

*Intermediate Man.* By John Lachs. Indianapolis: Hackett. 1981.

John Lachs is a philosopher (Vanderbilt University) and a poet (*The Tides of Time*) whose latest book, *Intermediate Man*, more properly belongs on the shelf of sociology than of poetry or philosophy. Addressing the modern phenomenon known as "alienation," Lachs observes that the concept is vague, ambiguous, and regrettably judgmental. In its stead, he proposes the terms "mediation" and "psychic distance." A mediated action is an action performed for one person by another. The necessary loss of immediacy (direct connection between ourselves and our actions) produced by mediation is called "psychic distance." Lachs argues that from the sharp focus and broad perspective of these two concepts, we can understand the fundamental ills of modern life, untangle the snarls of our complex society, and perhaps, ultimately, unburden ourselves of the emptiness and frustration characteristic of our times. It is a bold and ambitious pursuit, the kind that is bound to offend nearly everyone at some point along the way, the kind necessarily given to generalizations and oversimplifications for its sheer magnitude. One thing for sure, it cannot be done in 145 pages.

Nevertheless, the book is worth reading. It is rich in content: observations on the nature of government, education, parenthood, responsibility, psychology, drugs, the mass media, language. It is stylistically attractive: personal in tone, with clear, direct, and vivid statements. Indeed, at times Lachs waxes poetic, though now and then he comes dangerously close to sermonizing, typical of those who speak as from a vision. Always, one senses, Lachs writes from the heart, even when the reins to his enviably fine mind get slack or tangled. It's as though the poet got better of the philosopher in just those places where we needed the philosopher the most.

In a nutshell, Lachs's position is this: mediation is inherent to, and very nearly synonymous with, society. From mediation we derive enormous benefits: comfort, leisure, efficiency, and productivity, all the advances made possible through specialization and the division of labor. But the costs are equally great. The larger and more complex the society, the longer the chains of mediation, the more we depend on others to perform actions for us. And the longer the chains, the greater the psychic distance produced until, as is the case today, individuals feel impotent, lost, and confused. We lose touch with the world, and "things happen" that affect us significantly, yet

seem beyond our control, influence, and worst of all, beyond our understanding.

Several chapters are devoted toward demonstrating the pervasiveness of mediation. The use of tools, for example, makes it "possible for us to act without coming into direct physical contact with what we act on . . ." (p. 25) Echoing Ralph Waldo Emerson, Lachs observes that what tools offer in efficiency and power, they exact from us in immediacy. More generally, the notion of progress (that stimulating force which drives an industrial society) tends to make us future- rather than present-oriented, and renders what Aristotle called "activities" (ends in themselves) simply means to an end. We move and act for the sake of some distant goal. So there is danger lurking in the very soul of progress.

Even language itself, that instrument which connects our separate minds, stands between us and the world, between us and others. "The person to whom I attempt to convey my feelings gets but a pallid copy of what I live and breathe." (p. 53) One suspects that Lachs's own poetry is more vivid and compelling than this quote suggests, but there you have it: Language itself is a mediating force, and where there is mediation, so too is there gain and loss.

Furthermore, we are surrounded by institutions—corporations, the legal system, government, religion—which we tend to view as real agents rather than as abstractions representing individuals. Such a view, which is a byproduct of mediation, diminishes our sense of power and blurs our vision as we seek to place responsibility when things go wrong.

Perhaps the greatest mediator of all is government, and Lachs spends a good deal of time discussing the role of government in our lives. The goal of decentralization and deregulation, of breaking up the immense power of government is, according to Lachs, a noble but futile and misguided ideal. Noble, because it springs from the heart of freedom, but futile and misguided because federal and local governments are inextricably connected, omnipresent, and provide the uniform rules and predictable enforcement that are necessary and inevitable for any society:

Municipal and state government simply do not have the scope to cope with the corporation and the labor union. Big government is not an incidental growth or the product of conspiracy. A rich country with a large population invites broad commerce and big business. Big government is required to create safe conditions for big business, and also to control it. (p. 93)

Enforcement and uniformity of rules are clearly exemplified in totalitarian states, but totalitarianism is hardly justified thereby. Lachs skirts the fundamental and crucial issues here and altogether fails to draw the distinctions and make the analysis that his claims require. Lachs assumes that commerce (big or otherwise?) requires external control, and, furthermore, that it is government's proper function to provide the control. Neither of these assumptions is necessarily true, as any libertarian economist or philosopher could demonstrate. At any rate, Lachs is much too quick here. He tells us that "Big government must be accepted as a necessary force." (p. 93) If by "big government" Lachs means to include among other things, government

control of commerce, then he is simply humming the old liberal tune. Indeed, he continues with a plea for the humanizing of government. Big government "must be turned into a medium for self-determination, into an instrument of freedom, not oppression." (p. 93) This even sounds like a politician talking. And who on Capitol Hill would argue with these sentiments?

There is no disputing Lachs's talk of the pervasiveness of mediation, and it does seem almost intuitively clear that mediation would tend toward psychic distance (though it isn't as evident as Lachs seems to believe that "our" lives are hollow and unfulfilled). We can even allow that the claim that government is not "out to get us," is, in fact, benign in intent. Given all this, the solutions that Lachs offers in his last chapter come to little more than an eloquent (he writes beautifully) pep talk. Proper education is the answer. We must integrate education with daily life, make it more practical and relevant. Use the community as a lab. Educate the senses and emotions. Develop the body as well as the mind. "The democratic process and the educational process coincide in their aims. Both focus on the development of personality and through that on the intelligent self-determination of the community." (p. 143) Hence, our leaders must also be our teachers, educating the public "by means of laws." (p.143) Individually, we can convert many of the things we do into activities valuable in themselves; "we can strive for wholeness by refusing to be defined and exhausted in our roles" (p. 129); we can examine the acts we perform, trace out their consequences, and see the extent of our participation; we can do the same of others' actions, "so that all of us in mediated chains become more ready to take responsibility for our acts." (p. 129)

What all of this lacks in genuine information or in hard, detailed analysis and argumentation, it nearly makes up for in style and inspiration. *Intermediate Man* has the flavor of those popular paperbacks from one or another psychologist who has a scheme for getting us back on the right track. One tends to agree with the drift, and, at times, even to get excited; but in the end, though perhaps uplifted, one is not permanently moved. Inspiration is definitely a necessary condition for solving life's problems, but it is far from sufficient.

It would be unfair and misleading to end this review on the above note. Given the brevity of Lachs's book, it is to his credit that he accomplishes as much as he does. He offers an interesting perspective on the condition of modern man and develops this in a way that invites reader response and that promises to sustain serious and lengthy discussion. In short, the merits of *Intermediate Man* far outweigh the flaws, and the reader is urged to give the book a try.

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