

The Common Sense of Politics, by Mortimer J. Adler. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971, 265 pp., \$6.95.

The future student of the history of philosophy, looking back upon our own period, may well characterize it as an age of relative darkness. Certainly, in our time, no new political philosopher has risen to match the compelling glitter of a Thoreau or Spencer, let alone, in the realms of the philosophy of history, of a Spengler or a Toynbee. What makes this absence of intellectual giants all the more debilitating is the fact that,

BOOK REVIEWS

79

from the vantage point of a new generation desperately searching for philosophical beacons, there appears to be no profound answer to the pundits of neo-anarchism and the apostles of the New Left.

Mindful of this gap, a concerned reader picks up this new book by Mortimer J. Adler with a sense of hopeful anticipation. After all, Adler, Director of the Institute for Philosophical Research in Chicago and author of a bundle of serious books on philosophy, sociology, and education, trumpets this new work as a challenge to the new spokesmen of anarchism, the "anti-political philosophers." The jacket promises excitement in the revelation of Adler "as more revolutionary than Charles Reich, more conservative than William Buckley." It advertises the tome as "just- in-time tonic for those of us who have almost given up on common sense as well as on politics, and who no longer see the connection between the two."

These promises are sustained, if falteringly, in Adler's initial chapters. Admittedly, the early going is slow. Adler devotes his first four chapters to defining such phenomena as politics, ethics, the distinction between the two, "common sense," and man, the "political animal," and his aggressive tendencies. This lengthy grappling with definitions, while tendentious and symptomatic of the undue preoccupation of modern-day philosophy with semantics, is pardonable: after all, philosophical constructs must be based on the clarity of definitions.

Adler then shifts into his argument. He scans history and focuses on three revolutions which, "in terms of institutional changes that have been accompanied by signal advances in political thought," have increased the political wisdom of the world: the Greek Revolution of the 7th century B.C.; the American Revolution, with its message of political equality; and the Russian Revolution, with its promises (if not practices) of social egalitarianism and the welfare state. Plumbing the nature of the state and of government, he concludes that the kind of personal liberty

espoused by the 19th century anarchists and their modern-day followers can in fact be realized only within the leavening of organized society, expressed in the voluntary contract of the *de jure* state and *de jure* government. But, in order for this personal liberty to be maximized, he argues, state and government must be "perfectly just" in dispensing and safeguarding the political, social, and economic equality of its citizenry. He defines political equality largely in terms of universal enfranchisement. He idealizes economic equality in terms of the democratic socialism of the "mixed economy," in which capitalism coexists with public ownership of major national industries. Adler calls his ideal, which he pits against the alternative of anarchism, that of the "classless establishment"—shorthand for the "perfectly just" but governed society.

So far, so good—or not so bad. What Adler's philosophical construct amounts to is essentially a reaffirmation of the vision of democratic

socialism and of the classless, governed society. While this ideal is hardly a philosophical revelation, Adler does enliven it with some interesting and cogent insights into historical evolution and into the relationships between personal freedom and the commonweal.

But then we get to Adler's "prescriptions," and at this point the reader would be well advised to fasten his intellectual safety belt. Adler's prescription of universal society is threefold. First, he advocates the "control" of technology in the interest of expanding universal unity and justice. Secondly, he prescribes the establishment of world government—and world government not merely in the image of powerful United Nations, but in the form of a "Union of Socialist, Democratic Republics" embracing a universal and harmonious collective of individual states and governments, all dedicated to the principles of societal justice as defined by Adler. Finally, he proposes a "liberal education" for all of mankind: "the development of an effectively administered, purely liberal schooling for all children who do not require hospitalization for feeble-mindedness; and, after such schooling is completed, the continuation of liberal learning by everyone through adult life."

These prescriptions, while they may jolt the credulity of a statesman or political scientist, are not in themselves reprehensible: after all, vision is vision, and Adler is entitled to his own. What bothers more is the blithe, almost guileless manner with which Adler suggests that his vision not only is a "realizable political ideal," but that its achievement lies, historically speaking, around the reasonably nearby corner. Thus, with respect to world government, with the "technological obstacles . . . being overcome, the only question of its feasibility concerns the political obstacles that remain." A simple matter!

But, Adler concedes, the realization of his panacea perhaps will take too much time: the prescriptions "are of such magnitude and such urgency that it may not be possible in the time allowed [unspecified by him] to consummate them by peaceful means. In that case, *revolutionary action will have to be taken and will be justified*" (reviewer's italics).

So here, astoundingly, we have Adler's version of the "just revolution." Stretching the implications, one can picture the estranged student who takes time out from fashioning bombs in his basement to read Adler's book and forsakes Marcuse for Adler's vision. He can now continue to make his bombs and hurl them against the establishment—no longer to eliminate it, however, but rather to render it just and "classless."

As was stated at the outset, we live in an age of philosophical darkness.

Institute for Defense Analyses

WALTER F. HAHN