Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory/Revue canadienne de théorie politique et sociale, Vol. V, No. 3 (Fall, 1981).

AN IDEOLOGY IN WAITING

In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," the seer Walter Benjamin wrote that a "state of emergency" is the rule rather than the exception in bourgeois existence.[1] Now, more than ever, Benjamin's prophetic insights appear as an early diagnosis of the unprecedented threat to civilized life presented by the politics of the new right. The election of Ronald Reagan, this too perfect organ-grinder for multinational corporate interests and the self-appointment of Alexander Haig as the "village vicar" of a merciless American foreign policy, point to the surfacing, not in Europe but in the New World this time, of the beast that is at the heart of the western mind. In the face of this state of emergency, it is impossible to be silent. For this is an authoritarian politics which is as relentless in its assaults on popular democracy in El Salvador as it is pitiless in its "reality therapy" for the poor, for children, for the aged. We thought that Spencer was finally dead, only to discover in the slogans of "supply side economics" the birth anew of social darwinism.

Just as the New Left defined the political agenda of the 1960's, in the 1980's the political cycle finds its completion in the hyper-collectivism, the politics of emotional needs, of the new right. Indeed, towards the end of his life, Herbert Marcuse said in a prophetic commentary carried in the *Journal*:

> The tendency is to the Right. The life and death question for the Left is: Can the transformation of the corporate state into a neo-fascistic one be prevented?[2]

Marcuse's analysis addresses the possibility that the emergence of a rightist tendency is a born-again movement of the authoritarian personality, of what Theodor Adorno described as the renewal of the "potentially fascistic personality." The dominant fact about the political right today is that it no longer contained within the terms of a normal political opposition or of an orthodox economic strategy. Without doubt, the right expresses politically the strategic economic aims of dominant corporate interests. Milton Friedmann's nostalgic and Walrasian panegyric to the sovereign market-place, even as he stands in front of the sweat shops of Hong Kong extolling "freedom of choice" in the market-place, is a radical attack on the wage earnings of workers and the dispossessed. And J.K. Galbraith was not mistaken in noting recently that the economics of the neo-conservative regime—aimed directly at relieving the tax burden of the upper middle-class at the expense of public services—is really a barely disguised class struggle of rich against poor. The political slogans of the new right—the "disciplinary society," "waste in public regulation"—are not ineffective appeals aimed at resolving the contradictions of the "welfare state" in favour of organized private interests. Economically, the politics of the new right points to the existence of an economic crisis which has been displaced to the social sphere.[3]

But over and beyond the strident political vocabulary of the new right, something else is happening. The new right is *so* potentially dangerous because it represents a broader awakening of an "ideology in waiting." And this newly

surfacing ideology has its basis in the nihilism of a middle-class gone authoritarian. In the end, fear of loss of privilege, impotence in the face of overwhelming power and despair over the failure of the liberal consensus produce a psychological "readiness" for the therapeutic of the authoritarian state.

It is no secret that the conservative assault spills beyond the political realm, narrowly conceived. Attacks on gay rights, demands for the return of disciplinary education, offensives against the womens' rights movement, and nostalgic appeals for the defense of the family, neighbourhood and work-place—indicate the emergence in the politics of the 1980's of a personality type which is the psychological fuel of conservative political discourse. The "moral majority" is really a not unsubtle appeal to a politics of emotional distress.

In an excellent analysis, "Anxiety and Politics,"[4] the theorist Franz Neumann—who was, incidentally, one of the first of the critical thinkers to be deported from Germany by the Nazis—discussed the psychological basis of the authoritarian personality. Neumann claimed that the bourgeois individual lives today under the strain of two unresolvable sources of tension: an "outer anxiety" and an "inner anxiety." The outer anxiety expresses the ever-present dangers of the public world; the inner anxiety reflects the unresolved oedipal tensions of the bourgeois self. Desires for self-punishment, objectless feelings of guilt, a lack of confidence in the survival capacities of the self—these are the legacy of the inner anxiety. Neumann claimed further that the tensions represented by the outer and inner anxieties turn authoritarian, and thus, potentially neo-fascistic, when under the pressures of external economic crises and a more silent inner crisis, the outer anxiety meets the inner anxiety.

> The external dangers which threaten a man meet the inner anxiety and are frequently experienced as ever more dangerous than they really are. At the same time those same external dangers intensify the inner anxiety. The painful tension which is evoked by the combination of inner anxiety and external danger can express itself in two forms: in depressive or in persecutory anxiety.[5]

Politically, depressive anxiety may express itself in despair and resignation—it is the sure and certain source of the otherwise inexplicable suicides which come to dominate the mental landscape of today. Persecutory anxiety is the classic basis of neo-fascistic movements. It is the psychological fuel which produces a mass-based politics of emotional needs, referenda on happiness as the essence of electoral politics, and scapegoatism of vulnerable out-groups. It may also result in the projection of private anxieties of impotence, fatalism, and inferiority onto what Neumann describes as the "caesaristic leader," the strong leader who charismatically sums up in his personality the spontaneity, the violence, the passion of the "dark side" of the modern mind. As the epicentre of the meeting of the outer anxiety and the inner anxiety, the bourgeois individual is envisioned as suffering a dramatic loss of ego and abandoning himself to states of fantasy, delirium, and illusion. For Neumann, the bourgeois self was almost destined to move from the private experience of fantasia to the stronger medicine of the

cult, the evangelical religion, and then to active support of a mass politics of emotional needs. Voting analysts now call this phenomenon "mood politics."

I would follow Neumann in noting that the politics of the 1980's, and principally those of the American empire, are typified for the individual by the meeting of the outer anxiety, the public crisis, with the inner anxiety. The outer anxiety today is a crisis of political economy. The inner anxiety is an existential crisis. The socio-psychological basis of new right politics is the fusion of the outer and inner anxieties; the meeting of the existential crisis and the political crisis. The outer crisis which the individual meets, this external danger which activates an interior, neurotic anxiety, has been eloquently described by a number of theoreticians, including Sheldon Wolin and Jurgen Habermas, as a classic erosion of trust in liberal-democratic institutions. Wolin traces the crisis of the "political" to the original impulses of liberal ideology itself. Liberalism, in Wolin's terms, is the ideology which strips public life of any basis in a substantial concern with justice, equality or democracy. The anti-democratic sentiments of the new right are, in part, the end-product of liberalism's reduction of politics to a barren struggle of interest against interest.[6] Equally, Christopher Lasch in *The Culture of Narcissism* traces the decline of the public realm to the bourgeois individual's concern with using the public world only to advance through manipulation a narrowly calculated self-interest. And Michael Weinstein in a paper entitled "The Eclipse of Liberalism" notes that the decline of an authentic politics in the United States is symbolized by a breakdown of the "general will" as the basis of the social contract; and by the consequent development of a strong desire to neutralize the menacing face of public life by "contractualizing" all social relations.[7] Weinstein says that Rousseau's "general will" as the basis of public life has now given way to the more monadic principle of the "will of all." In a situation of economic triage, the return of an almost Spencerian survival ethic pits individual against individual. In addition to an erosion of confidence in political life, the inevitable economic crisis is such that the individual is under a constant treat of a loss of privilege, position and status. An "outer anxiety" thus grips the bourgeois self—inflation is the economic cancer which erodes the discretionary income of the middle class and this class cannot rest easy in the absence of contractual commitments guaranteeing a secured distribution of public goods.

Under the pressure of a "loss of privilege," of a daily anxiety over loss of confidence in the credibility of the political economy of the liberal state, the bourgeois mind oscillates to the other extreme. There is a retreat from public life, massive and wilful in character, into a private inner experience of fantasy and illusion. Reason gives way to private passion. The individual in the absence of a secure public realm tries to establish a private zone of emotional security, symbolized by the ideal of the Spencerian ego: privative, survival-oriented and exploitative. Max Horkheimer concluded in *Dawn and Decline* that this is an era typified by the appearance of monadology as an active principle of social life[8]. It is not unpredictable that the social counterparts of the outer anxiety are nostalgia, the return of a "myth of innocence," and a retreat to the family, if not to the body, as the last barrier against a public world verging on *stasis*. It is

equally predictable that the deflated bourgeois ego finds its most eloquent expression in, on the one hand, the almost surrealistic image of the "air-proof" house and, on the other, in a simplistic faith in business education.

Unfortunately, the private zone of emotional stillness sought by the bourgeois mind is itself illusory. One lesson of the hegemonic tendencies of the technological order is that the social as well as the psycho-analytical foundations of identity have already been colonized. What C.B. Macpherson has described as "possessive individualism"—the sense that the modern "self" has been transformed into a propertied aspect of the economic order—is a haunting image of contemporary times. In flight from public life, the individual encounters an inner self whose laws of psychical action resemble the catastrophe theorems of the outer world. The individual leaves behind the anxieties of the public world only to discover an inner self which borders, on one side, on the return of beastialism and, on the other on absorption into the socio-psychological imperatives of the corporate political economy. This is the beginning of the crisis of the Spencerian ego; the source of the inner anxiety. Daily, the suspicion develops that it is impossible to survive on the terms of the Spencerian compact. Cultural darwinism, having left in its wake a vacated ego, the deflated self finds its inner resources under the colonial rule of the social order.

Following the reflections of the thinkers as diverse as Neumann and Weinstein, the political formula of the nihilistic personality might be envisaged as a ceaseless movement of the bourgeois mind between an ambivalent attitude to public life on the one hand and desparate anxiety over the survival capacities of the self on the other.[9] It is this restless movement between the delegitimated self and the under-authorized state which provides a base of political support for the harsher economic strategies of the new right.

The bourgeois individual retreats from participation in public life because of a deep distrust of political leadership, but at the same time, needs for economic self-interest to secure the political arena. And the bourgeois mind needs to affirm the self as the basis of an individualistic survival ethic, but is haunted by the suspicion that the self will not prove adequate to the task. The individual is thus caught in a classic psychological contradiction. The outer anxiety increases; the economic crisis threatens actual loss of privilege. The inner anxiety intensifies; and the inner crisis, the need to affirm the self as the basis of survival in a "hostile world," is intensified by the external danger.

Classical symptoms of the failure of the bourgeois individual to resolve the tension betwen a "retreat from public life" and a "loss of confidence" in the survival capacities of the individual ego are, in part, the appearance of sporadic and highly symbolic violence, and the movement of religion into the political realm. In religious fundamentalism, the existential crisis of the self is resolved by a flight beyond the individual ego to immolation in a group mind. In symbolic violence, there is found the signature of the return of the collective unconscious. What Carl Jung described as the dark anima of the Shadow returns to haunt public life. This is an age in which criminals become once again truth-sayers of the normal imagination.

Politically, the result of the psychic explosion which occurs when there is a

meeting of the political and existential crisis is the production of persecutory anxiety; a displacement of the crisis into a style of politics which provides a *therapeutic* for both actual threats to the self's zone of privilege and to its feelings of emotional inadequacy. In *The Anthoritarian Personality*, Adorno, Frankel-Brunswick and others traced out the political implications of the authoritarian character-type. Their work, completed in the 1950's, reads like an anticipatory diagnosis of the politics of the contemporary decade. It indicates that in the politics of the new right we are dealing, in part, with a broader distemper. As a working-out of a personality type which has "no pity for the poor,"[10] the bourgeois mind goes for itself, undermining the consensual basis of the liberal-democratic polity. The class-hidden and power-disguised foundation of the social contract dissolves. A surplus-class of the dispossessed appears which is forced outside the system of political administrative relations. In brief, the outer anxiety of the authoritarian personality is met with political sadism. The inner anxiety, the existential crisis of the frightened and melancholy bourgeoisie, is resolved through masochism. Political masochism involves the application to the self of harsher and more punitive forms of self-repression and self-censorship. All of this to sustain a "spurious inner world" which will act as a defense against outer reality. The therapeutic of political sadism finds its analogue in the politics of cynical self-interest. The principle of economic triage is applied to vulnerable out-groups. Political violence, domestically and internationally, is viewed as one strategy among others to sustain economic privilege. Or, in the analysis of *The Authoritarian Personality,* stereotypy "works as a certain kind of corroboration of projective formulae." In short, the new right organizes into an authoritarian politics, a "free floating distemper" which is the essence of contemporary American politics. In the end, projection and displacement are the psychological tools of a middle-class which has radically severed public from private existence and which finds itself torn between a deauthorized state on the one hand and a mutilated self on the other.

***

The critical tradition has traditionally acted on the basis of a dialectical understanding of crisis. The present crisis, typified by the return of the authoritarian personality, vanquishes human hope in the dispensation of history. But the sheer immanence of this danger, this rebirth of fascism in comfortable middle-class guise, also provides opportunities for new solidarities and, ironically, in this time of great turbulence with the possibility of creating a vision of social utopia in the development of a more democratic polity. The gap between the real and the ideal, the gulf between our actual condition of immiserisation and the possibility of a free society—this gap, this wound, never closes. But the intellectual responsibilities of thinkers today is with Adorno, Benjamin, Sartre and others to address on behalf of a suffering humanity, the "wound" of history.

AN IDEOLOGY IN WAITING

Standing on the Spanish border in the early 1940's, Walter Benjamin chose suicide rather than surrender his person, his vision of culture, the "angel of history" itself, to the torturers of the Gestapo. In the same way that Artaud wrote of Van Gogh, Benjamin was a man *suicided* by society. It is the same authoritarian tendency, this natural face of the modern order, which after Benjamin has driven Poulantzas, Artaud, Aquin, and Phil Oakes—the best minds of our generation to the stillness of madness, to the despair of suicide. I remember again Allen Ginsberg in *Howl*:

> I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving, hysterical, naked
>
> dragging themselves through the negros streets at dawn looking for an angry fix
>
> ...who passed through universities with radiant eyes hallucinating Arkansas and Blake..light tragedy among the scholars of war
>
> who were expelled from the academies for crazy and publishing obscure odes on the window of the skull.[11]

I cannot forget, I must not forget, that now when history has turned bleak again, when as Brecht said, "gansters strut around like statesmen on the stage of history"—that we, the survivors are the only links between past and future, between a past of critical rebellion and a future of utopia.

We serve the past best by keeping alive the act of remembrance, but also by seizing the future, by insisting in an uncompromising way on the practical possibility of the ideal. Surely the present is a dead-zone of politics: it is a killing ground for the right. For today who in the tradition of the critical imagination does not stand with Benjamin on the Spanish border, with the choice of suicide on the one hand and history in the form of the new right, of the coming again of the beast first seen by Nietszche, on the other.

Sartre, the philosopher who remained loyal to the free human subject, said finally, with irony. "Man is a useless passion."
And Kolakowski replied, for those who survive:

> The left still needs a utopia...the contradictions of social life cannot be liquidated; this means that the history of men will exist as long as man himself. And the Left is the fermenting factor in even the most hardened mass of the historical present. Even though it is at times weak and invisible, it is nonetheless the dynamite of hope that blasts the dead load of ossified systems, institutions, customs, intellectual habits, and

closed doctrines. The Left unites those dispersed and often hidden atoms whose movement is, in the last analysis, what we call progress.[12]

Arthur Kroker

Notes

1. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations,* New York: Schoken Books, 1969, p. 257
2. Herbert Marcuse, "The Reification of the Proletariat," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory,* Vol. 2, No. 1, 1978, p. 23.
3. Jurgen Habermas, "Conservatism and Capitalist Crisis," *New Left Review,* No. 115, 1979.
4. Franz Neumann, *The Democratic and Authoritarian State: Essays in Political and Legal Theory,* Glencoe: Free Press, 1957, pp. 270-300. The term "ideology in waiting" is taken from this essay.
5. *Ibid.,* p. 275.
6. For an eloquent account of "dependent man, the rump remains of democratic man," see Sheldon S. Wolin, "The Idea of the State in America," *Humanities,* Vol. 3, No. 2, 1980, pp. 151-168.
7. Michael A. Weinstein, "The Eclipse of Liberalism," MSS., p. 21.
8. Max Horkheimer, *Dawn and Decline*, New York: The Seabury Press, 1978, p. 17.
9. Weinstein, *op. cit.*, p.9.
10 T.W Adorno *et al*, *The Authoritarian Personality*, New York: Harper and Row, 1950, p.699.
11. Allen Ginsberg, *Howl*, San Francisco: City Lights, 1956, p.23.
12. Leszek Kolakowski, *Toward A Marxist Humanism*, New York: Random House, 1968, pp. 82, 83.