world problems as we have in building ships. Progress has been astounding. In our present mood of self-criticism (borrowed from Communism!) we discount our achievements. Between arrogance and abasement there is a vast range of feeling. We should avoid both extremes, and break out of the guilt complex that has recently bedeviled us.

Anyone who is smug about the status of the negro is a fool. But the slave trade is gone; slavery is abolished. A larger percentage of the negroes in Georgia get some kind of college education than is enjoyed by the free white, brown, or yellow people in most of the countries of the world. That, I repeat, should not make us smug, but it shows we can do even better—if we try.

The theory behind what progress we have made is contained in one of the most expansive ideas in all history. The Declaration of Independence said, "All Men Are Created Equal." It was so radical, it remains so radical that every kind of effort has been exerted to ridicule it.

Robert Frost who once said he tried to "make music out of the sound of sense" summed up the issue with a poet's insight:

"That's a hard mystery of Jefferson's
What did he mean? Of course the easy way
Is to decide it simply isn't true.
It may not be. I heard a fellow say so.
But never mind, the Welshman got it planted
Where it will trouble us a thousand years.
Each age will have to reconsider it."
That last line sets your task. Every truly expanding idea demands reconsideration, reinterpretation by each generation.

The man who wrote those words "All men are created equal," and the men who took their lives in their hands by signing them, were not the God-like giants in the earth that sentimentality has so often made them appear. They were human, even as we--with all the faults as well as the virtues to which humanity is heir. They had not the wealth, the education, the leisure,--or the health--of your generation. Nor did they possess many of the powerful tools now ready to hand.

That last line from Frost epitomizes your task: Each age will have to reconsider the assertion that all men are created equal. When originally uttered they partook more of the nature of prophecy than of proven fact.

What has thus far been achieved toward the realization of that promise, if read in a history book, would be acclaimed as marvelous.

I do not suggest that your reconsideration should be in the same terms as those employed by my generation. Some things we did well, but there was also too much folly. Nor do I advise you to follow the pattern of your parents' generation. They did better than mine, but, let us be candid, there have been flaws in their labors.

In the inescapable reconsideration of this explosive idea set your own style. Even so you may take as a guideline one of the most moving and the most majestic of all political utterances since the declaration itself--Lincoln's Second Inaugural. These were his words: "With firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in."

That is your reasonable service.