Society and the Status Quo: The Individual and the Innovative Society

Clark Kerr

In 1961 John W. Gardner, president of the Carnegie Foundation, wrote a perceptive book in which he explored the problem of maintaining standards of excellence in an egalitarian society. Now he has written an equally perceptive sequel in which he points out that excellence, though essential, is not enough:

> A society that has reached heights of excellence may already be caught in the rigidities that will bring it down. An institution may hold itself to the highest standards and yet already be entombed in the complacency that will eventually spell its decline.

Gardner's new book, **Self-Renewal: The Individual and the Innovative Society** (Harper and Row, New York, 1964. 159 pp. $3.50), is a ringing summons—it might almost be called a sermon—for the renewal of the individual, his organizations, his society, his values, and his moral order:

> Unless we attend to the requirements of renewal, aging institutions and organizations will eventually bring our civilization to moldering ruin. Unless we cope with the ways in which modern society oppresses the individual, we shall lose the creative spark that renews both societies and men. Unless we foster versatile, innovative and self-renewing men and women, all the ingenious social arrangements in the world will not help us.

Having set his theme, Gardner proceeds in a brisk, straightforward, and deceptively simple style to discuss the specific requirements for renewal at various levels in society and the obstacles to renewal. In an age marked by widespread uncertainty, he speaks with refreshing personal conviction—"must" is a word that appears on every page. And he speaks in terms heard less frequently today in the national debate—love, courage, self-development, commitment, meaning, and, of course, the title-word, self-renewal.

John Gardner addresses himself directly to those who feel uncomfortable with such expressions of moral earnestness:

> Many moderns would rather walk barefoot over hot coals than utter an outright expression of moral concern. They have to say it obliquely, mix it with skepticism or humor, or smother it with pessimism. But embarrassment about the expression of moral seriousness is a disease of people far gone in affectation and oversophistication. Unaffected people will regard it as normal to consult their deepest values and to exhibit allegiance to those values.

He makes no claim that moral seriousness will solve our problems. But he points out that it will help us face rather than avoid our problems, and devote our energies to real rather than imagined problems. And those, he observes, dryly, are "not trivial advantages."

With moral earnestness, but certainly with no lack of grace and humor, Gardner tackles some of today's real problems. Since "today the skeptic is the status quo," this is a fundamental attack on the status quo.

The vitality of societies, he says, is essentially the vitality of their individuals and institutions. When organizations and societies are young, they are flexible, adaptable, willing to try anything, uninhibited by fixed habits and attitudes.

Maturity brings order, competence, and strength; but it can also bring rigidity, timidity, and eventual senility. Gardner points out that renewal can disrupt this "rise and fall" trajectory of societies.

> A society whose maturing consists simply of acquiring more firmly established ways of doing things is headed for the graveyard—even if it learns to do these things with greater and greater skill. *In the ever-renewing society what matures is a system or framework within which continuous innovation, renewal and rebirth can occur.*

Such innovation will occur, however, only if the society fosters creative, self-renewing individuals. Gardner discusses the education of such individuals:

> . . . much education today is monumentally ineffective. All too often we are giving our young people cut flowers when we should be teaching them to grow their own plants. We are stuffing their heads with the products of earlier innovation rather than teaching them to innovate. We think of the mind as a storehouse to be filled when we should be thinking of it as an instrument to be used.

What we should be doing, he says, is to develop skills, attitudes, and the kinds of knowledge and understanding that will fashion "a system that provides for its own continuous renewal." Yet historically the educational system has been better at dealing with continuity than with change.

Renewal calls for versatility, and the question of education for versatility leads to the inevitable controversy about whether to train specialists or generalists. Gardner's reply is that education should first lay a broad base for a lifetime of learning and growth:

> The individual who begins with such a broad base will always have some capacity to function as a generalist, no matter how deeply he chooses to specialize. . . . Individuals so educated will keep the society itself flexible, adaptive and innovative.

In any society there will be defenses against new ideas, and Gardner uses Blake's phrase, "mind-forged manacles," to describe some of them—complacency, fixed routines, the body of custom and "reputable" standards, overemphasis on methods and procedures, and fastidious taste that may reject the new and dynamic because it is seldom tidy or restrained. Innovations often conflict with vested interests, not only material possessions and obligations but reputations and status as well:

> Many a gifted scholar has allowed his creative talent to be smothered by a growing commitment to his own previously stated doctrines. Many an established specialist fears the loss of his reputation if he ventures beyond the territory where he has proved his mastery. Indeed this fear is the greatest obstacle to intellectual breadth in the scholarly world.

The reviewer, a noted labor economist, is president of the University of California. In 1945, at Berkeley, he founded the Institute of Industrial Relations and served as its director until 1952 when he became chancellor of the Berkeley campus of the University of California.

But true creativity can seldom be assured of immediate acceptance or popularity. Innovators thus need the protection of a strong tradition of freedom of thought and inquiry. Gardner adds wryly:

> Of course, a tradition of freedom is effective only in protecting the nonconformist or innovator from his enemies. There is no way to protect him from his friends. And, unfortunately, the first restraining force for one who steps off the paths of custom and majority opinion is not the lethal gunfire of opponents but the clutching hands of intimates and colleagues.

Perhaps as a result of his position as the president of a major foundation and as a director for several large corporations, Gardner is especially discerning about the problems caused by large-scale organizations in modern life. The later chapters of his book deal trenchantly with the relations among individuals, organizations, and society at large. Along the way he scores tellingly against a number of prevalent attitudes toward the complexities of modern society.

To those who hark back nostalgically to a less complex existence, he says:

> We cannot return to a simpler world. Much of contemporary social criticism is made irrelevant by its refusal to face that fact.

To those who seek escape in an egocentric pursuit of happiness:

> It is not unduly harsh to say that the contemporary idea of happiness cannot possibly be taken seriously by anyone whose intellectual or moral development has progressed beyond that of a three-week-old puppy.

He does not entirely deplore those who "opt out" and become what he terms nonconforming curmudgeons:

> We may see a time when we shall be grateful for individuals who are willing to shake their fists at an overorganized world.

But he has little or no patience with the fashionable pessimism of the day:

> Our generation is not the first to discover the chance and tragedy of this world, but if some of [our] writers had their way it might be the first generation to drown in self-pity at the thought.

And he points out that organization itself is not the villain that many intellectuals—liberal and conservative—think it to be:

> Our legal and constitutional system is, after all, an aspect of social organization designed to protect the individual . . . some moderns are so enamored of the idea of individuality that they would not think of speaking out on behalf of society. They imagine that the only effect a society can have on the individual is a destructive one. But it is by means of the free society that men keep themselves free.

We must accept and use our organizations, Gardner says, devising better ways of making them serve the individual; and he quite accurately notes that substantial personal freedom is possible within a society of mass organizations. He places particular importance on the maintenance of a pluralistic society—one with many organizations and many centers of power. In a society with broad choices among organizations and with many points of initiative and decision, both the individual and his innovations stand a better chance of survival.

A pluralistic society requires adequate forces of cohesion and a general consensus about the society's values. Gardner asserts:

> Our society has always had a measure of consensus with respect to such values and, whatever the critics may say, we have it still. . . . one finds the ideals of freedom, equality of opportunity, the conception of the worth and dignity of the individual, the idea of justice, the dream of brotherhood. The fact that we are not always faithful to these shared values does not indicate confusion nor a failure of the consensus. . . . This society is suffering not from confusion but from infidelity.

For good or ill, Gardner concludes, each generation must nurture the society's values, bringing new vitality to the moral order or allowing it to decay:

> Men and women who understand this truth and accept its implications will be well fitted to renew the moral order—and to renew their society as well.

Gardner's is not a "how-to-do-it" book for the conduct of modern society. It is something rarer these days, and more basic: a "why-to-do-it" book. Its impact on many readers is bound to be challenging and stimulating and even—to follow Gardner's lead and use an unsophisticated word of some moral earnestness—inspirational.

I should like to add some observations of my own:

1) Self-renewal is a problem in all societies. Toynbee considered it an insuperable problem. For him the cycle was from growth to decay. Gardner adds self-renewal as a possible alternative to the inevitable Toynbee cycle. But it seems to me that enhanced self-renewal is a little less of a fundamental problem for contemporary American society. There are even those who might argue that renewal is so swift a process that renewal itself is the problem and more chances for decay the solution. My own view is that renewal is of ultimate importance but that it is at least moderately well handled by American society; but this is not to say that the process could not be improved as Gardner suggests.

2) Gardner emphasizes the contribution of the individual and of moral values as well as that of the social system itself to the process of renewal. I would place rather more emphasis on the role of the environment and the proper structuring of it to permit and encourage and even force constructive change. I agree that the best social structure is a pluralistic system but feel that this system needs further definition than Gardner gives to it in this book.

3) A number of his observations on specific aspects of society are particularly striking—for example, his contrast of the antithetical approaches of the creative person and the revolutionary. And certain of his appeals are quite moving; particularly his concern for the situation in which we place our youth and the need to provide for them a better opportunity to understand the totality of the social process, to participate effectively in the process at an earlier age, and to undertake change in response to youth's own developing moral values.

4) The United States is most fortunate to have at the head of one of its largest and most influential foundations a person who is as thoughtful and creative and courageous as John Gardner; who uses his influence, which is substantial, to encourage the process of self-renewal in individuals and institutions—especially educational institutions, for they particularly require self-renewal—and who so refutes in his own organization the rule that "nothing is more readily observable in the life of organizations than the triumph of form over spirit. Great ventures start with a vision and end with a power structure"—for the Carnegie Corporation still has a vision, to its great credit and to the nation's great advantage.