

# ANSWERS FOR HERNAN LAVIN CERDA:

## On War, Technology and the Intellectual

by **Thomas Merton**

**Biographical Data:** Born in France (1915) of artist parents, one English, one American. Educated USA, France, England (Cambridge University), graduate work at Columbia University, NY. Author of many books of prose and poetry. Among the most recent are: *Raids on the Unspeakable* and *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. Also an artist. Entered monastery in 1941 because for me monastic life is fundamentally a life of protest and iconoclasm. Obviously this is not simple, since the monastery is also an institution. However, I am known to be critical of institutions, Catholic institutions included. Am now living as a hermit, solitary in the forest, but am in contact with groups of poets, radicals, pacifists, hippies, artists, etc., in all parts of the world. Though I believe I have an obligation to non-conformist criticism and independence, I also recognize that my political views are limited and without authority, especially in matters concerning countries distant from where I am. However I can at least speak as a brother to my distant brothers. My position is non-dogmatic, existentialist, Christian in a completely non-conformist evangelical sense, and in many ways my views approximate closely to the humanism of someone like Albert Camus, except that a ground of mysticism and eschatology sharply distinguish me from his religious positions. Yet I would say that in many ways I am closer to him than to rigidly doctrinaire Christians whose Christianity is chiefly a celebration of bourgeois "Christian" culture and the status quo.

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1. *What do you think, as a poet and Trappist monk, of our technological world? What advances and what regression do you find in technology? Why do you maintain man is a prisoner of technology?*

First of all, technology is a fact and a necessity of modern life. I am sometimes accused of denying this. I do not believe in trying artificially to maintain archaic processes and values. I never fully agreed with Gandhi's spinning wheel. And yet the spinning wheel was for Gandhi a symbol of freedom from domination by the cotton mills of Manchester, in other

words a sign of protest against colonialist alienation under the dominance of a distant industrial power. Technology is therefore not only a fact but it is the key to the power struggle. The rapidity and sophistication of technological growth means greater wealth, greater military capacity, a higher standard of living, but above all the power to exploit and dominate others. On the other hand, technology alienates those who depend on it and live by it. It deadens their human qualities and their moral perceptiveness. Gradually everything becomes centered on the most efficient use of machines and techniques of production, and the style of life, the culture, the tempo and manner of existence respond more and more to the needs of the technological process itself. Unfortunately it is too often assumed that the technological process is inevitably rational. This is not the case. It is sometimes highly irrational — to the point that what is good for the process may be very bad indeed for humans. The great physicist, Max Born has said of space flights that they are “a triumph of intellect but a tragic failure of reason.” I am not adducing this as proof that space flights should be discontinued, but certainly in a world where nearly half the population is close to starvation, the money for space travel might well be employed to better purpose. Max Born adds: “Intellect distinguishes between the possible and the impossible; reason distinguishes between the sensible and the senseless.” As Jacques Ellul has shown, a basic law of the technological process is that once a quicker and more effective way becomes possible, it becomes necessary. But that does not mean that this new way makes more sense. It may be completely senseless: except perhaps that it may also make money for somebody. The Vietnam War exemplifies this. Its irrationalities are not only the result of American economic and social processes, but more directly the result of American technology, and of the American technological mentality.

Yet one of the most significant things about Vietnam is that it proves that technology is not all powerful, and shows that men with rifles and hand grenades can resist the most powerful and advanced military machine in the world — when that machine is running against reason. If Vietnam were less primitive, if it depended on an airforce and tanks, it would perhaps have been shattered as the Arab armies were shattered by Israel.

There is a danger of technology becoming an end in itself and arrogating to itself all that is best and most vital in human effort: thus humans come to serve their machines instead of being served by them. This is completely irrational. One whom I have always admired as a great social

critic — Charlie Chaplin — made this clear long ago in “Modern Times” and other films. The question is then how do we control technology instead of being controlled by it? The more corrupt a social system is, the more it tends to be controlled by technology instead of controlling it. The intimate connection between technology and alienation is and will remain one of the crucial problems we will need to study and master in our lifetime. Technology means wealth and power but it bestows the greatest amount of wealth and power upon those who serve it most slavishly at the expense of authentic human interests and values, including their own human and personal integrity. Life in the United States shows this beyond question. But unfortunately, the rest of the world secretly or overtly wishes to become like the United States. What a tragedy that would be!

2. *What should be, in your opinion, the role of a revolutionary intellectual, particularly in our continent which lives under pressure from American imperialism, the country where you live?*

First of all I would like to say that all intellectuals should realize the basic similarity of their duty and mission everywhere, for they are all in the same plight. They also face identical temptations from the seductive blandishments of huge power structures. The intellectual must recognize that he is constantly and everywhere being offered a privileged cubicle in an intellectual and spiritual whore house. What is asked of him is to surrender his own authenticity, his own intellectual identity, his own freedom of decision, his capacity to select attitudes which in his opinion are lucid and honest. In a word he is asked to surrender the fundamental secret which is his own free-ranging intuition and devote his talents to the articulation of slogans and images devised by someone else who happens to be not an intellectual but simply a commercial or political operator.

In Latin America I would say that there is a special danger of provincialism — too much uncertainty about one's own national, cultural, political identity, and consequently a greater danger of wasting energy in dramatic gestures of negativism. In general this may result from a failure to appreciate one's own gifts, one's own potential. In my opinion, the potential of the Latin American intellectual could be very great indeed. But is there too much fear of independence, fear of solitude, of risk, of lonely exploration? Does creative power get lost in interminable talk, in futile

argument, in self-reassuring rhetoric? This is of course the pattern of the *trahison des clercs* in every society, capitalist as well as communist and non-aligned.

Cesar Vallejo remains, in my mind, the type of the creative voice who better than any other has, in our century, spoken for South America in all its complexity, bitterness, ambiguity, desire, helplessness, creative impetus and nobility. There is in South America a potential that remains strangled and mute because it is rooted in an Indian culture and mentality which were brutally silenced in the sixteenth century. I for my part have great hope that when once again something of the long unconscious silence of Inca and Maya is broken (this will obviously be something cryptic, poor, simple, incomplete) we will hear a final message that will restore us all to a kind of wholeness. In this I am perhaps too influenced by the romanticism of D. H. Lawrence, but I think there is something to it. My friend Ernesto Cardenal, the Nicaraguan poet, is right in exploring this area in his poetry and his meditation. The Latin American intellectual, instead of being haunted by a sense of provincial inadequacy before the specters of Europe and America, should return to the hidden springs of his own inexhaustibly rich subconscious heritage.

3. *What do you think about Vietnam and the policy of warlike aggression let loose by the Johnson administration?*

It is obviously one of the great human tragedies and failures of the twentieth century: a sign of the intellectual, political and moral bankruptcy of the United States which is, at the same time, the most formidable technological and military power in the history of the world. But we would miss the point if we were to interpret Johnson's war as a repetition of Hitler's aggression in the last war. We are always one war late in our understanding: the Johnson administration does not consist of Nazi gangsters, but of "decent people" who are able to do what they do in all stupidity and "good faith" because they are totally alienated by the technological society in which they live.

There is nothing surprising about the inhumanity of gangsters and psychopaths such as the Nazi leaders were. It is much more disquieting to observe the inhumanity and moral insensitivity of "good" ordinary people — that is to say "right thinking" and honest products of our industrial

milieu. What this means is, of course, that the system itself is inhuman, dishonest and cruel in spite of its surface idealism and its celebration of warm human values. The dishonesty of the culture consists in its willingness to deny reality in favor of an imaginary picture of the world, and to make use of technological weapons in defense of a national delusion. Such a culture defends its interior peace and complacency by resorting to the success of its engines: if its technology works, then its illusions must be truth after all!

It is no accident that McNamara was trained as an executive by Ford: and the mass production of remote death in a tropical country is made possible by the fact that these minds think in terms not of humanity but of efficiency. This is not confined to America: it is common to all the great powers, including Russia and China. In our time, inhumanity is not the privilege of the capitalist system alone — it is the product not only of economics but of an existence that is completely mechanical and organized in view of technical efficiency. The Vietnam War is (like the Spanish Civil War) an apocalyptic sign. Will we be able to understand it? There is articulate protest in the United States: but this protest is useless. This too is a matter of great significance. The human voice of protest has no significance when it is contradicted by the computers in the Pentagon.

4. *In what way can North American man liberate himself from the machine of violence directed against him? In what way can the Latin American man free himself?*

This is a very important question to which I do not know the answer: and nobody knows it. He who discovers it and puts it into effect will be the greatest man of the twentieth century. In my opinion, we look for violence in the wrong places: we do not understand violence properly. The basic reason why humans cannot free themselves from violence is that they do not want to be free from violence. They prefer the complex mechanics of violent interrelationships, because in this mechanism they feel at home. Why? Because it legitimizes hate. That is why the United States is really unable to free itself from the intolerable stupidity and shame of the Vietnam War. Foreign hatred of the United States has become part of the psychological mechanism by which the United States legitimizes its own hatreds, its own delusionary fears, its own guilt, its own anxieties.

Ultimately, the man who seeks to be free from domination by the violence of others has to be free from the violence, the fear, the hate and the guilt in his own heart. But who can be free from these things? Only he who loves others, and one loves others not by expressing admirable sentiments of esteem, but by giving oneself for others and their good. By lucidity, by non-dramatic and realistic collaboration in the struggle for life, freedom, bread, truth. I have in mind the kind of lucid struggle described in Camus's *Plague*. This is an excellent handbook of ethics for a time of pestilence such as that in which we live.

This "lucid" and heroic struggle was by no means mere fiction. It was exemplified by the resistance movement in the death camps, like Auschwitz. Here armed rebellion was out of the question, violence was pointless, but men and women risked torture and death to procure extra food, drugs and other help for the weak, the sick, maintaining intelligence contacts with the outside, and hiding those who were slated to be killed. Obviously the results were pitifully limited, in comparison with the massive work of destruction and dehumanization, but this is an area where success is not measured in terms of quantity. This is true human resistance: the affirmation of life against the overwhelming death wish that is sweeping the world in crisis.

5. *How do you explain the passage from the non-violent line of the Blacks in the United States (Martin Luther King) to the adoption of armed resistance which we have recently witnessed in your country (Mohammad Carmichael, Malcolm X)?*

First of all, non-violence is an extremely sophisticated and delicate instrument of communication which can be used effectively only by an elite in certain well defined circumstances in which there must be a possibility of mutual understanding on an ethical plane. True non-violence has to be a form of active resistance, and not merely passive submission. Non-violent resistance implies a strong moral dynamism and ultimately religious faith. When there is a question of masses of oppressed people who are not sure of their own identity, non-violence becomes highly confusing. The Montgomery bus strike was a good example of successful use of non-violence because the issue was quite clear and so was the fact that the Blacks were making a definite personal commitment in a matter where their rights were

obviously violated. In this case, both sides understood the issue in the same terms. When Civil Rights legislation, gained through non-violent action, was deliberately *ignored* by the whites, then it became clear that communication was no longer clear and, in fact, that some of the basic presuppositions of non-violence had broken down. One of these was the supposition that Americans were basically Christian and peace-loving people. The Vietnam War has brought out the subliminal injustice, violence and hatred in American society. The Black has resorted to violence and hate out of sheer desperation, and in order to assert himself on a more primitive level. It is his accusation of the hypocrisy of the American liberals. The big question is however whether this violence has any real political meaning, or whether it is pure nihilism and elemental despair. Certainly one thing is true: it may result in driving the United States more and more to the right. A withdrawal of Black support from the supposedly "liberal" Democratic party and the formation of their own minority political bloc could result in the election of a Republican conservative and a further step toward the United States becoming a kind of "benevolent" police state — which in fact it already is to some extent.

6. *To what extent can poetry liberate the human being without the proper reality of our peoples being revolutionized, at the bottom, poetically?*

This is a big question: but basically it is a question of the authentic signs and symbols which have real and living validity for a specific people and culture, signs and symbols which the poet must draw out of the living depths of the people's unconscious life. The misfortune of so much political revolution is that it too often appeals to fake symbols, contrived signs which have nothing to do with the depth of man's being but only seek to manipulate him successfully and quickly in the interests of some superficial operation. The imaginative poverty of so much revolutionary politics can be a sign of its opportunism and its basic impotence — the result being not real revolutionary change but just some spasm and "golpismo." On the other hand, so much poetic expression is merely superficial — there are *avant garde* conventions just as well as conformist conventions. The trouble is that the poet is content to live safely on a trivial level in which he can play a relatively easy role and believe himself a "poet" without having to go to the trouble and risk of being a "prophet." But for this, one has to be chosen, one does



not elect oneself to the post of prophet, nor is one chosen for it by a political party — or by the Church.

7. *What do you think about the “hombre inutil” ignored by our society? What do you think of the angry and unadapted?*

Obviously one of the forms taken by protest against the idol of “efficiency” will be the formal refusal to be “useful.” This protest may function on many different levels. At its deepest level, it may be a protest of authentic personalism, based on the truth that the person is an end in himself, not a means to be used by others. But this authentic “uselessness” will also manifest itself in a gratuitous and spontaneous creativity, which will justify it over against the enforced and rigid cult of mechanical cause and effect. In this dimension, the protest of “uselessness” can have a kind of Taoist revolutionary quality. But Taoism easily degenerates into more inertia and quietism, and the protest of uselessness, resentment, inadaptation, may become a mere excuse for laziness and sulking. However, let us never forget that Eichmann was a “useful” and efficient servant of a technological society in which he was perfectly adapted, in which he functioned without complaint, in which he zealously managed the complex technology of death. Let us not forget the thousands of efficient, uncomplaining policemen who are perfectly adapted to “society” and satisfied with the art of extracting confessions and liquidating those who refuse to conform. If there is a choice to be made between the “useful” and the “useless,” the “contented” and the “irate,” the “adapted” and the “unadapted” I will give the benefit of the doubt in each case to the latter. It is a good thing to be discontent and unadapted in a society that is afflicted with pestilence and makes a virtue of not knowing that it is dangerously ill.