The Parasite as Revolutionary:  
The Fleecing of America

SERIOUS political theory can be—very roughly—divided into three categories which I shall call respectively, the conservative, the liberal and the revolutionary. Their dominant themes run throughout the history of Western political thought, and while they sometimes overlap, it is by and large possible to fit any one thinker at any one time into one of the three. Not much needs to be said about liberalism, which possibly has dominated America since the establishment of the United States. The basis of this ideology is the belief that human secular destiny can be steadily improved by improving the environment, and that the human person is, by and large, the function of his natural and social conditions and if you change the latter for the better you will improve the former. Not all liberals are starry-eyed optimists, and many are aware of the formidable obstacles to progress inherent in man's biological structure and ingrained belief systems. Also, the scope and width of possible improvements are disputed, ranging from claims that piecemeal, cumulative, gradualist solutions are the only feasible ones to the "sweeping changes" schools of thought.

As against the liberals, the conservatives tend to believe that there are inbuilt, irremovable obstacles to human progress; that human nature is incapable of fundamental improvements; that it is irreversibly flawed. It is therefore not the task of the magistrates to strive towards human perfection, but rather to hold man on leash, to tame his aggressive impulses by force and by conditioned fear-responses, to circumscribe his anti-social aggressiveness by tradition-induced internalized prohibitions, and above all, not to tamper with institutions which have proved their mettle as instruments of human domestication.

Charles Reich

his book "a badly written goulash of platitudes and clichés, betraying incompetence in many fields, destitute of even a shred of empirical evidence to back up hots of sweeping and puerile utterances"
The revolutionaries differ from both the liberals and the conservatives in that their "ultimate" beliefs are closer to those of the liberals, yet the more immediately practical ones appear to be based on much the same assumptions as those of the conservatives. The revolutionaries share the liberal's trust that man can be perfected, or at least progressively improved, but unlike the liberals they don't believe that this can be achieved without a catastrophic restructuring of the world as it is and as it has been since the beginning of civilization. The revolutionaries, like the conservatives, believe that men, as we now find them, are flawed and as such are incapable of improvement. Yet the flaws have been built into them by psychologically crippling social organizations which have lasted for millennia and which still maintain their sway, thereby sustaining the flaws. Once the corrupting society is destroyed and its psychologically stunting effects removed, men can be redeemed.

The redemptive creed of the revolutionary differs from liberal gradualism in that it presupposes the end of the "old world" and the creation of a new one before any attempt to improve the quality of human life becomes at all possible. The revolutionary collapse of the old will be initiated by a crisis in pre-revolutionary relationships and by profound psychological shocks as the customary ceases to exist before a new consciousness replaces the old. The interim period justifies terror and perhaps even the genocidal sacrifice of the living psychologically unredeemable human material as bridge-building matter and manure for the future. The chillicastic nature of revolutionary thought is now a commonplace among historians of ideas, and I shall not retell an old story.

The key concepts of the liberals, the conservatives and the revolutionaries are, respectively, freedom, progress, order, tradition, and crisis. Some revolutionaries and conservatives will be brought into psychological communion by their shared contempt for men as they are and for the liberals who expect to do anything worthwhile with that. Yet the revolutionary will at times join forces with the liberals to overcome the notion fairly deeply ingrained in Christian thought that by and large nothing can be done in this vale of tears, and it is better to tolerate established abuses which, as a by-product, maintain the social order, rather than to innovate by breaking the customary bonds of reverence and obedience, thereby risking the unleashing of a lawless "state of nature" in Hobbes' sense, either between tyrant and a subjugated population or between members of a lawless human horde.

The New Left in America and elsewhere is revolutionary in that its style of serious people who in some sense mean what they proclaim and who are not mere poseurs, TV entertainers, or promoters of exciting homoerotic fashions in the textile trade. Their prophets from Marx to Marcuse have made it abundantly clear that they reject our society in toto. By and large, also, the New Revolutionaries tend to display the classical specific differences in tactics, temperament, organizational methods and philosophy which have always emerged, in one way or another, within revolutionary movements; there are elitist Leninist or crypto-Leninist followers of Lukacs (whose work has been bowdlerized and popularized by Marcuse), the participatory democrat-anarchists who favour elective soviets, the advocates of more or less organizationally indirect individual action and nihilistic terror, and finally, the drop-outs, the hippie-freak element.

The drop-outs, which can be further subclassified according to style of noise-making and manner of deviance, are, strictly speaking, not revolutionary. Their actions tend to be irredescribably apolitical and their life-style is far too erratic to lead itself to systematic political manipulation and direction by revolutionary technicians. Yet their actions tend to have unforeseen and unintended political consequences. The drop-outs are at the same time despised and courted by the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary alike, since both regard them as a hopeful sign. For the revolutionary, the drop-out represents a symptom of decay in the target society, while for the counter-revolutionary, a sign of decay in the quality and morals of the revolutionary movement. Reich's book is essentially an apotheosis of the drop-out and his penumbra of attenuated imitators, and it represents an attempt to elevate him to the status of the revolutionary par excellence.

Visitors to America, like this author, are shocked by the extent to which "the revolution" has become a lucrative industry, and they wonder whether the wealthy and powerful men who subsidize, exhibit and lion-
ize the advocates of their own destruction are more greedy and innocent, or perhaps symptomatic of the very insoluble internal contradictions which the revolutionaries claim to find all over America. It seems that the American revolutionary, and drop-out apostles of the "counterculture" and the protagonists of the more traditional doctrines of the left buck have hit it off perfectly. The inhuman and shallow nature of most of the "counterculture" seems if anything to heighten the lust of their adulterous embrace, which requires for its elicitation rather crude and excessively spiced fare. A thing which strikes a stranger in America is the bluntness with which the question cui bono is relevant to the American culture industry and particularly to that part of it which may be called for want of a better name "the academic racket"—not to be confused with the still sizeable islands of excellence and integrity which have managed to survive the "educational" holocaust in America.

In this sordid world, in which not even the overwhelmingly ulterior motives of the culture-racketeers are the genuine ones, but a mere facade for yet more sordidly ulterior ones, the Kannerian question, "how is Reich's book possible," must be asked. How is it possible that a badly written goulash of platitudes and clichés, betraying incompetence in many fields, destitute of even a shred of empirical evidence to back up hosts of sweeping and puerile utterances and without the redeeming qualities of genuine indignation and sardonic wit, was given the kind of promotion it received? Yet before one attempts an answer, the content should be stated and analyzed. Since Reich's thesis (I have avoided inverted commas because I could not decide whether to use them for "Reich's" or "thesis," and using them for both would give the article a distinctly Soviet flavor) is by now well-known, I shall state it as charitably as I can, for it rests on the kind of now-fashionable pop-Hegelianism which cannot withstand even superficial philosophical analysis. Hence, if one wishes to discuss the stuff at all, one must improve on it in stating it.

II

REICH'S basic concept seems to be the Marxist notion of the relation between material base and superstructure, or "consciousness." Thus, corresponding to three specific phases of American history, there are three types of consciousness, three families of ideological superstructure. Consciousness I is a function of pre-corporate classical capitalism or of America as a farmerist free-market democracy. Its principal values are thrift, industry, enterprise, faith in economic justification by cleverness and hard work, competitiveness, and a certain masculine robustness and ruthlessness to go with it. With the emergence of monopoly capitalism Consciousness I became dysfunctional. The race no longer worth to the swift. With the crises of monopoly capitalism, Consciousness I singly could not cope; it became "false-consciousness." The social and political actions of the New Deal which were undertaken to counter the effects of the Great Depression produced a new, managerial society, a network of hierarchically structured and interlocking politico-economic bureaucracies, a new power system, commanded by a scientifically trained, hierarchically minded directorate.

The new social structure is sustained by command relations and programmed by a variety of conflicting managerial hierarchies who are, however sufficiently coordinated—(not by conspiracy or consciousness of interests—here Reich differs from Marx)—but by an interlocking system of arbitration and conflict management, to warrant for itself the designation of Corporate State. Nobody in particular is really running this managerial society any more and the hierarchies of the military-industrial complex are themselves just so many cogs in the machine. The sustaining entity is not an apparatus or an elite, it is mental: Consciousness II. The old ideal-typical protestant-ethnic rooted entrepreneur has been replaced by the cool, sleeky-or abrasive, ideologically aseptic organization man, who sets the pace, determines the fashions and dictates the trends. Consciousness II has improved America. Since the inception of the New Deal, the machine of managerial, statist, monopoly capitalism actually runs and is not bogged down in semipermanent crisis. But it runs at the cost of dehumanizing its social actors. The trouble with Consciousness I was not that it was esthetically or morally bad—on the contrary, Reich indicates that it was quite fetching. It simply did not work. Consciousness II does work. The economy and the state apparatus function. But in working it destroys what is human in the social actors. There is waste, there are wars, there is private affluence.
and public squalor, there is alienation etc., etc.

The bearers of Consciousness II value advancement, the striving for power in orderly hierarchical bureaucracies by intrigue and merit, and they subordinate everything, even fun and games, to corporate ambition. Man becomes co-extensive with his officially accredited competences within a hierarchically stratified system of production and management. It is life without spontaneity, play and truly individual enterprise; just striving for power after power until death of the corporate salesman (Miller's was really a Consciousness I bloke trapped in a Consciousness II world). The life-style of Consciousness II is psychologically deadening, yet man's spirit is immortal and resilient. It bucks the machine, cools its nose at competence, hierarchies, and careers, and reasserts itself; Consciousness III is born. It is tantamount to a refusal of corporate discipline combined with an aggressive reassertion of non-corporate traits such as spontaneity, individual eccentricity, and the primacy of sensuousness over duty.

The central political thesis of the book is the proposition that the American corporate state will disintegrate purely as a result of a mental metamorphosis in its subjects and not as a result of political or revolutionary action. People's consciousness will simply change from II to III and the corporate state will wither away. The old corporate, anti-human Gesellschaft will give way to a free yet organic society of spontaneous sensualists and creative artistic producers.

It is not quite clear whether Reich maintains (a) that the high level of automated technology makes significant societal repression redundant (Marcuse's doctrine of "surplus repression") or (b) whether he holds that effort and labor will continue to be necessary but that they can be invested into production without the discipline of Consciousness II, i.e. without internalized notions of duty, levels of aspiration, and, socially, without hierarchy, authority, and division of labor. I feel that Reich oscillates between (a) and (b) being unaware that they constitute real alternatives.

What is one to make of all this? Some implications of the thesis are quite obviously incompatible with widely advertised alleged characteristics of Reich's opus. Thus Reich, or, if you will, the bearers of Consciousness III, are not, in any operationally meaningful sense of the word, revolutionaries. The minimum for being one is that one undertakes purposive political actions which, at least, do not exclude the use of violence and which are deliberately directed against the structures and personnel of the old order with a view to overthrowing them. The man who sits and waits for a spiritual rebirth and when it comes merely enjoys it may be all sorts of things: if he does nothing else, the use of the term revolutionary to describe him is a misuse of language.

The Consciousness III chaps are not exhorted by Reich to do anything. As a matter of fact they are actually exhorted to do nothing political in the ordinary usage of the term. They are merely urged to drop out, to fall if possible on the softness of sustaining corporate wealth and to enjoy themselves. They are in fact urged to become idiots in the original Greek sense of the word.

Reich qualifies in no intelligible sense of which I am aware for the label of Marxist, though he would obviously like to qualify. Should the pattern of intellectual and political fashions in America undergo one of its sudden and unpredictable changes, Reich will be able to state quite truthfully that he is not and never has been etc. without seeking the sanctuary of the Fifth Amendment. As a matter of fact Reich seems to be that rare kind of man — an intellectual who amidst an unprecedented welter of Marx-debates and Marx-chatter has managed to misunderstand the principal political theorem of any kind of Marxism, namely, that it is not consciousness which determines social existence, but social existence which determines consciousness, and that the proper relation between advanced beliefs and backward reality is political action.

Reich is, actually, an almost paradigm case of a political "idealist" in the half-technical and half-pejorative sense in which the word is used by Marxists. For his central thesis is: do nothing and wait for the redemptive illumination to cleanse your soul. Let all those who are laboring in Consciousness II turn their minds to the things of the liberated flesh, to Consciousness III. Purity of mind is all, for the pure in Reich's rather fleshy spirit will by definition be the good society, the communion of saints. As a matter of fact, the movement which Reich's ideology approximates most closely is Moral Rearmament. The practical effects of accepting the proposition that personal purity must precede political action is, of
course, political quietism. I would not be surprised if somebody, somewhere in the KGB or in some more creatively clinical, paranoid outfit of the New Left were to rule that Reich is paid by the CIA to undermine the revolutionary action-potential of the American masses: but I shouldn’t have said it, for, in the American culture racket, reality and the satire on it have by now become almost completely interchangeable. For all I know somebody may actually have already said it, or may get ideas by reading this article.

Reich fulminates continuously against "false consciousness"—another Marxist term which he has failed to comprehend. Yet, his own "Consciousness III" is a paradigm case of a false consciousness, a set of false yet comforting beliefs that you can have your cake and eat it. And this is true no matter whether one adopts a revolutionary or conservative philosophy of life. For there is one thing on which honest conservatives and revolutionaries can agree: the good life is not given to us. We must work hard at it, and hard work requires instinctual renunciation. Reich's ideas will not qualify as Marines or corporation executives. Yet, neither will they qualify for death in the electric chair for acting on the (false but noble) belief that as long as somebody is in prison everybody is in prison, and that one should, therefore, do something drastic about a world in which there are so many jails.

III

We come now to the reason why. What has made Reich's book into a best-seller? Why should it have sold so many more copies than other intellectually more competent books, which have appeared roughly at the same time, and which were written for a similar, fairly well-educated, middle to upper-middle-brow public? Why should men of affairs, and their wives, used to sound arguments in the pursuit of their corporate business to and good material texture in their private pleasures, prefer a discourse on the redemptive properties of Consciousness II on skis, in hip clothes, to sober and rationally argued treatises based on sound political knowledge and adequate empirical evidence? Perhaps somewhere underneath Reich's Consciousness III there lurks the old impish One and Two, an eye for the fast buck and a promoter's instinct for what the public loves (I am using the word in its currently obscene sense).

Everybody knows by now that "radical" means "chic." Yet it is also common knowledge that "radical" still carries with it some risks: thus, even if law enforcement and discipline were to break down completely, there is always the danger of being mugged by a rival radical gang. And, there is, of course, the shadow of the backlash and what might happen to the kids if some law-and-order monster were to establish fascism in America by returning the safety of the streets to the old and the weak, and the college campuses to the pedagogues and scholars.

Even if one were to accept fully Professor Eugene Genovese's hypothesis that the American New Left is made up largely of economic parasites extruded from the loins, nurseries and schools of a liberal middle class which has by now mismanaged everything, including the socialization of their children, one may nevertheless concede that the enterprise of radically chic social parasitism is occasionally inconvenient, at times morally disturbing, and an object of sarcasm from both conservatives and from more seriously committed revolutionaries. The sense of one's own basic fraudulence—living in affluence and leisure, spouting a revolutionary rhetoric, and inducing in oneself counterfeit emotions of communion with the wretched of the earth—spoils at times one's delight with the game.

Reich's doctrine frees "the kids" and their parents from all this. Reich, in fact, says that in being a social parasite one is being a revolutionary. There have been occasional parasitic playboys who were also revolutionaries—who, as it were, "made it" in revolutionary politics, e.g., the younger Verkhovensky. Yet, according to Reich, the playboy no longer has to make it since he is it. No wonder the book should please so many. The law enforcement agencies and their allies will naturally opt for revolution in the minds, rather than by bombs, violence and political subversion. The media will welcome a revolutionary who does not question the legitimacy of property, but the most delighted will surely be the liberal academics and the college presidents, for here at last is a radical whose message does not increase the insurance rates of academic real-estate. The replacement of arsonists and bullies by bums and deviates will relieve many an administrative headache.

The people who should be disturbed by
the prominence of Reich's book are those—American and non-Americans alike—whose personal freedom and survival is linked with the fortunes of the American republic. For it is obvious that the real revolutionary, as against the psycho-revolutionary of Reich's Consciousness III, represents no serious danger in America. Like all modern state machines in developed countries, the American state apparatus is effectively unchallengeable from within. Foreigners like myself, and even some natives, are deceived into believing that a violent revolution is possible in America by the degree of tolerated violence and dissent, and by the remarkable extent to which Americans tend to doubt the stability of their social order. The amount of slippage in the American law enforcement apparatus is, perhaps, greater than in any other highly industrialized society, and certainly greater than in other "English-speaking" cultures, but there is no evidence that a head-on challenge against the social order would not be swiftly and successfully crushed.

The "anti-Vietnam movement" is actually the best evidence for this thesis. The "movement" operated with no holds barred, and it included men and organizations who would stop at nothing and whose hostility and rage against America's social structure was implacable and absolute. And yet, there was no significant interference with the military effort in the field. By and large the conscripts joined their units, obeyed orders, and handled their weapons as well as they usually do. There was no interference with troop movement, no mutinies, and no sabotage of transport and logistic support. The revolutionaries did not even begin to accomplish the task of "turning the imperialist war into a civil war." As a matter of fact, as far as the war effort per se went, they were not even in the game and that, characteristically and humiliatingly, despite the high proportion of blacks among the American soldiers.

Yet the New Left is divided into two groups, of which by far the greater part would opt for the role of comfortable social parasites celebrated in Reich's book. The values of that group have now permeated American society down to the women's magazines and comic books. The situation is reinforced by the fact that the belief in the basic dispensability of government in the pursuit of individual happiness is one of the most cherished American myths. In no other developed country is the need for sovereignty and government viewed with greater suspicion than in America. Indeed, the lurking feeling that governments are dispensable after all, or, if not, that they should be reduced to the barest minimum, provides an occasional link between the thinking of the Left and the conservative Right in their joint nostalgia for a vanished past. It is a part of American tradition and, hence, even conservatives are highly vulnerable to it.

And yet, American society—both in its conduct of imperial policies and in her management of internal affairs—will require more and not less discipline, more and not less controls by experts, bigger and not smaller doses of guidance by the military-industrial complex in the coming technocratic age. Whether the elites will be nominally Federal bureaucrats or corporate managers with massive links to the state apparatus has been shown to be irrelevant in Burnham's Managerial Revolution in 1958 and remains irrelevant today. The serious problem is, surely, how to work safeguards of individual liberty into the interstices of the managerial-corporate state, which cannot be abolished because with it our technocratic culture would also go, and with it our civilization. For whenever a Reichian Consciousness III switches on the light on his desk to write an essay against Consciousness I and II on his electric typewriter, he votes against his essay with his typewriter keys.

At the present time the still open societies of America and her allies are challenged by totalitarian despots of various kinds, of which the USSR remains the most formidable. They can withstand the challenge only if they consolidate and extend their institutions of conflict management to prevent disruption of the minimum of continuity and coherence which are a prerequisite for the successful conduct of world affairs, and if they can confront the system of terror and propaganda which threatens us from without by a force based on an internalized sense of civic responsibility. There is only one libertarian counter to terror and totalitarianism—determined resistance based on a civic consensus rooted in loyalty to the Republic, and supported by a variety of virtues, shrewdly tamed vices, and skills which together constitute the functioning human person within the context of his culture-bearing polis. The
Letters to the Editor

ON CULTURAL FREEDOM

Several writers have recently received a letter from Mihajlo Mihajlov, who requested that they attempt to get it published. The following text, edited only to conform to standard English usage, was forwarded to the IR by Thomas Moir.

Mihajlov’s case is instructive. A ranking member of the Yugoslav Communist Party, he made the error of writing a criticism of the Yugoslav government — for which he was “dismembered” by Tito (he had been widely discussed as Tito’s successor) and imprisoned. Released after long captivity he apparently has run afoul of the Yugoslav government again.

Dear Sir,

On a call of Mr. Harrison Salisbury a couple of months ago, I wrote a philosophical, not political, article for The New York Times. The article was published on the 24th of October, 1970. The title was “The Artist as an Enemy.” This year on the 29th of January I was called to come to the town judge of Novi Sad, because the police had reported denunciation against me because of breaking the prohibition against publishing in printed matter. The prohibition lasts until March, 1974. Now I’ve been threatened with prison. It is the first time in Yugoslavia that someone has been accused because of publishing non-political articles abroad. The prohibition has been used only for printed matter inside the country.

This is a drastic example of preventing cultural activities, actually their existence; as for political activities I do respect the prohibition of four years. I am not allowed to be given jobs to work here. I am not allowed to have a passport, as well, although I keep getting offers from American and European Universities.

The punishment of prison is not so frightful for me; it possibly can’t be more than two months. It is the matter of someone being prevented from his intellectual activities, not from political activities. That is at the moment the main thing, not only for me personally.

I would be very grateful to you, if you would bring out this case in your country.

Sincerely yours,

Mihajlo Mihajlov
Novi Sad, Yugoslavia

PHOTO CREDITS