

"We are all guilty."

WITH OUR instant communications system the word gets around quickly, words, phrases, and punch lines that only a few years ago travelled leisurely by way of magazines and books, trains and travelling salesmen now pour directly into the language from coast to coast in a matter of weeks or even days or hours and stay there if they have a tranquilizing or stimulating value. One of these phrases was and is, "we are all guilty." The television networks helped to popularize this pious sentiment at the time of President Kennedy's assassination when their commentators explained what had happened with the help of interviews and interpretations, bringing up to the moment the solemn thought of Donne who had once beautifully expressed the sense of loss for the whole human race when one of its members dies.

Hemingway, of course, had helped prepare the contemporary world to be aware again of the meaning of the tolling of the bell but it was the instant commentators who gave it universal currency. The tragedy could not be merely the result of the shooting of a president by a deranged killer. It was a time for sepulchral tones and portentous utterances. Hate had been stalking the land, a hate of our own engendering and it might have been laid low, or at least that was the implication, by the same means that is suggested for ending the war in Vietnam: "Make love not war." Had we all been gentler, had the social and no doubt political and economic climates been other than they were the President might still be alive. This is the "we are all guilty" syndrome; the analogue of the one that was operative for a long time in American

sentiments about post World War II Germany, in the form of "they are all guilty."

Our society as represented by its public relations constantly improves its image of itself with these clichés. Last March a sizeable group of teachers in a Bronx junior high school resigned because of the repeated physical attacks made on them by some of their recalcitrant students. The teachers took an advertisement in *The New York Times* to explain why they had quit. Their advertisement said: "We are teachers. We became teachers because we want to teach. Much of the time we are unable to do so. . . . WHY? There are many reasons. Among the most important is the continued tolerance by the Board of Education of the problems of a small number of extremely disruptive children who openly threaten teachers and defy authority. These disruptive children are the victims of poverty who, through no fault of their own, act out their frustrations through these assaults on teachers and other children. So much disorder exists in many classrooms that no learning can take place. . . . What Is The Board Of Education Doing? In most cases, nothing. When serious assaults take place, the Board plays a game of musical chairs. A pupil who has committed an assault is transferred to a neighboring school in exchange for a similar case from the other school."

A most revealing advertisement. In it are signs of the "we are all guilty" piety but there is a new twist explicitly stated. That is that the guilty are not guilty. These children who have hauled off on their teachers and/or on other children often enough so that teaching could not go on are themselves victims, acting out their frustrations. The teachers have resigned and demand that the Board of Education do something more about inhibiting the assaults of the young delinquents although it is not clear just what the Board or any oth-

er minor authority could accomplish if the children are not responsible for their acts. The advertisement does not say so nor probably would the teachers, but they must know that the game of musical chairs goes far beyond that played by the Board. Some of these children have been moved from old slum neighborhoods to housing developments which became merely new centers for crimes made possible by the provisions of elevators and the opportunities the separate entrances gave for attacking the inhabitants one by one. The advertisement called for public support of the teachers to urge the Board of Education to deal firmly with violators of school order. But if the violators are pinning back the teachers' ears through no fault of their own, it hardly seems fair to deal with the children instead of with the causes of their disorders which must again lie in the social, political, and economic system which produces or tolerates the poverty that is at the root of their, shall we say anti-social, behavior. The Board of Education might put them in a special school such as the one which I understand exists in Manhattan where children who are merely serving out their time of compulsory education may be sent and where one teacher, an ex-football player, told me he had had notable success dealing with the more violent among his charges. He was forbidden by law to clout one of them even after they had attacked him but he had found a way. He had grabbed their arms and held them until they were out of voice and vigor and the children, accustomed to respecting that kind of show of strength, tried no further mayhem on him. Whether or not the children felt they were the victims of poverty before my friend took hold of them, they quickly learned to behave better in his presence. His method, alas, could not be copied by all his colleagues but they too were impressed by it.

In the debate on the responsibility of the post World War II Germans the question of collective guilt came up over and over again. Learned articles and books were written mainly to prove that it could not exist and it was generally decided that the most that could be said of a people was that they shared a collective responsibility. This is true for those of us who deplored the use of the atomic bomb against Hiroshima and above all Nagasaki, when the war against Japan was already won and the Japanese government had been seeking peace terms through the Soviet Union for months. These were not your or my decisions; the orders came from Messrs. Truman and Stimson. How could people who did not even know the research on the bomb was being done have any decision to make or share any guilt? Their responsibility eventually derives from their being citizens of a country whose government they participate in, and in the rough language of the street the bomb was dropped by the Americans. The language is indeed universal: when, during the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, the papers printed the news of the attempted landing of anti-Castro forces in Cuba, a Czech Communist living at my pension waved a newspaper before me shouting: "What do you think you're doing invading Cuba? You can never win!" His last point at least as matters turned out was well taken. Thus there is no escaping the mark of a collectivity. Tribe, nation, color, race, sex are all generalized in the shorthand of everyday speech as well as in the writings of specialists. A woman or a Negro driver get automatic reactions the moment they chance to cross what a white man takes to be his right of way, and they too are catalogued by association out of the direct as well as sometimes distortedly interpreted experience of the male white driver.

Because this is a time dominated by

genuine science, parascience and pseudoscience, solid traditions as well as rooted prejudices are always open to inspection. "We are all guilty" is a statement about an allegedly illiberal, reactionary society where right-wing radicals especially are encouraged to sharpen their knives for crusades of hate. The left-wing radicals, one of whom actually assassinated President Kennedy may be reluctantly admitted to the company of the guilty but they are not genuine members in the view of the "we are all guilty" people who indeed also argue, as the far leftists do, for the basic corruption of the capitalist society. The same thing is true of the "they are not guilty" people. The children who attack their teachers or mug one another, or anyone weaker than they are, are also considered the helpless victims of a corrupt society. They commit these acts through no fault of their own and while the teachers who resigned would be glad to be rid of them without getting a set of duplicates from another school in return, what is obviously needed is another kind of society, one that would not reproduce them. A society without ghettos, without poverty, without exploitation and class warfare.

Imbedded in these articles of faith is the implacable conviction that the environment not the individual is the major cause of crime, that crime is a by-product of poverty and of slums. Actually, not much is known by criminologists about the causes of crime and there is much evidence that they are not closely connected with poverty. Michael Foner, chairman of the Metropolitan Crime Prevention Project of the American Society of Criminology, in a recent article published in *The Nation* (March 4, 1967), pointed out that serious crimes have been increasing for decades in the United States while poverty has been declining. Crime went up fifty per cent in the five-year period between 1962 and

1967 while poverty has been going down for thirty years. Crime has increased despite the higher standard of living, the drop in unemployment, the vast increase in earnings. I have already noted in these columns that a city like Taipei with a standard of living that is but a small fraction of that of a city like Chicago is a safe place to walk at night, even in the park. The easy assumption that impersonal forces, society, slums, an inhumane economy produce crime, that they and not the individuals concerned are responsible, is well-nigh universally held but probably it is not true.

Other theories on the cause of crime are emerging in the face of the rapidly mounting crime rate that is clearly neither being slowed nor explained by the prevailing dogmas. Mr. Fooner refers to a book that was published many years ago—Hans von Hentig's *The Criminal and His Victim*. In this book the author calls attention to a kind of symbiosis that, as far as I know, was not remarked before Hentig wrote. Certain crimes are committed against certain kinds of victims. There are specific crimes committed against women, against children, against people who want to get rich quickly, against aliens, and so on. In this sense Hentig thought the victim participates in the crime, unwillingly, of course, in most cases, but in every case he participates in the nature of the act. The poverty theory does not, as Mr. Fooner points out, explain crime satisfactorily. About as many people, he says, citing S. M. Robinson's *Study of the Youthful Delinquent Behavior of Men Who Are Respectable Members of Society*, having successful and honorable careers as doctors, business and political leaders, clergy and policemen have come up from broken homes, association with criminals and poverty, flawed family relationships, discrimination and psychological abnormalities as have

become criminals. And he quotes Robinson's conclusion: "The best cops and the best crooks come from the same place."

Something after all may be left to individual responsibility when the lethal dust settles over the grandiose formulations that have produced the articles of faith of the collectivists. Sin, wrong doing, the act of a psychotic, or of a criminal psychopath become objectified when the guilt is placed upon society, objectified and so diffused through the social space as to disappear. Just as the leaders of the Soviet Union through the social space as to disappear. new society would no longer be necessary—why should women be prostitutes when they had no financial need to sell themselves or thieves steal when they could work without exploitation?—and therefore founded the forced labor camps where the victims of capitalism could be reeducated, so the faithful marchers for social justice in the United States would reform the wicked American society. Only thus they hold will the crime rate shrink and crime eventually disappear. But suppose the opposite is true, that the individual and not society is the criminal? Suppose, as Richard Weaver once said, that rising expectations without the possibility of fulfillment produce more crime than the knowledge that one's own possibilities are limited, that the individual in the free society must make his own way and must be given the opportunity to make it but it is he who bears the responsibility and not the society that gives him more options than any other known to man.

"Through no fault of their own," said the teachers in their advertisement. Did they really mean that? As the children attacked them or others young and old with fists or knives or guns, sometimes because their victims couldn't produce a cigarette on demand, did the teachers really think that the society must be revolutionized to

cure such individual or gang behavior? Or did they, when they weren't writing advertisements, want the children, each one of them separately, held to account, disciplined, shown the error if possible of his or her ways, as did my hard-nosed friend in the tough New York school—to begin in some cases a longer-range therapy? What they want, they wrote in their advertisement, was the freedom to teach, one assumes, children who can and want to learn. That means making distinctions between the marauders and the genuine pupils on the basis of what they are and how they

behave and not on some set finding of Marxist or other collectivist metaphysic. For it is precisely this capitalist society that has freed the great majority of the people of the United States and of other Western countries from what was universal endemic poverty, and much of the world hangs on its largesse even when it denies the efficacy of its economic doctrines. And if we are all guilty it may be in this sense—that we permit the collectivist clichés to have authority long after they have been proven nonsense.

—E.D.