

Imperialism and Irrationalism¹

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Back in 1877, Engels, in **Socialism: Utopian and Scientific**, offered this opinion: "Their political and intellectual bankruptcy is scarcely any longer a secret to the bourgeoisie themselves." Ninety years ago it required an Engels, perhaps, to see this; today the bankruptcy is announced by the defaulters themselves. Thus, in the summer of 1965, Richard Goodwin, then an Assistant to the President of the United States, said:

"We are not sure where we are going... We know there are new problems, but the intellectual resources of this nation—the historic reservoir of social progress—do not readily provide the answers."²

The very air is foul with more than smog and tear-gas. These are only the more apparent effluvia emanating from the decay of a social order. Were Gibbon working now on the decline and fall of the United States empire, his notebooks would be overflowing.

Debasement is decay's product as well as its intention; I do not doubt that the debasement is not only systematic but also is deliberate. Not least among its virtues, surely, is the fact that it is profitable, too. At its heart is irrationalism: the eclipse of reason, the denial of science, the repudiation of causation. The normal result is cynicism; the abnormal is sadism. The finale is fascism.

The levels vary. There is the over-priced rot usurping more and more of the shelf-space in U.S. bookstores; here one finds no motivation, no real feeling, no difficulties, no doubt, no warmth, no love, no pity, no thought; no human beings. These are less pretentious, but otherwise not very different from such best-

² Quoted by Richard Rovere, *The New Yorker*, August 14, 1965.

selling “books” as those by Spillane. The same is increasingly true for the movies—not only at American Legion stag parties, and Times Square “art” houses, but more and more on the screens of those neighborhood movie-houses that manage to survive. Again, the central and common feature is mindlessness mixed with brutality.

Joseph Wood Krutch, an elder statesman of literary critics and still rather “old-fashioned” in some of his tastes, thinks the “emphasis on violence, perversion and nihilism” that characterizes much of current U.S. fiction and playwriting “seemed rooted in contempt for the world.” He offered this view:

“Seldom, if ever before, has any of the arts been so dominated by an all-inclusive hatred. Once the writer hated individual ‘bad men.’ Then he began to hate instead the society which was supposed to be responsible for the creation of bad men. Now his hatred is directed not at individuals or their societies but at the universe in which bad men and bad societies are merely expressions of the fundamental evil of the universe itself.”³

Here is the way a new novel is advertised in the *New York Times* (May 3, 1967): “...a labyrinth of cruelty, pain, blood, welts, screams, moans, torture, bondage and—delight ... whippings, cuffings, the ecstasy of contact...”

Russell Baker, the “Observer” of the *New York Times*, noted (August 3, 1967) that it is a rare evening in watching television that one does not witness as part of the “entertainment,” “a whole battalion of victims bludgeoned, machine-gunned, bayoneted, pistol-whipped, gunned down, mashed under tank treads, beaten

3 In *The Saturday Review*, May 6, 1967. For an earlier and incisive analysis of these trends, see Sidney Finkelstein, **Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature** (New York: International, 1965), especially pp. 285-98. The neglect of this book by the commercial press is a fine tribute to its author.

senseless with fists and otherwise despatched.” Here are the words of that same newspaper's movie critic, Bosley Crowther (July 4, 1967), describing a current film epic: “...violent explosions, bark of guns, the whine of bullets and the spinning bodies of men mortally hit provide the aural and visual stimulation for an excitement of morbid lust.”

On Broadway—somewhat less so, off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway—as Walter Kerr wrote in a very recent New York Times (January 26, 1969):

“Nowadays, it's not good form to ask what a play is about. Aboutness is out, content is irrelevant, conscious design is suspect. A play is simply a series of impressions that happen to happen in a certain unordained sequence ... We're supposed to sit quietly, keep our responses open, and never, never, strain for coherence.”

What we have referred to in the above paragraphs is a steeper decline than the literary reflections of alienation; these continue, but do not represent as full a repudiation of reason as most modern productions.⁴

Another significant and particular source—and expression—of irrationalism in the United States is racism. A useful examination of this connection was produced by Reese Cleghorn, an editor of the *Atlanta (Ga.) Journal*; it is a pamphlet badly entitled *Radicalism—Southern Style: A Commentary on Regional Extremism*.⁵ I say badly entitled because this is a study not of radicalism but of

4 In addition to the Finkelstein book cited earlier, see: S. Finkelstein, “The Artistic Expression of Alienation,” and Howard D. Langford, “The Imagery of Alienation,” in H. Aptheker, ed., **Marxism and Alienation** (New York: Humanities Press, 1965); Gaylord C. LeRoy, **Marxism and Modern Literature** (New York: AIMS, 1967); Arnold Kettle and V.G. Hanes, **Man and the Arts** (New York: AIMS, 1968).

5 Jointly issued in 1969 by the Southern Regional Council in Atlanta and the American Jewish Committee in New York City.

reaction and especially of the George Wallace movement.

The point for present purposes, however, is that Mr. Cleghorn emphasizes that the Wallace movement reflects the irrationalism so characteristic of dominant Southern politics; he says this irrationalism reflects the racism that afflicts the South in particular—an ideology in open conflict with elementary democratic principles. The thinking, writes Mr. Cleghorn, is paranoid admission from feelings “of guilt, obsessive defensiveness, close mindedness;” the feelings themselves, of course, stem from enslavement and oppression and super-exploitation of others, though Mr. Cleghorn is not quite so clear on the latter point. But he is clear as to the irrationalism fostered by racism—itsself the quintessence of irrationalism; here is another and striking example of racism's cost to Americans of all colors.

Reason's eclipse takes many other and sometimes rather elusive or highly sophisticated forms. The entire tendency towards a technocratic, arithmetic, *counting* methodology especially in sociology is part of this; the tendency towards eliminating causation either explicitly or by denying the possibility of evaluating causes, or by affirming the infinitude of causation—where everything is cause to everything else and therefore no cause per se can be discovered—especially in historiography; the a-human writing of Herman Kahn and the efforts of Z.K. Brzezinski; the apocalyptic visions of Norman O. Brown, with his insistence that it is only the subjective and the so-called unconscious that matter rather than the objective and the conscious; A.H. Maslow's rejection of social renovation as central to making possible the better life and replacing this (basic to the concept of Utopia as well as the concept of revolution) with efforts at the release of psychic impulses so that one would not have Utopia but rather “Eupsychia;”

the most recent writings of Herbert Marcuse with their reflections of near despair and their emphasis again upon the subjective and psychological; and efforts to apply existentialism to social questions, as in the work of John Wild, which in fact effectively rule out of the social sciences the possibility of ascertaining objective reality; or in the religion of Timothy Leary whose discoverer insists that: "We must entertain non-verbal methods of communication if we are to free our nervous system from the tyranny of the stifling simplicity of words."⁶

In addition to the well-known attacks upon values and ethics—either as unknowable or as irrelevant to "science"—there are growing signs of a repudiation of the Enlightenment as a whole. There certainly is value in calling attention to areas of neglect in the entire Enlightenment tradition, including its highest, or Marxian, aspect; I mean, for example, such questions as the nature of power, of evil, of psychology as a whole. But this is something else than, for example, Ronald V. Sampson's essay, "The Bramble of Power," where one reads: "*Only* by appealing to the private individual can we give meaning to the legitimate ideals of Progress, Democracy and Socialism."⁷ Mr. Sampson concludes—quite logically, given his "only:"

Long-term action needs to be undertaken at the level of psycho-therapy, family mores, child nurture and an education, cooperative and not competitive, that is devoted to rearing the whole creative potential of man through the work of his hands and his brain in a life that is not divorced from nature.

6 Full bibliographical reference would require excessive space; but see, in particular, N.O. Brown, **Love's Body** (N.Y., 1966); John Wild, **Existence and the World of Freedom** (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1963); and Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert, "The Politics of Consciousness Expansion," **The Harvard Review**, I (Summer, 1963)—quoted matter from p. 35.

7 In *The Nation*, December 16, 1968; italics added.

It does not reflect any denial of the consequence of Mr. Sampson's essay to remark that such writing is not only pre-Marxian; it is pre-Owenite, and we will not go forward by retreating. Clearly, a competitive society will have a competitive education; one struggles on all levels—including the educational—but one never forgets the *strategy*, namely, the transforming of society.

Perhaps the most dramatic, recent reflection of the flight from reason is the fantastic fad of McLuhan, or of McLuhancy. Significantly, it is the United States—including its academic community—which has most ardently embraced this shoddiness and made of it a veritable cult of the “in.” The English scholar, D. W. Harding, in a penetrating analysis of this phenomenon, observed:

McLuhan's glaring incoherences of thought and disregard of everyday observation are not confined to peripheral 'probes;' they occur at nodal points of the system. And yet the cult sprang up. Something in our education abets the willing suspension of common sense which a belief in McLuhan requires.⁸

In an important—and therefore neglected!—book, the distinguished English writer, Pamela Hansford Johnson, suggested that all “must know the basic reason for the deluge of sado-masochistic, 'hard-core' pornography.” Here was her “basic reason:”

“This is not published by good, altruistic persons who believe they are helping to make a sweeter and more educated society. These may exist: but I have referred earlier to another force in a commercial society, which is an

⁸ In *New York Review of Books*, January 2, 1969. Sidney Finkelstein presented a devastating critique of McLuhan—*Sense and Nonsense of McLuhan* (N.Y., 1968); but for every ten who read Finkelstein there are ten thousand who read McLuhan—itself sufficient commentary on the eclipse of reason in the United States!

infinitely powerful one. People are publishing the stuff because there is money in it. The motive is, quite simply, profit, and this is the way they can make a quick, sure turnover.”⁹

This is, I think, the immediate reason; but it is not the basic one. For consider: profit-making has existed for some time, but the reason Mrs. Johnson wrote her book in this period is that today there is, as she said, “the deluge.” Such a deluge appears only in a society which is dying; it reflects disintegration and it intensifies that disintegration. At the same time, for those who rule that society, the motive is not only making profit in the selling of such commodities but also inculcating inhumanity.

Recently, Walter Lippmann was asked: “Are these the worst times there’ve been in your lifetime? For the country?”

Mr. Lippmann—whose active life in the United States goes back to the 1910s—replied: “Yes, I think so. I’m more worried about the state of the country than ever before ... What I see is the disintegration of hope and belief and will—will power and morale ... we have despair and deterioration.”¹⁰

Henry Steele Commager, a contemporary of Mr. Lippmann and his peer in distinction, expressed himself at about the same time, in very much the same way: “We find ourselves not only confused but impotent, impotent intellectually and morally ... We [have] lost confidence in ourselves, dissipated our energies, dissolved our dreams, substituted anti-principles for principles, anti-policies for

⁹ *On Iniquity* (N.Y., 1968), p. 113.

¹⁰ *New Republic*, December 9, 1967

policies ... we have lost confidence in man.”¹¹

I think United States history does not show another occasion when so prestigious a body as The National Committee for an Effective Congress concluded after examining the state of the nation, that: “America has experienced two great crises in her history: the Civil War and the Economic Depression of the 1930s. The country may now be on the brink of a third trauma, a depression of the national spirit!”¹² This Committee found “malaise,” “frustration,” “alienation,” as appropriate words to describe dominant moods; it states that, “At all levels of American life, people share similar fears, insecurities and gnawing doubts to such an intense degree that the country may in fact be suffering from a kind of nervous breakdown.”

The disintegration is most acute because the United States is the main bastion of what remains of imperialism; a centrepiece in the British *New Statesman* (October 27, 1967) generalized the matter this way: “The West is a civilization without a philosophy and is rotting at the core because of this.” As for analysis, the author James Hemming, went further than one is likely to find in the commercial U.S. press: “Man treated as worker-consumer, however fat his wage packet or salary cheque, is man without dignity, manipulated, degraded man, frustrated man, alienated man. This is exactly where commercialized society has got us.”

Marx was not mentioned, presumably because the borrowing—even to verbiage—was so heavy that acknowledgement was held to be unnecessary!

11 *New York Times Book Review*, January 28, 1968.

12 *New York Times*, December 26, 1967.

Neither Lippmann nor Commager nor the National Committee for an Effective Congress offer explanations for the unprecedented despair and alienation they describe. Similarly, Hans J. Morgenthau in asking "What Ails America?" sees "the decomposition of those ties of trust and loyalty which link citizen to citizen and the citizens to the government,"¹³ but its source is not clear to him, except as this lies in the unspeakable war being waged by the U.S. government against the people of Vietnam. The latter, however, while carrying with it enormous capacity for damage and vitiation of the quality of U.S. life, is reflective of deeper sources of such damage and vitiation. That is, that the U.S. government is capable of waging so atrocious a war is itself symptomatic of more basic rot at its very foundations. True certainly it is, as W.E.B. DuBois warned in his remarkably prophetic way, back in 1904: "I believe that the wicked conquest of weaker and darker nations by white and stronger but foreshadows the death of that strength." But the path of racist conquest itself reflects the logic of a structurally parasitic and exploitative social order and there one has, I think, the root of the paranoia now dominating official U.S. conduct and policy.

In biblical language one may speak of the reality of retribution; in psychiatric language, of paranoia; in Marxist language, of antagonistic contradictions and the inexorable trauma these produce.

The heart of the difficulties lies in the fact that the U.S. social order is characterized by the private ownership of the means of production and the private appropriation of profit. Such relations and motivations are obsolete and therefore regressive. The obsolescence—manifested in the spread of socialism and the decline of colonialism—means that aggressive foreign policies and

13 *New Republic*, October 28, 1967

repressive domestic ones are not only anti-human but also doomed—I mean doomed in a practical sense. They are not viable and so U.S. policy -with all its wealth and power—goes from one disaster to another.

Admitting this for those wedded to the corpse is psychologically impossible; hence, real paranoia appears. That is, since reality is insufferable it is denied and a world whose content fits the need of an obsolescent social order is imaginatively constructed. This means the repudiation of reason. The alienation that is everywhere apparent may also be viewed as a sign of health and I think that to view it that way is nearer the truth than to see it as simply a reflection of sickness. Symptoms of sickness, indeed, are themselves physiological forms of struggle against illness; manifestations of alienation on a broad scale reflect the essential soundness of the population which increasingly finds intolerable the anti-human and irrational policies of its doomed rulers.

Professor Morgenthau complained rightly that “deception [by the U.S. government] is being practised not occasionally as a painful necessity dictated by the reason of state, but consistently as a kind of light-hearted sport through which the deceiver enjoys his power.”

More, deception is now normal because it is needed; the policy is so awful and so doomed that it must be enveloped in falsification. But the masses of people have quite different needs and in time—despite a natural, patriotic bias—will become persuaded that they are being fed a diet of deceit and will demand a change of menu. Indeed, what all the talk about radicalization means is that the mass of the people are in the process of becoming persuaded of this and are raising this demand.

But to trace this out further is another essay, and that must await another opportunity...¹⁴

¹⁴ This article will appear in a forthcoming book, **Radical Currents in Contemporary Philosophy** (St. Louis: Warren H. Green, 1970).