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## Three Myths

**Arnold Beichman • Antonio Martino  
Kenneth Minogue**



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# The Myth of American Fascism

ARNOLD BEICHMAN

The *New York Times* Sunday Magazine some time ago published a long article about Senator Jesse Helms called, "Thunder from the Right."<sup>1</sup> It described the Senator's conservatism in fairly dramatic terms; as the sub-title proclaimed it, "President Reagan may find it hard to be conservative enough for Senator Jesse Helms and the New Right's true believers."

One passage in that article struck me as odd in its implications. The writer says that "Helms occasionally travels abroad" and "Most of these trips have been to conservative countries like Taiwan or to those with right-wing military dictatorships, such as Brazil, Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay."<sup>2</sup>

I found this passage quite odd because no writer in the *New York Times* would ever comment with such disfavor about a Senator—like Church or McGovern, may they rest in peace—who visited a left-wing military dictatorship like Cuba. In fact to the *New York Times*, not visiting Cuba would mark a Senator as benighted and undiscerning. When Senator Percy goes off to visit Brezhnev and the other Kremlin gerontocrats, there are no *New York Times* sneers about Percy visiting left-wing proletarian dictatorships.

Senator Claiborne Pell visits Moscow and then reports on a conversation with the late Premier Alexei Kosygin who, says Pell, was "very concerned as he talked about the need for roads, automobiles and consumer goods. [Kosygin] was very much concerned about the influence of his generals and his admirals on the course of policy in his country. It occurred to me. . . that hawks and doves are not confined to the United States alone."<sup>3</sup> And what did it all mean to Senator Pell? "What is the threat from the Soviet Union? . . . We do not know for sure." Going to the Soviet Union, then, and uttering platitudinous idiocies about

1. *New York Times Magazine*, 8 February 1981, pp. 23ff.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 84, col. 1. On the other hand, more than half of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party are army officers. In fact, "the armed forces may well be Cuba's strongest and most influential political institution." Abraham F. Lowenthal, "Armies and Politics in Latin America," *World Politics*, (October 1974), p. 108. What Liberal Left secretary would criticize Castro for weighting the leadership with military officers? And is Castro a "civilian" dictator?

3. *Commentary*, November 1980, p. 47.

the Soviet Union is morally superior to tripping about “right-wing military dictatorships” in Latin America.

Then there is Senator Lowell Weicker, who had an 8½-hour meeting with Fidel Castro and found him to be “a man of enormous intellect and idealism.” Said Weicker: “Castro’s been known to snow people, but he didn’t snow me.” Castro and Weicker flew all over the island and, said Weicker, “I saw what he’s done with my own eyes. They deliver a quality of life to those people they’ve never known before. By Caribbean and South American standards, it’s Park Avenue.”<sup>4</sup> No mention by Senator Weicker about military dictatorships. What is it that Castro’s left-wing dictatorship does that makes it morally superior to “right-wing” dictatorships in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay?

### Supporting the Status Quo

Or take a recent column by Anthony Lewis of the *New York Times*, who wrote that “General Haig’s policy on El Salvador puts the United States down hard on the side of the status quo. Is that a line likely to serve American interests in a world of poverty and discontent and change?”<sup>5</sup>

The significant phrase here is, “puts the United States down hard on the side of the status quo.” Status quo. What Liberal Left writer would ever say: “President Carter’s policy from 1977 until 1981 on the Soviet Union put the United States down hard on the side of the status quo.”? I’m sure no Liberal Left writer ever complained when Helmut Sonnenfeldt suggested that we ought to accept the status quo in Eastern Europe. East Germans, Hungarians, Poles, Czechs, and Slovaks have indicated over and over again that they despise their status quo, that they would like to be rid of Soviet domination. But only El Salvador matters to Anthony Lewis. America is victimizing El Salvador by coming down hard on the side of the status quo. I haven’t read all of Anthony Lewis’s columns—who could?—but I’m sure he has not written with the same passion about the Soviet-suppressed Baltic republics and *their* status quo as he has about the anti-status quo terrorist brigades on the El Salvador left.

4. *People*, 10 November 1980.

5. *New York Times*, 8 March 1981.

The status quo, to the Liberal Left, is bad if and only if a non-Communist, a non-Márxist government is in power. The moment a Marxist government comes into power (as in Nicaragua) and begins to rule as a *left-wing* military dictatorship with even greater efficiency than its predecessor, then and only then does the status quo become holy, and criticism becomes tantamount to interference in the internal affairs of that country. Status quo is the code phrase to justify support for left, Marxist, terrorist movements against existing governments. When Senator Weicker says that we ought work "side by side" with the Cuban people because "Castro is there to stay," that's coming down hard on the side of the status quo. Would the Liberal Left suggest that since a right-wing military junta is "there to stay," we ought to work "side by side" with the people? Supporting the present Angolan regime is supporting the status quo; supporting Jonas Savimbi, who is anti-status-quo, is morally reprehensible (so far as the Liberal Left is concerned).

President Reagan recently said quite loudly that he didn't like the Communist status quo. Toasting Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher during her visit in Washington, the President said that we ought to "begin planning for a world where our adversaries are remembered only for their role in a sad and rather bizarre chapter in human history." Now there is the United States Government coming down hard *against* the status quo. Who on the Liberal Left, Anthony Lewis included, is cheering President Reagan for being against the status quo? *Our* status quo is always bad; *theirs* is always good.

The world has been, is now, and always will be afflicted by a struggle between those who are for and those who are against the status quo, and there will never be—in fact, cannot be—any consistency in such conflicts. The Soviet Union is anti-status-quo in some parts of the world but not in others. It defends and protects the status quo in Cuba, while the United States opposes that status quo. In turn, the Soviet Union seeks to maintain the status quo in Poland while the Poles oppose the status quo. Challenges to the status quo are perennial in Communist countries as well as non-Communist countries. The East Germans revolted in 1953, the Hungarians in 1956, the Czechs in 1968, the Poles in 1970 and in 1980 and in between, the Afghans in 1979. In non-Communist countries, you have anti-status-quo

movements, past and present, led by ethno-nationalists, ethno-regionalists, Balkanizers; in the Philippines, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Quebec and Western Canada; Kurds in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey; Somalia, Ethiopia; and many others.

The phrase "status quo" is as meaningless as it is loaded—it is a phrase that collapses on examination as lacking any moral content. Should Abraham Lincoln have permitted the anti-status-quo Confederate secession? Was Adolf Hitler's challenge to the European status quo morally legitimate? If France and Britain together had insisted on maintaining the status quo in Eastern Europe after Hitler came to power in 1933, we might have avoided World War II. It was precisely because the democratic states in Europe declined to come down hard on the side of the status quo—that is, to protect the legitimacy of the successor states in Eastern Europe against Hitler—that we went from Munich to the seizure of Czechoslovakia to the invasion of Poland and to the beginning of the world catastrophe. So much for the Left Liberal infatuation with the anti-status-quo complex.

But this infatuation raises another question. Why should the Liberal Left consistently prefer left dictatorships to right dictatorships or to any other form of right-wing government? What difference is there between Somoza's refusal to hold elections in Nicaragua and the Marxist junta's refusal to hold elections until—maybe—1987? What realistic difference is there between Batista's Cuba and Castro's Soviet Cuba? There is a difference in actual fact. Huber Matos, who fought with Castro against Batista, has described Castro's dictatorship as "a more implacable dictatorship than Batista's."<sup>6</sup> Why are free elections important for Left Liberals when right dictatorships are in power, but unimportant when a Left dictatorship assumes control?

Castro, in my hearing and in the hearing of other United Nations correspondents at a New York luncheon shortly after he took power, said there would be free elections in Cuba in a year or so—not immediately, because, like George Washington,

6. Huber Matos has told us that "Batista did not order executions for nameless crimes against the state. Under Fidel, a pseudo-legal framework covers death sentences which are in many cases just license to murder. Finally, there is this difference: ours was the first Communist revolution in America. Cuba is a Soviet dependency." *National Review*, "Huber Matos the Undefeated," by Lorrin Philipson, February 20, 1981, p. 157.



he would have no opposition. Well, it's 21 years later and still no free elections. Surely Castro can't think of himself any longer as a latter-day Washington. Yet I have heard no complaints from Senator Weicker about 21 years of postponed elections.

### The Danger of Fascism

Why this permanent discrepancy in the moral outlook of the Liberal Left? The answer, in a word: capitalism or its putative excrescence, fascism. The Liberal Left is permanently concerned with the danger of fascism, and only occasionally and ritualistically with communism. Yet if ideologies were stock issues, who would risk fascism as an investment? There's no growth industry here; fascist countries are non-existent, unless you want to call military authoritarians fascist. The hot stock issue today is Communism, a real growth industry, a pandemic growth industry. No matter, the enemy for the Liberal Left is non-existent fascism, especially non-existent fascism in the United States.

I refer you to a sentence in a column by the *New York Times* movie reviewer, Vincent Canby. In discussing a revival of a 1933 movie, "Gabriel Over the White House," Canby tells us that the film "says a lot about the great esteem in which fascism is sometimes held in this country."<sup>7</sup> During President Reagan's visit to Canada in March 1981, one could see on the television screen, among the signs held by anti-Reagan protesters, one which read: "Go Home, Reagan, Apostle of Fascism." For Coretta Scott King, Reagan's election means fascism has already arrived.<sup>8</sup>

One of the most wretched examples of this smear of America, the American people, and the country's free institutions is a book, recently published, *Friendly Fascism: the New Face of Power in America*.<sup>9</sup> It is by Bertram Gross, Distinguished

7. *New York Times*, Guide, 30 November 1980, p. 3.

8. The *Florida Times Union* quoted Mrs. King thus: "I feel that with a Republican president this country would move further toward the right and we would move to a fascist state. And I do not think this would be speaking too strongly to say that." (6 October 1980). Another purveyor of the canard that fascism is on the way is the American Civil Liberties Union director of the project on political surveillance, who has written: "Out of nativism, anti-communism, super-patriotism, religious and political conservatism [J. Edgar] Hoover forged an ideology of capitalism in the American grain, a blueprint for American fascism." Frank J. Donner, *The Age of Surveillance*. (Knopf, 1980), p. 125.

9. *Friendly Fascism: The New Face of Power in America*, by Bertram Gross. (M. Evans & Co., New York, 1980).

Professor of Public Policy and Planning at Hunter College and a professor of political science at the City University of New York. He is described as the major architect of the Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment Act of 1978 and the 1946 Full Employment Act in their original forms. He was at one time executive secretary of the President's Council of Economic Advisers. He could be called a liberal Democrat, although it would be more correct to call him a Left Liberal. His book was published before the Reagan landslide in November 1980. One can be certain that for Professor Gross, the Reagan Victory confirms the pythonic revelations of "Friendly Fascism."

In the guise of a loving Cassandra, a patriot, an Ombudsman-at-Large, Gross draws up an indictment of the American polity such as not even Pravda or Moscow Radio in their wildest imaginings would concoct. To adapt what Francois Bondy said in another context, Gross's book is "crowded with the unprovable in support of the irrelevant."<sup>10</sup>

As an example of how to smear a people, Gross quotes a Harvard psychiatrist, Dr. Gerald Klerman, who, says Gross, "estimates" that one out of eight Americans—about 28 million people—"can expect to experience depression during his life." Perhaps Dr. Klerman had some scientific reason for making so unprovable an estimate. But what about a comparison with other nationalities—is one out of eight good or bad? How do Japanese, Papuans, Cypriots, Ecuadorians compare on the depression continuum? And what does the "estimate" mean, except that people are people? Gross also quoted Dr. David Rosenthal of the National Institute of Mental Health as saying that "possibly 60 million Americans are borderline schizophrenics or exhibit other deviant mental behavior in the schizophrenic category." For Gross, these figures prove the development in America of "friendly fascist" tendencies. Presumably people with "friendly Communist" tendencies do not suffer from depression or schizophrenia.

Such tendentious use of public health statistics reminds me of William Blake's couplet:

"A truth that's told with bad intent  
Beats all the lies you can invent."

10. *Encounter*, February-March 1981, p. 62, Bondy is describing *Le Defi Mondial* by Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber.

## Fascism as America's Future

The most immediate question about Gross's book, decorated as it is with the apparatus of objective scholarship, is why does he predict "Friendly Fascism" as America's inevitable and/or not-so-inevitable future? Why not "Friendly Communism" or "Friendly Reaction" or "Friendly Right-wingism"? Why Fascism, an ideology with no canonical texts, no definite content, and no reification in any modern industrial state? In fact there may not even be any such thing as "fascism". Professor Henry Ashby Turner Jr. has written that "there has been a general reluctance to consider what must be a definite possibility; namely, that fascism as a generic concept has no validity and is without value for serious analytical purposes."<sup>11</sup>

To warn about "Friendly Fascism" is to put oneself squarely on the side of true liberalism; to deny the possibility, let alone the imminent arrival, of "Friendly Fascism" is to ally oneself with "Friendly Fascism"; otherwise why would anyone deny the possibility? Anyone who warns that fascism is on the way is provably a liberal; he who denies it is, by his very denial, a man of the right—a warmonger who believes in defense budgets and in resisting non-existent Communist threats to peace.

Even those who ostensibly disagree with Gross nod reflectively that there just might be something in what he says. For example, Jason Epstein, publisher and social critic, doesn't see anything plausible in "Friendly Fascism." But—

*Friendly Fascism* is nonetheless interesting in so far as it reflects what seems to be a widespread feeling among liberals as well as conservatives that democracy in America has played itself out; that soon Americans won't be able to govern themselves. . .

In fact, authoritarianism seems less likely to arise at the center than at the increasingly autonomous bureaucratic outposts—the maternity wards, the class-

11. Henry Ashby Turner Jr., "Fascism and Modernization," *World Politics*, 24:4, (July 1942): 563. During the Stalin-Tito confrontation, a French Communist leader said: "When I say that Tito's regime is comparable to that of Franco, I am not playing with words. I can prove by Marxist analysis that the Yugoslav regime is a fascist regime." Quoted in K.A. Jelenski, "The Literature of Disenchantment," *Survey*, no. 42 (1962), p. 117.

rooms, the asylums, the welfare agencies, the nursing homes. . . .<sup>12</sup>

"Friendly Fascism"—nursing homes! Maternity wards! Is there something you don't like? Warn about "fascism" and you have an audience to cheer your perspecacity. Warn about "Communism" and you have an audience to jeer your warmongering perseverance.

If Fascism ever had any doctrinal significance, its last bastion was Falangist Spain. With the uprooting of Nazism and Italian Fascism in 1945 and the downfall of Salazar Portugal and the Greek colonels, the school of political thought which has been denominated as "fascism" went into eclipse. The only major political doctrine today that challenges human rights "in principle," as Senator Moynihan has expressed it, is in the Soviet Union.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore if there is no fascism, it is necessary for Left Liberalism to invent one, so that the old contrast between leftwing totalitarianism (sometimes bad but potentially good and desirable) and rightwing totalitarianism (always bad) can be restored. Since the possibility of fascism in the old sense is not realizable now or in the future, a new kind of "fascism" must be created with which to scare people. After all there is now a Reagan in the White House who speaks directly about the menace of Soviet Communism to world peace. The new scare-word becomes "Friendly Fascism"—which someone like Jason Epstein can indulge even though he knows Gross is talking nonsense.

### A Monster Created

With a concept like "Friendly Fascism" it becomes possible to frighten public opinion in West European countries—particularly in France and Italy, with their mass Communist movements—about the United States and its future political direction.<sup>14</sup>

12. Jason Epstein, "Is the Party Over?", *New York Review*, 23 October 1980, page 10. Epstein's misuse of language is paralleled in a recent study of American business in which the author writes: "Totalitarianism in America works in subtle ways. It is effected from without, but it takes place within each man, almost always in silence. It has no flag but the company logotype and no weapons but paychecks, promotions, and the promise of happiness." *The Oppressed Middle: Politics of Middle Management*, by Earl Shorris (Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1981).

13. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Counting Our Blessings: Reflections on the Future of America*. (Atlantic-Little Brown, 1980), p. 97.

14. Gross doesn't go as far as Sean MacBride, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize and the Lenin Prize and, naturally enough, UN High Commissioner for Namibia: "The capitalist system is terrorism, and the people are forced to take up arms and revolt against the system." *Washington Post News Service*, 8 Oct. 1977. "Friendly Terrorism"?

Now why is it necessary to re-create a monster called fascism? Simply put, to prevent democratic opinion from focusing on the only totalitarian system which exists in the world today: Soviet Communism. By re-creating the old menace of fascism, even though as a ruling philosophy it exists nowhere and is without intellectual adherents, it becomes possible to contrast *two* totalitarianisms: Communism, self-defined as being on the side of history and in the vanguard of the progressive forces, with antihistorical, regressive, and therefore undesirable fascism.

The historical claim that democracy is in reality proto-fascism is essential to the Liberal Left effort to confront two problems which, if ignored, would make hash of the argument that socialism is the only solution for the world's ills. The first problem is the success of modern capitalism, not in the abstract, but as compared with any other existing economic system.<sup>15</sup> The second problem emerges from the first: the failure of socialism to bring a broadening of either political or economic freedom for workers and peasants. (Only in a so-called socialist country would the cry for a shorter work-week, as in Poland, be regarded as counter-revolutionary.) The last 63 years of Kremlin socialism or, as I prefer to call it, Gulagism, has seen its votaries incessantly explaining why omelettes can only be made by breaking eggs and why the broken eggs always turn out scrambled;<sup>16</sup> why Stalin was an aberration and why Khrushchev was a hare-brained schemer. No doubt when his time comes, Brezhnev will turn out to have been a senile despot who had to be gotten rid of. Or else he was guilty of "subjectivism" or the personality cult.

The "Friendly Fascism" smear of America is essential to the Liberal Left in order to save Marxism and its unfulfilled promises. Since virtually all of his prophecies have proven false, the Marxist corpus can still be saved by talking about "domination,"

15. Jean-Francois Revel has made the point that what has given European socialists great strength in their debate is that they argue as if they are comparing two real systems—capitalism and socialism—"rather than comparing a real system with a plan." Says Revel: "They have altered an hypothesis into an event." The study of political democracy can draw on the historical record but, says Revel, "the study of socialism is an exercise in futurology." *The Totalitarian Temptation* (Doubleday, 1977).

16. The ghastly "omelette" metaphor seems to have been created by Beatrice Webb, according to her niece. See George Watson, *Politics and Literature in Modern Britain*, (Rowman and Littlefield, 1977), p. 52. Such apologies are still to be heard. Recently, an unnamed Chinese historian explained the horrors of the Pol Pot regime in this fashion: "We must allow inexperienced people to make mistakes and correct them." *New York Times*, "China's Aim in Asia," April 21, 1981.

“surplus repression,” “repressive tolerance,” “institutional aggrandizement,” “sophisticated manipulation”—slogans which imply that capitalism equals fascism-to-be and which, by their mere incantation, transform the future into the here and now. The Liberal Left must predict fascism-on-the-way; otherwise the Marx-Engels-Lenin prognosis of an enduring capitalist crisis becomes ridiculous. For if capitalism does go on in its bungling way, improving the lot of its own people while at the same time supplying “socialist” countries with the food and technology they need, then it demonstrates that capitalism can solve its problems, peacefully, as indeed Marx said it could.<sup>17</sup>

### Fascism & Communism Compared

But it cannot be said often enough that it becomes more and more difficult to distinguish between Fascism and Communism, for in essence there is little difference between the Fascism that was and the Communism that is. Professor Roy Macridis has written:

For some time the view of totalitarianism as an exclusively right-wing phenomenon was widely held. . . . [T]otalitarianism is a political phenomenon that subordinates individuals and their freedom to the political objectives of the party and the State. In this sense, Communism and Fascism are both totalitarian ideologies, having the same elements of personal leadership, elimination of all opposition, single-party rule, subordination of all activities to State and to party and the use of police terror. . . . There is in fact a convergence between “left-wing” and “right-wing” totalitarianism. The similarities are best apparent in relation to their shared negative themes—that is, what they oppose. But they are close too in regard to the tactics

17. Marx said, September 8, 1872: “We know of the allowances we must make for the institutions, customs, and traditions of the various countries; and we do not deny that there are countries such as America, England. . . where the working people may achieve their goal by peaceful means.” Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *On Britain* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962), p. 494. The fact that so very many of Marx’s prophecies have proven wrong has no effect on the True Believer. Georg Lukacs, master of European Marxism, declared in 1967 “that even if every empirical prediction of Marxism were invalidated, he would still hold Marxism to be true.” Lewis S. Feuer, *Ideology and the Ideologists* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), p. 105.

they advocate for the conquest of power and with regard to the manner in which their power is institutionalized.<sup>18</sup>

In other words, if you would understand Fascism, study Communism.

The similarities between Communism and Fascism had long been remarked upon by pre-war anti-Communist intellectuals like John Dewey, Oswald Garrison Villard, Charles A. Beard, Archibald MacLeish, Horace Kallen, Sidney Hook, Morris Cohen, John Chamberlain, and others. Morris Cohen once referred to “the passionate and uncompromisingly ruthless war-spirit common to Communists and Fascists. . . . When the Communists tell me that I must choose between their dictatorship and fascism I feel that I am offered the choice of being shot or hanged.”<sup>19</sup>

In May 1939, the anti-Communist Committee for Cultural Freedom associated the Russian and Fascist dictatorships and said that “literally thousands of Germans, Italians, Russians and other victims of cultural dictatorship have been silenced, imprisoned, tortured or hounded into exile.” And this was three months before the infamous Nazi-Soviet Pact, of August 23, 1939. But nine days earlier, on August 14, 1939, 400 Left Liberals and innocent dupes, prominent in the arts, sciences, and religion, had issued a long Open Letter branding the Committee for Cultural Freedom signers as “fascists” and “friends of fascists” for daring to suggest “the fantastic falsehood that the U.S.S.R. and the totalitarian states are basically alike.” The relationship between Communism and Fascism was not, as opponents of this construct like to argue, the product of Cold War thinking; the relationship was apparent long before 1946.<sup>20</sup>

In Europe, again before World War II, it was noted that despite apparent doctrinal differences, Fascism and Communism were brothers. As Bernard Crick has written:

18. Roy C. Macridis, *Contemporary Political Ideologies* (Winthrop, 1980), p. 91.

19. Frank A. Warren III, *Liberals and Communists: The 'Red Decade' Revisited*. (Indiana University Press, 1966), pp. 13-14.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 182-183. Also see Eugene Lyons, *The Red Decade* (Bobbs Merrill, 1941), Chapter XXXVIII.

From about 1936, very much a product of the behavior of the Communist Party in the Spanish Civil War, several well-known, or to become well-known, political writers or literary intellectuals, began to take over Mussolini's unrealistic and bombastic term [totalitarianism] . . . and to apply it to something that they saw independently of each other and at first found hard to believe. They saw with unwelcome horror that there were astonishing similarities between the style, structure of thought and the key institutions of the Nazis and the Russian Communists. Borkenau, Gide, Malraux, Orwell, Silone, all saw this.<sup>21</sup>

There is an even closer historical connection between the two totalitarian systems. Professor Richard Pipes has argued against the notion, common in the historical literature about this period, that the Czarist system of repression was "reactionary." After all, techniques are "neutral." He writes:

Methods of suppressing dissidence can be applied by regimes of a 'left' orientation as readily as by those considered 'right.' Once tried and proven successful, they are certain to be used by any government—on whatever grounds—which regards itself as entitled to a monopoly in politics.

The type of legislation and the police institutions created to enforce the Czarist resistance to reform, says Professor Pipes, "spread after the Revolution of 1917 by way of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany to other authoritarian states in Europe and overseas."<sup>22</sup>

This point has been made even more sharply by Professor Adam Ulam, who believes that Soviet immoral behavior actually abetted the rise of Hitler, whose territorial claims "were no more shocking than those advanced by the Soviet Union by virtue of its role as the Fatherland of Socialism."<sup>23</sup>

21. Bernard Crick, "On Rereading 'The origins of Totalitarianism'", in *Hannah Arendt, the Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvyn A. Hill (St. Martin's, 1979), pp. 28-29.

22. Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime* (Scribner, 1971), pp. 294-295 and p. 316.

23. Adam Ulam, in Kurt London, ed., *The Soviet Impact on World Politics*.



The distinguished British political theorist, Maurice Cranston, has written: "Fascism took its anti-Semitism, like most of its ideological apparatus, from the Left. . . Indeed at the level of ideology, the distinction between Left and Right is very blurred."<sup>24</sup>

One of the most perceptive political analysts of our time, George Orwell, in 1940 questioned if there really was a difference between Left and Right, between socialism and fascism. Why, he asked, should there be any doubting that Hitler was a kind of socialist? Wrote Orwell:

The propertied classes wanted to believe that Hitler would protect them against Bolshevism, and. . . the Socialist himself. Hence, on both sides, the frantic efforts to explain away the more and more striking resemblance between the German and the Russian regimes.

The Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939 was ample documentation for Orwell—"National Socialism is a form of Socialism, is emphatically revolutionary."

### Social Fascism

Professor Gross's insistence that capitalism leads to fascism has a 50-year-old tradition behind it. The German Communist Party told its followers in the 1930s: "Fascism is the last card of the German bourgeoisie, which it is now playing against the threat of worker-revolution." Yet the resemblances between fascism and communism were massive, writes George Watson, but "it was unfashionable to admit that they existed at all."<sup>25</sup>

The myth of American fascism was spread by one of the most evil doctrines ever spawned by the human mind—the doctrine of "social fascism." Concocted by Stalin in the early 1930s, the phrase emboldened Communists to accuse all non-Communist

24. Maurice Cranston, "Ideology Today," *Lugano Review*, LR6 (1975/6), p. 16. And there is Ludwig Von Mises' observation: "In Hitler's Germany there was no private enterprise or private initiative. There was a system of Socialism which differed from the Russian system only to the extent that the terminology and labels of the free economic system were still retained." "Interventionism," *National Review*, March 6, 1981, p. 242.

25. Orwell is quoted in George Watson, *Politics and Literature in Modern Britain* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1977), pp. 40-41. Also, pp. 93-94.

The attack on America as fascist, proto-fascist, and/or incipiently fascist began almost half a century ago. It was part of the Kremlin line that was implemented in this country by the Communist Party, U.S.A. And this Kremlin line was strongly influential among Left Liberals of the time, several of whom were so close to the Communist Party as to be indistinguishable from Party members.

The 1934 Communist Party manifesto said that the New Deal purposes were “to make the workers and farmers and middle classes pay the cost of the crisis, to preserve the profits of the big capitalists at all costs, to establish fascism at home and to wage imperialism abroad.” The Civilian Conservation Corps were described as “forced labor camps”; the Wagner Act was an attempt to wrap “strong chains” around labor. While the Communist Party did not consider the New Deal “developed” Fascism, the Roosevelt and Hitler programs were, “in political essence and direction. . . the same.” Since Roosevelt was doing the work of Fascism, the time would come when he and his allies would be “waving the U.S. swastika.” Roosevelt, like Hitler, was an “executive of finance capital.”

The February 1935 CP manifesto announced its opposition to the “‘New Deal’ of Hunger, Fascism and War.” One of the leading fellow-travellers of the period, Harry F. Ward, said that the New Deal was establishing “the political form of American fascism.” Even non-Communist liberals like Reinhold Niebuhr saw parallels between the Roosevelt and Hitler programs. Stuart Chase saw in the New Deal program an example of “liberal Fascism.” Norman Thomas wrote an article in 1934 titled, “Will Fascism Come to America?”<sup>27</sup>

Professor Gross sees this “friendly fascist” future created by “faceless oligarchs [who] sit at command posts of a corporate-government complex” subverting the Constitution.<sup>28</sup> It will be the Land of Cacotopia, in Bentham’s nonce-word, with the worst of all governments, committing the worst of all evils. What is so shocking about Gross’s prophecies about “friendly Fascism” is that, despite his disclaimers, he is saying that in a matter of time,

27. I am much indebted in these references to Frank A. Warren III, *Liberals and Communists: The ‘Red Decade’ Revisited*, (Indiana University Press, 1966), *passim*.

28. The marvelous thing about such imagery is that you never have to put up a fact. Thus you need not identify “faceless oligarchs” since facelessness also presupposes anonymity. You needn’t say what part of the Constitution is being subverted; all of it. Gross so constructs his allegations as to preclude any evidence against them.

America will be a land of rampant and vicious nationalism, slavery, genocide, official lies, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, imperialism, mass oppression and exploitation, and concentration camps. These attributes of old-fashioned fascism need not be in the friendly version, or so he says. But why then use the word "fascism"?

Because by predicting a fascist future for the U.S., the prophet is imputing moral superiority to the Soviet Union, which, naturally, can't be fascist because it is not a capitalist economy. To attack a country as on the road to fascism is to label it, for Left Liberals, as wicked. On the other hand, to attack the Soviet Union for its infamies is to initiate the Cold War.

If Professor Gross merely said that this country was becoming reactionary, who would listen? If he used the phrase, "Friendly Reaction," it might even be regarded as an endorsement of President Reagan. But "Friendly Fascism"? Good marketing strategy but wretched political science.

By a rhetorical trick, known as aposiopesis, he makes everything happening now, no matter how trifling or unprovable, a symptom of "friendly fascism," and so the present becomes the future. His rhetoric is on a par with an article in the Soviet *Pionerskaya Pravda* (10 October 1980) which said: "More and more people are beginning to realize that Zionism is present day fascism."

### Comparative Politics Ignored

Professor Gross's thesis is flawed technically because, as a political scientist, he ignores one of the most useful heuristic devices of analysis known to the social sciences, a technique perfected by Aristotle and in use to this day: comparative politics, comparing constitutions or political systems. Gross avoids the comparative approach, and with good reason, because to compare the U.S. polity with other polities would instantly destroy his thesis.

Were he to compare the workings of political systems, for example that of the U.S. and Mexico, he would find that Mexico has a highly centralized political leadership, one which is centralized in a Presidency controlled by a tiny elite. There is the most limited autonomy for interest groups. There is an official political party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI),

which since its founding in 1929, has never lost a presidential, gubernatorial, or senatorial election despite the existence of three so-called opposition parties. The vast proportion of the Mexican population is marginal to the political process, non-participatory. It belongs to no organizations or parties.<sup>29</sup> Is Mexico a "Friendly Fascist" country? Most countries in the world are far, far worse than Mexico.<sup>30</sup> If the U.S. is on the road to "Friendly Fascism," just where on Gross's continuum is Mexico?

Gross ignores, whether out of ignorance or deliberately, the significant similarities between what he describes as the symptoms of Fascism with the actualities of Communism in the Soviet Union and its enslaved states: imperial expansion, domestic repression, unbridled militarism, undisguised racism, the Great Leader or the Party's Leading Role, destruction of free trade unions, political terror, and the legitimization of dictatorship by the laws of history.<sup>31</sup>

For Gross, a regime is fascist when it is "interlocked with concentrated capital." He fails to examine the concentration of capital by the Soviet New Class—the Party, the Presidium, the Central Committee, the Politburo—which monopolizes all the country's capital with no accountability and with a degree of power that no capitalist regime ever possessed in war or peace.

Even worse, Gross reveals an extraordinary unawareness of the extent of, in his words, "the brutalities of a Stalin or his heirs." He says that in Hitler's Germany, "domestic repression probably exceeded that of any other dictatorial regime in world history." Can it be that this Distinguished Professor has not read Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Robert Conquest, Vladimir Bukovsky, Leonard Schapiro—who would tell him that, both in numbers and in inhuman efficiency, Soviet terror (the Stalinist as well as the "friendly" kind of today) far exceeds the horrifying brutalities of Adolf Hitler? And the Mao Terror in China, the

29. Pablo Gonzalez Casanova, *Democracy in America* (Oxford University Press, 1970), *passim*.

30. For an analysis of the world's countries on the freedom continuum, see the annual Freedom House publication, *Freedom At Issue*, the latest, No. 59, Jan.-Feb. 1981.

31. How simple to ignore the "Fascist" statement of V.I. Lenin on his arrival in Russia, April 4, 1917: "The dictatorship of the proletariat [would be] an authority not based on law, not on elections, but directly on the armed force of some portion of the population." Or the 1906 statement by Lenin demanding "unrestricted power beyond law, resting on force in the strictest sense of the word." Quoted in Michael Polanyi, "On Liberalism and Liberty," *Encounter* (March 1955), p. 29.

Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the enslavement of millions of Chinese, the Castro Terror? Has the Distinguished Professor forgotten Stalin's extermination of the "kulaks," some 20 to 30 million people? And how can any well-informed political scientist ignore the Khmer Rouge Terror in Cambodia, a country which Norman Podhoretz has called the "Auschwitz of Asia," where at least one million people, out of a population of 8.3 million, were slaughtered by Pol Pot and his "proletarian" murderers after their takeover in 1975?

I haven't checked *The Guinness Book of World Records* but if there is a world champion dictator, Stalin easily gets first prize.

### A View of the USSR

The test today of a man's ethical sense is his outlook on the Soviet Union after more than six decades of totalitarian dictatorship in the name of socialism. It is now a widely accepted mode of political discourse in the non-Communist world for Left Liberals and even so-called Euro-Communists to utter nasty remarks about Stalin and, occasionally, the Soviet Union. (Euro-Communists are sometimes critical of the USSR, but never sufficiently as to make an irreparable break with the First Socialist Country.) So to offer a few ritualistic strictures about the USSR no longer has much significance in identifying someone's outlook on the Soviet Union and its esurient foreign policy. Here and there, Gross utters a caveat about the Soviet Union. But how analytical and relevant are the caveats?

Gross fails utterly to realize that Fascism may well be a variation of the radical socialism prevalent in Italy before World War I, as Professor Gregor has argued. Gregor has also shown, in a masterly piece of research among the Russian sources, that the standard Soviet interpretation of fascism has undergone critical changes.<sup>32</sup> The new revisionism among Soviet social scientists demonstrates a sympathetic understanding about the role of Fascism in European history, how it "spurred" economic activity, and how it provided for "an increased degree of vertical social mobility," according to Alexander Galkin, a Soviet social scientist, quoted extensively by Gregor.

32. A. James Gregor, "Fascism and Modernization: Some Addenda," *World Politics* XXVI:3 (April 1974), pp. 379, *passim*.

The most atrocious section of Gross's book deals with how the "Friendly Fascist Establishment" has been expanding the U.S. military budget so rapidly that "there may even be a good reason for the nervous old men in the Kremlin to feel threatened."<sup>33</sup> A statement like that persuades me that Professor Gross is no innocent bystander, no charter member of the Confused Left.<sup>34</sup>

Any comparison between Warsaw Pact and NATO forces shows Moscow's overwhelming superiority in strategic ICBM launchers, submarine-launched and intermediate-range ballistic missiles (1660 Warsaw to 802 NATO), combat manpower, main battle tanks (26,700 to 11,000) and tactical aircraft. Even more meaningfully, the Warsaw Pact is far more united and willful than the disunited NATO forces.

The "nervous old men in the Kremlin"—was there ever a more idiotic or sinister description of a military super-power which feels free to march into Angola, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, or Cambodia, either with its own Red Army or through surrogate forces? A military super-power whose leader told the 1976 Soviet Party Congress that "we do not conceal the fact that we see detente as a way of creating more favorable conditions for the peaceful building of Socialism and Communism?"<sup>35</sup>

Despite these and other examples of Soviet imperialism abroad and Soviet Gulagism at home, despite the Warsaw Pact military siege of Poland, Professor Gross talks only about the dangers of U.S. "expanding militarism" which, he says, enables

33. This passage was written before the Reagan landslide. One can imagine, if the Kremlin gerontocrats were so "nervous" during the Carter unilateral disarmament program, how Gross thinks they feel now at the beginning of the Reagan-Weinberger era.

34. On page 367, Gross praises the National Emergency Committee on Civil Liberties and the National Lawyers Guild for their "valiant efforts" in fighting for civil rights. According to Professors Roy Godson and Ernest Lefever, the Guild has supported Cuba, North Vietnam, the PLO, and the Baader-Meinhof Gang. The Committee was founded in the early 1950s to replace the Civil Rights Congress, "which was more openly known for its ties to the Communist party U.S.A." *In The CIA and the American Ethic*, (Georgetown University: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1979, pp. 72-73.

35. At the 24th Party Congress, on March 30, 1971, Brezhnev said: "In recognition of its international duty, the CPSU will continue to pursue a line in international affairs toward promoting the further activation of the world anti-imperialist struggle and the strengthening of the combat unity of all its participants. The total triumph of socialism the world over is inevitable, and for this triumph, for the happiness of the working people, we will fight, unsparing of our strength." *Soviet World Outlook*, February 15, 1981, p. 3. Nervous old men, indeed!

“establishment leaders to deflect attention from social injustice and racism at home by stirring up hostility toward *imagined enemies abroad.*” (Italics added, and with good reason.)

One begins to understand the purpose of Professor Gross’s prognosis. First, it justifies the nervousness of the Kremlin’s old men, who are understandably fearful of any kind of “fascism,” particularly the friendly kind. And, second, if fascism is on the way in the U.S., why concern oneself about a remote, non-fascist country like the Soviet Union, run by trembling dotards where there is a domestic clear and present danger to struggle against?

To attack a country as fascist is to label it, for Liberal Leftists, as wicked by definition. To attack the USSR (as would any adherent of democracy) is “objectively” to initiate the Cold War. In other words, Fascist-baiting is moral, “Redbaiting” is immoral and bellicose. To be fearful of the Soviet Union and the Brezhnev doctrine, which legitimizes for the Kremlin any Soviet intervention, anywhere, any time, is to stoke the fires of the Cold War. However, to be fearful of American behavior is not only understandable but warranted. In the words of Professor Alan Wolfe, a member of *The Nation’s* editorial board, who supported the John Anderson presidential candidacy in 1980:

Let Anderson run. . .The more disruption the man can cause, the better. To the degree that America is divided, disrupted and disunified, the world is much safer.<sup>36</sup>

### The Influence of Marcuse

As I read through the pages and footnotes in Gross’s book, I kept wondering: where had I seen these formulations, this corrupted language before?<sup>37</sup> Many of these judgments seemed so familiar, like old newspapers and photographs of family picnics. And then it came to me. Of course. By a transcendental process known as Lamaism, we have witnessed a miraculous direct reincarnation—from the Grand Lama that was, Herbert Marcuse,

36. Quoted in *Chronicles of Culture*, (July/August 1980), p. 41.

37. There is an extraordinary amount of what might be called “psychobabble,” sentences of bloated, sticky prose, difficult to understand; e.g., “History is full of too many cases in which sweet talk about bottom-up planning has been a facade for top-down domination.”

with his unique revelation of "repressive tolerance," to the present, the new Grand Lama himself, Professor Bertram Gross, who has modified that revelation to "Friendly Fascism." Or to use Gross's synonyms: the new Fascism, creeping Fascism, Fascism with a smile, Neo-Fascism, dependent Fascism, expedient Fascism and genuine Neo-Fascism.

Gross never mentions Marcuse, the philosopher-provocateur, but he's there, hypostatizing prose and all. It was Marcuse who argued that by creating a system of "repressive tolerance"—i.e., fulfilling the Bill of Rights—democracy creates "the most efficient system of domination"; that this system prevents the development of the "consciousness of servitude." Democracy has created the "happy consciousness which facilitates acceptance of the misdeeds of this society." It was Marcuse who told us that "liberal society necessarily gives birth to an authoritarian state," that tolerance "serves the cause of oppression," that even progressive movements can have "a reactionary effect if they accept the rules of the game."<sup>38</sup>

In a later work, *Counter-Revolution and Revolt*, Marcuse argued against civil rights in America, saying that they are part of the counter-revolution—"the democratic-constitutional phase"—which, he said, prepares "the soil for a subsequent fascist phase." In other words, the more freedom exists, the more inevitable is fascism. It was John Locke who once said that "the people who talk about liberty are frequently its greatest enemies."

Gross's thesis is that American capitalism has learned the process of co-optation—"multi-level co-optation," he calls it, the process of recognizing new actors in society knocking on the door for entry. Thus thousands and thousands of jobs get distributed to dissidents and rebels and "purportedly radical organizations" so they can let off steam harmlessly. Then there is "multi-ethnic co-optation" in which conspicuous roles are assigned to blacks, Jews, and women, all of which leads to "Friendly Fascism." Gross's argument is invincible. If blacks, Jews, and women are barred from the system of decision-making, program planning, administration, whatever—that is, brutal racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, and fascism. If the doors are

38. Marcuse's works are many but one which gives a clue to Gross's manipulative skill is Marcuse's essay in *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967).



opened to racial and religious minorities, why it's "multi-ethnic co-optation." All his "facts" fit his theory. He can't lose. As Alfred Cobban wrote:

The sociological historian uses his theory as the criterion for the selection of the relevant historical facts, and then on the basis of those selected facts he illustrates and confirms the theory by which they have been selected. Part of the fascination of general sociological theories is that success is built in.<sup>39</sup>

How Marcuse would have enjoyed and applauded Gross, his disciple. After all, it was Marcuse who complained bitterly that a "harmonizing pluralism"—what Gross now calls multi-level and multi-ethnic co-optation—is part of "the new totalitarianism." Harmonizing pluralism—new totalitarianism-Friendly Fascism. Voila. To paraphrase Wordsworth, "Marcuse! thou shouldst be living at this hour: Gross hath need of thee. . . ."

Gross has written a book in the guise of an expert economist, a professor of political science, a pragmatist, a practitioner of rational procedures in the quest for knowledge. In actual fact, his book is that of a preacher, perhaps even a theologian *manque*, a latter-day Tertullian; one who believes in miracles because they are impossible. His book can only help the enemies of democracy. As Edmund Burke once wrote:

These professors. . . see no merit in the good, and no fault in the vicious, management of public affairs; they rather rejoice in the latter, as more propitious to revolution. . . [T]hey therefore take up, one day, the most violent and stretched prerogative, and another time the wildest democratic ideas of freedom, and pass from one to the other without any sort of regard to cause, to person or to party.<sup>40</sup>

39. Cobban, *The Sociological Interpretation of the French Revolution*, (Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 13.

40. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, (London: Macmillan, 1906), p. 70.

# The Myth of Social Justice

ANTONIO MARTINO

The expression "social justice" and the prominent role it plays in contemporary political debate remind me of Bertrand Russell's acute observation: "The most savage controversies are those about matters as to which there is no good evidence either way." Russell was undoubtedly right: wars are fought for religion, not for mathematics. In the case of "social justice" it can reasonably be argued that, had the expression been less void of empirical content, its role in contemporary political controversies would be far smaller than it is today.

According to Webster's New Dictionary of Synonyms, myth "varies considerably in its denotation and connotation depending on the persuasion of the user." Also, "the word is used to designate a story, belief, or notion commonly held to be true but utterly without factual basis."

On both grounds "social justice" is a myth. The expression owes its immense popularity precisely to its ambiguity and meaninglessness. It can be used by different people, holding quite different views, to designate a wide variety of different things. Its obvious appeal stems from its persuasive strength, from its positive connotation, which allows the user to praise his own ideas and simultaneously express contempt for the ideas of those who don't agree with him.

If my goal is "social justice," the goal of those who disagree with me is, obviously, "social injustice." They are evidently inspired by evil intentions, and their ideas are not worthy of a highly motivated man. This simple trick is very old, but it is still quite popular—as evidenced by the American liberals' frequent accusation of "lack of compassion," a phrase thrown at those who disagree with them.

The expression "social justice" is more popular among advocates of statism than it is among individualists, since it is often used to justify (and praise) faith in the omnipotence of government. In this respect, it is intended to provide the "moral" justification for what Sir Karl Popper calls "holistic social engineering." This, he stresses, "is never of a 'private' but always of a 'public' character. It aims at remodelling the

‘whole of society’ in accordance with a definite plan or blueprint. . .”<sup>1</sup>

It cannot be denied that advocates of “social justice” are quite often motivated by lofty ideals. Such is the case, for example, of those who are genuinely concerned about poverty and the need to do something about it. Their sincere compassion for the poor is undoubtedly a noble sentiment, and it deserves respect and admiration. However, their belief that the way to help the poor is by remodelling the whole of society (according to their preferred general plan) is more likely to hurt everybody than to achieve their aim.

From this point of view, noble altruists confirm the wisdom of Henry D. Thoreau’s famous remark: “There is no odor so bad as that which arises from goodness tainted. . . .If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life. . .”<sup>2</sup>

Supporters of “social justice,” though, are not always motivated by lofty ideals. Quite often their inspiration is less noble, as evidenced by the fact that many people illustrate the meaning of “social justice” by examples based on hate for those who have, rather than on sincere compassion for the poor. In other words, the *injustice* is perceived as consisting not in the miserable conditions of the poor, but the *difference* between poor and rich. The implicit implication is that the poor would be better off if the wealth of the rich were eliminated, *even if their own lot did not change!*

### The Cult of Poverty

It is here that the myth produces its worst effects, because it leads to contempt for wealth on the one hand and the “cult of poverty” on the other. As such, “social justice” is simply the rationalization of envy, and its unintended effects have been the erosion of the social fabric and the perpetuation of avoidable poverty.

This process, whereby the rationalization of envy leads to praise of poverty and contempt of wealth, has been brilliantly

1. K. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, (1957), 1974, p. 67.

2. H.D. Thoreau, *Walden, or, Life in the Woods*, (1847), New York, 1970, p. 207.

analyzed by Helmut Schoeck in his classic treatise on envy.<sup>3</sup> He stresses that, whereas the approach has very old ideological roots, its revival is “of purely Marxist origin” and it plays a very important role in Marxist criticism of Western societies. The paradox is, according to Schoeck, that many Marxists regard high incomes as “socially just” in the socialist society of scarcity, “unjust” in the affluent society of capitalism.

As for the criticism levelled against our “affluent” societies, one can only agree with his conclusion:

For more than ten years social criticism in Western industrial societies has been focused on their material achievements. Something simply *has* to be wrong *because* the times are so good. The suspicion that this criticism is neither profound nor well founded, but is due rather to an absence of other legitimate targets, is confirmed when we recall that in modern times social criticism has never yet commended a society for obliging its members to lead a poor and wretched existence.

And, as for the “cult of poverty”:

Is there any valid reason why being miserable should bring one closer to the truth? The parables of the Bible may be largely responsible for this peculiar assumption—yet what is meant by truth has long since ceased to be religious or theological truth (where the above may indeed apply), but scientific, verifiable, pragmatic truth, and why this should be revealed to the man with an empty stomach and dressed in sackcloth, rather than to one who is well dressed and well fed, is not immediately apparent.

This last remark reminds one of the role played by Christianity, with its scenario of camels, needles, and wealthy men who couldn’t go to Paradise, in spreading the “cult of poverty.” Little attention has been given to the unintended consequences of the

3. H. Schoeck, *Envy, A Theory of Social Behaviour*, (1966), New York, 1972, especially ch. 13. Quotations below are taken from the same source.

indictment of wealth as sinful, and poverty as virtuous. While it is hard to understand why poverty should be virtuous (for *anybody* can become poor if he wants to) the unintended effects of the praise of poverty are the diffusion of poverty and the ennoblement of envy. The fact is that only the production of wealth can reduce poverty. But, if poverty is *virtuous*, why should it be reduced? And if wealth is sinful, why should it be produced?

It was precisely this sort of reasoning that led Nietzsche to the extreme view that "Christianity has been the greatest misfortune of mankind." There is undoubtedly room for disagreement here, but that it is possible to (mis)interpret Christianity in such a way is evidenced by the views of the advocates of the so-called "Christian social doctrine" and by the present Pope's politically motivated, but ill advised, frequent criticism of "materialistic capitalism."

### Distributive Justice

"Social justice" is very popular in the field of "distribution." Indeed, it can be said that "distributive justice" is synonymous with "social justice." Even here, however, the meaning attributed to the expression varies considerably according to the persuasion of the user. Only a small minority of those who advocate "distributive justice" interpret it as meaning "perfect equality" (whatever *that* means). No society has ever been based on absolute egalitarianism, and even communist countries operate on the basis of an unequal distribution of income. Nor is complete equality part of the communist faith: Stalin himself scorned what he labelled "petty bourgeois egalitarianism."

But if "distributive justice" does not mean perfect equality, what then does it mean? It has been convincingly argued that the term "distribution" is, in a free society, meaningless. Thus, Robert Nozick states:

The term 'distributive justice' is not a neutral one. Hearing the term 'distribution,' most people presume that some thing or mechanism uses some principle or criterion to give out a supply of things. Into this process of distributing shares some error may have crept. So it is an open question, at least, whether *redistribu-*

tion should take place; whether we should do again what has already been done once, though poorly. However, we are not in the position of children who have been given portions of pie by someone who now makes last minute adjustments to rectify careless cutting. There is no *central* distribution, no person or group entitled to control all the resources, jointly deciding how they are to be doled out. What each person gets, he gets from others who give to him in exchange for something, or as a gift. In a free society, diverse persons control different resources, and new holdings arise out of the voluntary exchanges and actions of persons. There is no more a distributing or distribution of shares than there is a distributing of mates in a society in which persons choose whom they shall marry. The total result is the product of many individual decisions which the different individuals involved are entitled to make.<sup>4</sup>

I believe that the best attempt to give a meaning to the expression "distributive justice" is that of John Rawls. Here we enter into a vast subject, which has attracted the attention of social scientists in the past decades. It is a field which lies outside my professional interests, and I consider myself moderately incompetent on the subject. What follows are just a few doubts I have about Rawls' construction.

Rawls' thesis is that:

Persons in the initial situation would choose two . . . principles: the first requires equality in the assignment of basic rights and duties, while the second holds that social and economic inequalities . . . are just only if they result in compensating benefits for everyone, and in particular for the least advantaged members of society.<sup>5</sup>

If I interpret Rawls' analysis correctly, its aim is to find a set of principles that would ensure a definitive solution to the

4. R. Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, New York, 1974, pp. 149-150.

5. J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 1971, pp. 14-15.

problem of distributive justice in any kind of society, forever.<sup>6</sup> It might be said that such an aim is, by its very nature, unattainable. The problem of "distributive justice" represents the essence of contemporary political debate, the qualifying element in the choice of the preferred politico-economic system. A unanimously accepted solution to the problem would ensure the realization of a "perfect" society, free from any kind of political or social conflict. This explains why the problem has so much appeal to the social theorist, but it also suggests that probably a solution can never be found.

As Sir Karl Popper has taught us:

...we shall always have to live in an imperfect society. This is so not only because even very good people are very imperfect; nor is it because, obviously, we often make mistakes because we do not know enough. Even more important than either of these reasons is the fact that there always exist irresolvable clashes of values: there are many moral problems which are insoluble because moral principles may conflict. There can be no human society without conflict: such a society would be a society not of friends but of ants.<sup>7</sup>

### Measuring Advantages in Society

The fact that Rawls' aim is excessively ambitious, however, should not prevent us from analyzing his construction. The first problem to be solved is: who are the "least advantaged members of society"? The expression suggests that there is an *objective* way to measure people's position in the distribution. Such an objective measure, however, does not exist, and it would be erroneous to think that it could be approximated by money income, because money income provides a very inaccurate, if not contradictory, indication of people's real income and welfare. And, if one correctly looks at *real* income, it is almost impos-

6. Such is also the opinion of S. Gordon, "The New Contractarians," in *The Journal of Political Economy*, June 1976, p. 576. What follows is largely based on my article "Diversita' e' un valore," in *Le Regioni della Giustizia*, Biblioteca della liberta', 1977, n. 65-66, pp. 213-224.

7. K. Popper, *Unended Quest*, 1976, p. 116.

sible to ascertain who the "least advantaged" members of society are.

Non-pecuniary factors—such as a pleasant job, a good climate, leisure, the possibility of spending time with friends and family, etc.—significantly influence personal welfare, but are not quantifiable. At times they are reflected in the money income—so that, for example, *ceteris paribus*, one would expect a pleasant job to pay less than an unpleasant one—but very often their influence on the size of money income is offset by other factors.

As an illustration of this point, take the case of a worker in Naples who makes 200,000 lire a month. He knows that if he moves to Milan he would be paid 500,000 lire a month for the same job. And yet, he does not move. What does that mean? It means that for him the pleasure of living in Naples (rather than in Milan) is worth *at least* 300,000 lire a month. Otherwise, he would move to Milan. Now, suppose our Rawlsian equalizer moves in. He looks at the money wage differential and jumps to the conclusion that it is unfair to pay two workers different wages for the same job. "Equal pay for equal work"—might be his slogan. So, he decides that both workers should be paid the same, regardless of *where* they work. If he does that, he in fact introduces an unjustifiable inequality: in *real* terms, the worker in Naples now makes much more than the one in Milan. The effect of the "equalization" would obviously be that of creating unemployment in Naples and labor shortage in Milan. This is something the Italian government has not yet understood. They are puzzled by the fact that, whereas in the South they have far more applicants for a given bureaucratic job than positions available, in the North they can't fill all their positions. The explanation is quite simple: government employees are paid the same money wage regardless of where they work. But the point is that money income is not a good indication of real wealth.

This problem is vividly illustrated by a famous parable reflecting Professor George J. Stigler's humor:

Dr. John Upright, the young physician, devoted every energy of his being to the curing of the illnesses of his patients. No hours were too long, no demand on his skill or sympathies too great, if a man or child could be helped. He received £2,000 net each year, until he died at the age of 41 from over-work. Dr.



Henry Leisure, on the contrary, insisted that even patients with broken legs be brought to his office only on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays, between 12:30 and 3:30 PM. He preferred to take three patients simultaneously, so he could advise while playing bridge, at which he cheated. He received £2,000 net each year, until he retired at the age of 84.<sup>8</sup>

If this is the case, we are left with no *objective* way to know who the "least advantaged members of society" are.

### Acceptance of Rawls' Principles

It seems to me that the most important feature of Rawls' approach is the fact that he believes that in the "initial situation," behind the "veil" of ignorance, everybody would accept his two principles as the basis for the definitive solution to the problem of distributive justice. This seems to indicate that, in Rawls' world, the justification for his principles of justice is that they would be unanimously accepted in the initial situation. It seems to me that such a solution leaves room for two very important objections.

First of all, there is no guarantee whatsoever that Rawls' principles would be *unanimously* accepted in the initial situation. In order to argue that, one would have to assume that in the initial situation all individuals are *identical*. The veil of ignorance is not sufficient: everybody must have the same attitude toward risk, the same political views, hold the same religious beliefs. But, if all individuals are *identical*, why isn't perfect equality the chosen criterion for distribution? On the other hand, if they are *not* identical, how can we assume that they would all agree with Rawls' principles?

Maybe, *many* would agree (namely, those who share Rawls' system of values), but nothing guarantees that unanimity would be reached. Just as an example, I would prefer this to Rawls' "difference principle": "Inequalities are unjust if, and only if, they result in a certain and demonstrable damage to someone (excluding the envious)." I believe that such a principle would be easier to enforce and much more compatible with individual liberty than the one suggested by Rawls, but of course there are

8. George J. Stigler, *The Theory of Price*, 3rd edition, 1966, p. 17n.

many other possible criteria,<sup>9</sup> and nothing guarantees that in the initial situation one of them would be unanimously chosen.

The second objection is even more important. Even if we assume that Rawls' principles would be unanimously accepted in the initial situation, what guarantee do we have that the distribution that results from them would be forever accepted? How can we objectively prove that existing inequalities produce "compensating benefits" for the "least advantaged members of society?" Isn't it more credible that, even if the principles are unanimously accepted in the initial situation, the "justice" of the resulting distribution will always be challenged by at least some members of society?

However, these are not my main points of disagreement with Rawls' argument. The fact is that Rawls does not believe it "just" to allow the distribution of income and wealth to be affected by the "natural lottery" of individual talents and personal abilities. This instinctive revulsion against inequalities determined by personal qualities is hard to understand, especially considering that Rawls must be convinced of possessing a higher than average endowment of personal ability. What he fails to understand is that rarely, if ever, are differences in natural abilities the exclusive result of what he calls the "natural lottery." All talents are to a large extent the result of a combination of natural hereditary factors and acquired skills.

Artur Rubinstein presumably had a hereditary predisposition for music, but it was only thanks to daily practice (8 hours per day, every day—according to him) that he could become and continue to be the great pianist known to everyone. It is doubtful that he would have devoted so much work to that purpose if he had lived in a society based on Rawls' "difference principles," that would have confiscated the result of his work (because it was partially due to the "natural lottery"). Anybody who has heard Rubinstein play knows that his talent has benefited everyone; it has been a significant example of the immaterial nature of social wealth.

But this is not the point. Suppose that Rubinstein refused to play in public. Suppose he developed his natural abilities exclusively for the benefit of those he liked, and for himself.

9. For a summary of some of these, see S. Brittan & P. Lilley, *The Delusion of Incomes Policy*, London, 1977, especially pp. 196 ff.

In such a case, obviously, his talent would not have produced "compensating benefits" for the least advantaged members of society. It would have been an obvious violation of Rawls' "difference principle." What could have been done? Should he have been forbidden to play? And, if so, what about the first principle, the principle of equal liberty?

### Distributive Justice and Individual Liberty

This leads us to the fundamental objection against Rawls' construction, an objection that is valid for any kind of patterned, prefabricated system of "distributive justice": such systems are incompatible with individual freedom. This point has been stressed by several scholars, and it might be worth looking at their point of view in their own words.

As the late Harry G. Johnson has pointed out, freedom of choice produces inequalities:

. . .the alternatives of choice provided to the citizen necessarily give rise to observed inequalities of income as conventionally measured, and. . .efforts to prevent this outcome or to cancel it out by *post facto* income redistribution run the serious risk both of depriving the citizen of the benefits of freedom of choice and self-fulfillment and of eventually requiring a reversion to a more authoritative or totalitarian structure of the society and the state.<sup>10</sup>

As Robert Nozick has stressed, liberty upsets the pattern, *any* distributive pattern. He uses the known example of supposing that Wilt Chamberlain signs a contract according to which he gets 25¢ for every ticket sold. "Let us suppose,"<sup>11</sup> says Nozick, that in one season one million persons attend his home games, and Wilt Chamberlain winds up with \$250,000, a much larger sum than the average income. . . . Is he entitled to this income? . . . Each of these persons *chose* to give 25¢ of their money to Chamberlain." If *they* were entitled to it, "didn't this include their being entitled to give it to . . . Wilt Chamberlain? Can

10. H.G. Johnson, *On Economics and Society*, 1975, p. 214.

11. Nozick, *op. cit.*, pp. 161, 163.

anyone else complain on grounds of justice?" And he concludes: "The socialist society would have to forbid capitalist acts between consenting adults."

This is the fundamental point. If we allow freedom of choice, the individual spending decisions *continually* alter the "distribution" of income. No patterned, prefabricated distribution can last very long, if freedom of choice is allowed. And this is true of *any* kind of distribution, be it based on equality or on inequality. In a free society—in a society, that is, where people are free to decide how to use their income—any observed distribution is the result of the previous process of exchanges, and the starting point of a new process that will lead to a different "distribution." If one wants to maintain the chosen distribution through time, therefore, one has to forbid "capitalist acts between consenting adults" and give up individual freedom of choice. If, on the other hand, one wants to preserve individual freedom of choice, one must give up the idea of maintaining a patterned distribution of income and wealth. This is not a recent discovery; it was clearly understood by David Hume: "Render possessions ever so equal, men's different degree of art, care, and industry will immediately break that equality."

All of this undoubtedly confirms that "equality" of any kind is incompatible with freedom. Sir Karl Popper states: ". . . freedom is more important than equality; . . . the attempt to realize equality endangers freedom; . . . if freedom is lost, there will not even be equality among the unfree."<sup>12</sup>

A free society needs not lack compassion for the poor. We can and must do something to help those who, through no fault of their own, earn an income that is below what society regards as "acceptable." The best possible solution, in my opinion, would be to move from the present, wasteful, bureaucratic system of governmental assistance to a comprehensive and automatic negative income tax.

### Social Justice in Free Society

But, we must also be aware of the threat posed to freedom by the myth of social justice. The only kind of justice that is compatible with a free society is, as Professor F.A. von Hayek

12. K. Popper, *Unended Quest*, cit., p. 36.

has shown, commutative justice.

Commutative justice means. . . a reward according to the value which a person's services actually have to those of his fellows to whom he renders them, and which finds expression in the price the latter are willing to pay. This value has, as we must concede, no necessary connection with moral merit. It will be the same, irrespective of whether a given performance was in the case of one man the result of great effort and painful sacrifice while it is rendered by another with playful ease and perhaps even for his own enjoyment. . . . Commutative justice takes no account of personal or subjective circumstances, of needs or good intentions but solely of how the results of a man's activities are valued by those who make use of them.<sup>13</sup>

We need not have an inferiority complex toward those who claim that they possess a superior formula of social justice—they are usually possessed by it. No country has ever succeeded in improving the material well-being of its members by rejecting the principles of a free economy and imposing a prefabricated blueprint for distribution on the whole of society. Those who have tried have only succeeded in making the rich worse off, without improving the conditions of the poor. And, in the process, they have often impaired the productive capacity of the whole economy.

But, even more important, our free societies are the closest historical approximation of a minimal state that has been thus far realized. And as R. Nozick aptly reminds us:

The minimal state treats us as inviolate individuals, who may not be used in certain ways by others as means or tools or instruments or resources; it treats us as persons having individual rights with the dignity this constitutes. Treating us with respect by respecting our rights, it allows us, individually or with whom we

13. F.A. von Hayek, *Studies in Politics, Philosophy, and Economics*, Chicago, 1969, pp. 257 ff.

choose, to choose our life and to realize our ends and our conception of ourselves, insofar as we can, aided by the voluntary cooperation of other individuals possessing the same dignity. How *dare* any state or group of individuals do more. Or less.<sup>14</sup>

14. Nozick, *op. cit.*, pp. 333-4.

# The Myth of Social Conditioning

KENNETH MINOGUE

In the vocabulary of conditioning, responses can be "triggered." This essay on the idea of conditioning is a response, and I can explain precisely what "triggered" it. At a party on Christmas Day at Hampstead in London, I came across a young man wearing around his neck a studded dog's collar. It is necessary to emphasize that I mean a collar appropriate to a dog, and not simply a clerical collar. But trading on that possible confusion, I immediately asked him whether this decoration was a witty way of proclaiming that he intended to become a clergyman. When he denied this, I suggested that possibly it proclaimed that he was a cynic, since the Greek word *kynikos* means a dog. Wrong again. Launched on the game, I remembered Alexander Pope's couplet:

*I am his majesty's dog at Kew*

*Pray tell me, Sir, whose dog are you?*

But he managed to exhaust all my ingenuity, and finally explained to me what he meant by the dog's collar. It symbolized the human condition. It was not difficult to work out what he meant, for he was expressing one of the commonest views of what human beings really are.

We imagine (so the opinion runs) that we are superior to animals, yet we are actually nothing more than a set of organismic responses to stimuli like smiles, packaging, gender codes, the connotations of words, images, and symbols of all kinds. Hence it is appropriate that Pavlov, the famous Russian scientist who developed a conditioning theory of learning, should have made his most famous experiments on dogs. For all our illusions of superiority to the animal world, our life is nothing else but a form of higher salivation. Lurking in the background of this young man's position was a revised version of the Socratic paradox: not "I am wise in that I know that I am ignorant," but rather, "I am free, or at least rather superior to the ordinary person, in that I know that I am conditioned."

One does not have to have adventured far into the realm of ideas to recognize in this position a version of one of the central beliefs of the western world in the twentieth century. It is, I think, a fundamentally religious belief, and it may be the only religion still

thriving in European civilization. It consists of believing that we are oppressed, that part of this oppression takes the form of alien ideas inside our own minds, and that the business of life is to liberate ourselves from this oppression.<sup>1</sup> Such a central core is to be found in two distinct versions, both of which are fakes for reasons I shall explain. One version is political, and discovers oppression in the nature of our social arrangements. The oppression may be based on class, sex, race, nation, or much else, and the liberation consists in revolution and the achievement of a true community in which—as it were—dog does not eat dog, and everybody helps with the washing up. This is usually a rather melodramatic version of the belief, and the believers discover themselves to be persecuted by patriarchy, the bourgeoisie, imperialists, WASPs, and much else. There is also a spiritual version, found in a thousand cults, most of them parodying some Eastern religion. Here we find as the fundamental belief the idea that man contains within himself a spark of illumination which could liberate him if only it could blaze forth. The problem of finding this true self is that the detritus of western rational thinking, the ambitions of the rat race, vanities, habits, aggression and the rest of the internal “static” have made us imperfect receivers of messages both from the illumination within and the vaster light beyond.

Neither of these types of doctrine is quite what it seems. The ideologies look political, but what they actually seek is to destroy politics altogether. Marx and Engels desire, as well as predict, that the state will wither away. And the cultic versions look like expressions of spirituality, but have altogether lost interest in the moral dimension of human life without which mystical exercises are mere expressions of technical virtuosity. Transcendental meditation, to take one example, is concerned with peace and happiness and power, not in any central way with goodness. And this move from the moral interest to the technical is why such cults flourish in a technological era like our own: they are, in fact, nothing else but exercises in a superstitious technology of the mind.

1. The belief I am discussing may be found at all levels of seriousness. As Michael Leapman writes when introducing an article on the National Association to Aid Fat Americans, “Few self-respecting Americans do not nowadays regard themselves as part of an oppressed and stigmatized group. Day after day, our sympathies are sought by indignant blacks, women, homosexuals, landlords, tenants, Irish, old people, young people . . . the list is endless.” *The Times* (London), July 3, 1981, p. 12.



The idea of social conditioning thus refers to the set of thoughts and attitudes which we must (according to these beliefs) conquer if we are to be truly free and rational. It is thus the central idea in a conception of human life as an adventure in self-improvement which can be measured by the extent to which we liberate ourselves from our conditioning. These salvationist doctrines are, in detail, enormously varied. My concern is not with the details but with the formal structure which underlies the whole enterprise. The point in each case is to create a higher version of humankind. Such a point is evident in the symbolism of the dog collar. For a dog is to the ordinary man as the ordinary man is to—what? A superman? A god? The answers range from P. D. Ouspensky's theme of the higher evolution of man to Marxist ideas about the new man who must be built to live in the socialist order.

### **Conditioning and Christianity**

Since my concern is merely with the idea of social conditioning, it cannot include the wider ramifications of this idea. But there is one point which will help to put this matter into context. The religious core-idea that concerns me is clearly very different from the core-idea found in Christianity. In speaking of Christianity, I am concerned not with any particular version of that religion, but with those formal characteristics of Christianity which underlie the whole of western civilization. Christianity asserts that God created a perfect world which went wrong because of sin. This condition cannot change within history. The very concept of creation means that man is unbridgeably inferior to God, and hence that any idea of union with God could only be a matter of metaphor. All human transactions are distorted by sin, and the only appropriate attitude is that of humility and acceptance. It is obvious, of course, that this religion is entirely compatible with the most active transformation of the world. What it is not compatible with is any idea that man can, by his own efforts, transform his own character. Such a possibility involves an entirely different conception of both man and God, and can provoke in Christians only a few Pascalian mutterings to the effect that whoever tries to make men into angels will succeed only in turning them into devils. The idea of social conditioning, then, when it becomes entangled in these elevated intellectual regions, is a piece of scientific terminology which conceals the moral and theological issues raised by a proposal to transform the human race.

Our first task must be to explain the idea of conditioning, as it appears in three related fields: psychology, metaphysics, and politics.

### Theories of Conditioning

Conditioning began its rise to fame with the experiments made early in the century by the Russian physiologist Anton Pavlov, who constructed a theory of learning based on the observation that some physiological responses may be produced not only by a natural or "unconditioned" stimulus, but also by associated stimuli. Dogs begin to salivate at the sight of food. This is the "unconditioned" response. They can be taught to associate other stimuli (the ringing of bells, the appearance of lights) with food; and so long as the association continues to be "reinforced," they will continue to respond. If the association begins to break down, then the conditioning will soon be "extinguished." The terms in quotation marks have become items in the terminology of learning theory, and later psychologists of a behaviorist disposition, such as J. B. Watson and B. F. Skinner, have followed Pavlov in widening the range of the theory far beyond dogs and simple reflexes so as to take in the most elaborate and complex of human responses. Skinner, for example, has developed a theory of superstition in terms of accidental reinforcement. This theory is taken to be confirmed by experiments with pigeons who, randomly rewarded, begin to behave as if the rewards are "caused" by the behavior in which they happened to be indulging when the reward occurred.

It has always been characteristic of science that it explains the complex in terms of the simple; and hence the idea that man is nothing but a very complex organism has been an irresistible implication of science ever since the days of La Mettrie's *L'homme machine*. We find the same idea clearly stated in Skinner's early work: "The hypothesis that man is not free is essential to the application of scientific method to the study of human behaviour."<sup>2</sup> This formulation is, however, misleading. The idea that human beings are law-governed organisms is not a hypothesis, but rather a presupposition without which no one could advance properly scientific hypotheses about human behavior. And behaviorism is that doctrine in psychology which argues that psychology can only ad-

2. B. F. Skinner, *Science and Human Behaviour* (New York: The Free Press, 1953), p. 447.

vance by abandoning all such ideas as the will, introspection, inner thoughts and other such "ghosts in the machine."<sup>3</sup> The object of study must be man understood as a complex organism, and hence the model of plausibility in human behavior must be soldiers saluting and other such apparently in-built responses to stimuli. "When the Jewish child first learns to read," Skinner tells us, "he kisses a page upon which a drop of honey has been placed. The important thing is not that he will later salivate at the sight of a book, but that he will exhibit a predisposition 'in favor of' books."<sup>4</sup> It is along these lines that a whole psychology of learning and self-control has been developed, in which stutterers are reinforced in speaking fluently by sympathetic responses, and sex maniacs discouraged from their dreadful practices by aversion therapy.

The great vogue of the idea of conditioning depends, then, upon the fact that it plays a central part in one area of psychology. In this area, its vogue is supported by such other concepts in biology and biochemistry as "imprinting," in which an accident of association in young organisms becomes a law of their behavior. When people talk in pseudo-scientific terms of "pressures," they are invoking the same paradigm of explanation. Similarly, explanation of human acts in terms of supposedly biological cycles like adolescence and the menopause draws upon the same material.

Second, the idea of conditioning plays an important part in philosophy, and I suspect that this usage is also relevant to its current vogue. The whole idea of a cause, which is arguably central to scientific explanation, may be understood in terms of the necessary and sufficient conditions for the occurrence of an event. Perhaps more importantly, God is philosophically taken to be Unconditioned, thus distinguishing Him from all phenomena of which we have experience. Quite what such an idea would mean is something no one can give much account of, but there is no doubt that being unconditioned amounts to a dream of power, and it is indeed an illusion of human beings that they can attain an unconditioned state. The sage who finds "that content surpassing wealth" by means of meditation has put himself beyond the reach of the ordinary human conditionalities on which our happiness generally depends. By destroying conditioning, we may imagine that we have become free in a way that extends our power.

3. The reference is, of course, to the criticism of Cartesianism found in Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London, 1949).

4. *Op. cit.*, p. 57.

Third, there is an extended and weakened idea of conditioning which, drawing its plausibility from psychology, dominates our understanding of how people influence each other in fields ranging from education to propaganda. We are often tempted to distinguish the good and the bad in education by the use of a term like "indoctrination," which is a process by which ideas and attitudes are thought to be imposed upon other people. I have even seen the metaphor of "injection" used to convey the idea. "Programming" from computerspeak is another variation. Similarly, in politics, propaganda is the attempt by interested parties to make others think thoughts convenient to the interested parties. One of the dimensions of modern warfare is the battle of propaganda.

When this idea picks up the experimental resonance of conditioning, it results in the idea of "brainwashing." This word became famous in the early 1950s as a name for the techniques by which North Korean communists induced some American prisoners of war to confess to "germ warfare." That men could be forced to lie by torture is hardly a new discovery, but such dramatic events as the absurd self-incriminating confessions of defendants at the Moscow purge trials in 1936-38 had made everyone aware of the totalitarian use of these techniques, which were, in the Korean case, deliberately patterned upon Pavlov's experiments in causing such stress to dogs that their personalities broke down altogether. Subsequently, William Sargent<sup>5</sup> argued that the conditions for such breakdowns of personality with resultant heightened sensitivity to outside influences could be found in a range of common conditions, from rock concerts to the practices of certain religious cults.

### Conditioning and Responsibility

Now the combined effect of this cluster of ideas is to erode the traditional model of moral responsibility for human acts. The arena in which the borderline between the scientific and the moral models of human action is most unstable is, of course, the court of law; and there seems to be no satisfactory intellectual account of how human acts could be divided between the contradictory attributes of conditioning and responsibility. On a deterministic view, everything we do is the outcome of nature, nurture, and condi-

5. William Sargent, *Battle for the Mind: A Physiology of Conversion and Brainwashing* (London: Heinemann, 1957).

tions; on a moral view, everything except what can be shown to be the direct outcome of sleepwalking or hypnosis would be acts for which we are accountable. This is a question on which there is a huge literature, and I am certainly in no position to settle it now. All I can do is point to the fact that the idea of social conditioning has become a large component in the explanation of those irrational features of human existence which constitute "mitigating circumstances" in the judgment of an action.

Conditioning thus stands for an alien element within the self for whose effects we are not responsible. When, to take the most obvious kind of example, we excuse some youth from the slums for some violent or criminal act on the ground that he has been conditioned all his life to respond to his circumstances in that way, we make a plausible enough judgment. But in doing so, we threaten to leave no room at all for the idea of moral responsibility; and if we press this model of explanation further, we run the danger of making a responsible act altogether impossible. For any actual human being acts at a particular moment when some limited elements of his personality are uppermost, and it is always arguable that his action is the outcome of something other than his true self.

The idea of social conditioning has become one of the master ideas of the twentieth century, and it is not difficult to see why. We see our own rationality close up, and that of others from a distance. And since the attitudes and beliefs of many other people often seem to us to defy all rationality, it is convenient to be able to explain them in terms of some alien manipulation of the mind. Communists believe that the populations of western societies have been conditioned to a consumer ethic; and parents whose children have taken up with cults are prone to believe that the cults have brainwashed the children. Whatever the plausibility of this and many other versions of the conditioning argument, there is no doubting the rhetorical convenience of the idea. Our next task must be to sketch out the enormous range of applications it has developed in the last century or so.

It is well known that one man's dream is another man's nightmare; and the historical roots of the idea of conditioning go back to the Enlightenment hope that the nurture of human beings could become scientific. If so, then philosophers, if equipped with political and educational power, would be able to bring forth upon this planet an altogether superior class of human beings: rational, unprejudiced, free from superstition, and beyond any temptation to

the mad aggressions recorded by history. In writers like Condillac, the term "education" became a kind of respectable word to describe a process of personality-formation which we would today call conditioning, though conditioning, of course, of the supposedly benign sort revived in our days by B. F. Skinner. The theory on which this was based seemed at the time to be progressive and scientific. It was widely believed that science has "proved" that man was an organism behaving according to discoverable laws of behavior. This belief rested, in fact, upon confusing a conclusion with a presupposition: there can be no science of human behavior unless human beings are taken to be a field of phenomena governed by discoverable laws; and to the extent that this is true (which is limited) a science of human behavior has prospered. But no science can prove a presupposition; indeed, sciences do not, strictly speaking, "prove" anything at all.

### Power and Control

The modern scientific theory of conditioning stems, as we have seen, from the work of Pavlov late in the last century; and it has been continued by behaviorists such as Watson and Skinner. The latter has revived the dream of a world saved from madness and folly by the conditioning of experts. But this scientific exploration of the idea has been less influential in making the idea current than political developments. From the rise of communism and fascism to power in the 1920s, it has been clear that the advance of political power depended upon the engineering of beliefs; hence propaganda has, in an age of democratic rhetoric, become a form of communications technology. Hitler was said to have mastered the technique of the Big Lie, which was so big that ordinary imaginations, not being able to comprehend that anyone could be so barefaced as to say anything so outrageous *unless* it were true, would collapse into a reluctant assent. Simple techniques such as repetition, and use of peer group domination, were thought to break down the resistance people had to the doctrines of governments; and this led psychologists in the West to investigate how far an innocent subject would continue to affirm some obvious truth (such as the comparative length of several lines on a piece of paper) against the unanimous derision of planted witnesses who asserted what was evidently, on inspection, false.<sup>6</sup> Writing long

6. *Totalitarianism*, a collection of essays edited by Carl Friedrich (New York: The Universal Library, 1954), captures this mood very well. See especially "Ideo-

after in tranquillity, the most intelligent of Hitler's lieutenants distinguished earlier tyrannies from that of Hitler in the following terms:

Through technical devices like the radio and loud-speaker, eighty million people were deprived of independent thought. It was therefore possible to subject them to the will of one man... Earlier dictators needed highly qualified assistants, even at the lower level, men who could think and act independently. The totalitarian system in the period of modern technical development can dispense with them...<sup>7</sup>

Even more fascinating was the way in which power could be exercised over men who had given their lives to a cause so as to make them confess that they had actually betrayed that cause, the confession being manifest nonsense. It is out of phenomena of this kind that novels like *Darkness at Noon* by Arthur Koestler and *1984* by George Orwell came to dominate the contemporary imagination.<sup>8</sup>

logical compliance as a Social-Psychological Process" by Marie Jahoda and Stuart Cook, p. 203. The experiment I refer to is by Solomon E. Asch, "Effects of Group Pressure upon the Modification and Distortion of Judgments" in *Readings in Social Psychology*, Ed. Swanson, Newcombe, and Hartley (New York: Henry Holt, 1952). It was observed that often the naive member of the group would look perplexed, fidget, mutter to his fellows. Still, as Hannah Arendt points out in discussion (*Totalitarianism*, p. 228) it is perfectly sensible to allow one's sensory judgments to be modified by those of others; hence this is not a case of *ideological* compliance.

7. Quoted in Maurice Latey, *Tyranny: A Study in the Abuse of Power* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 35.

8. How recent is the exploration of these possibilities is an interesting question. Not very new, I should guess. Consider an incident in the history of the Ch'in dynasty related by Ssu-ma Ch'ien:

In order to find out how far his authority carried, Chao Kao presented a deer to Erh Shih, the while calling it a horse. Erh Shih then inquired of those about him "But this is a deer!" His entourage all replied: "It is a horse." Believing he was suffering from some delusion Erh Shih became alarmed and summoned the Great Divine to prognosticate the matter. The Great Divine said: "When performing the suburban sacrifices in Spring and Autumn and making offerings in the ancestral temples, and to the spiritual beings, Your Majesty had not been pure in his fastings, and that is why he is come to this..." This is quoted in Leonard Cottrell's *The Tiger of Ch'in* (London: Pan Books, 1962), p. 191. Cottrell goes on to remark that "This was the first of a series of 'brain-washing' operations designed to destroy what little self-confidence Erh Shih possessed."

The Korean War popularized a new version of the idea: brainwashing. And here the derivation from Pavlov was explicit. For the Korean captors of American soldiers were recognizably in a position of clear superiority to their prisoners, analogous to Pavlov's superiority to his dogs. The Koreans could (like the Nazi interrogators before them) determine almost all of the stimuli affecting their prisoners and could, by deprivation of food and sleep, make their victims the more pliable and suggestible. It is no wonder that many soldiers confessed to involvement in germ warfare. No wonder, also, that this scenario of interrogation has seized upon the modern imagination. It has, as we noted before, been generalized by William Sargent into a general theory of stress and susceptibility.

The next stage of the story may be called: The Hidden Persuaders meet the Military-Industrial Complex. A sociological popularizer called Vance Packard, earlier known as the inventor of the Organization Man, made a celebrated figure out of a motivational researcher called Dr. Dichter. Dr. Dichter's claim to fame was that he had discovered such hidden truths as that men subconsciously associate sports cars with mistresses and sedans with wives. Motor car manufacturers had thus accentuated sexual symbolism in the chassis of sports cars (the very word chassis, of course, had long had sexual connotations) and sold more of them than they had expected to. It was Dr. Dichter who made the discovery that many women had repressed exhibitionistic tendencies, and thus sold millions more bras on the basis of a promotion having the slogan "I dreamed I stopped the traffic in my Maidenform bra." Mr. Packard's ideas were taken up all over the world, particularly his concern with advertising in cinemas through subliminal stimuli which occurred too fast for the consumer to realize that he was receiving a message at all. Material like this gave a great fillip to the more melodramatic versions of the idea of social conditioning.

Into this stream of preoccupations there came to be fed social theories about the ideological conditioning necessary to sustain the capitalist system. A celebrated version of this doctrine was Herbert Marcuse's idea of repressive tolerance, a particularly brilliant extension of the idea of social conditioning, since it meant that even at the very moment when people were being explicitly encouraged to be critical and consider new ideas, they were actually being conditioned to passivity in the face of a fundamentally oppressive system. Marcuse's late-flowering celebrity coincided with the development of feminist uses of the idea.



Women, it was said, were conditioned because they had internalized the norms of the fundamentally oppressive relations of patriarchy.<sup>9</sup> And in more recent times, critics of modern society have concentrated upon "the media" as the dominant channel of information which "conditions" our view of the world.

I mention these signposts merely to prove that the idea of social conditioning, in a great variety of forms, has led to the central modern belief: That what we think and how we act are constantly being thrown off balance by alien influences, and that if only we could free ourselves from the prison of our conditioning, we would be able to enter upon a heritage of higher humanity merely glimpsed in all hitherto existing societies.

### Is Conditioning Possible?

Having thus laid out the background to the idea, let me immediately say that social conditioning is impossible. Indeed, let me go further and say that any kind of conditioning is something that cannot be done to a human being at all. I am, of course, here taking "conditioning" in the scientific sense in which it was first used. To "condition" a human being would have to mean that some conditioner (i.e., one or more people) had caused the object of the experiment to behave in an entirely predictable way on the application of a stimulus; for that is the kind of thing that Pavlov did with dogs. And to see why it is impossible, one need merely note several features of the Pavlovian experiment. First, in order to get the response he wanted, Pavlov had to tie the dogs up and blinker them so as to isolate the stimuli they were receiving. Such complete control cannot usually be achieved in dealing with human beings, and even if it could, it would generally fail to deal with the flood of internal stimuli in the form of thoughts and sensations, memories and reflections, which constitute the inner life of a person. The exception here is evidently that of the interrogation of

9. Thus a relatively cool and academic version of the idea: "A few studies report on differences among women of different gender role orientations. If the argument holds that women's strategy or style of rationality is altered by internalizing the norms of an oppressive relationship, those who reject the traditional relationship should differ in their choice of behaviour from those who do not. This, after all, is part of the reason why movements of 'liberation' place such emphasis on changes of 'consciousness.' . . . there is probably no other relationship so few are willing to characterize as oppressive. Oppression of women and female dependence are so ubiquitous they appear natural to women and men alike." Virginia Sapiro, "Sex and Games: On Oppression and Rationality," *British Journal of Political Science* Vol. 9. Part 4 (October 1979), pp. 402-406.

prisoners, a point to which I shall return. Next, we may note that the conditioned responses were simple organismic reactions like salivation, and hence not much connected with thought and action. And finally we might note that the behavior tends toward "extinction" unless it is constantly reinforced. It is no doubt a grand dream of power that some people—rulers, advertisers, gurus—might have over others the sort of control we may admire in the ringmaster of a circus; but it is quite impossible.

The possible exception to this is, of course, the power that interrogators have over prisoners. They can give them drugs, interfere with their diet, and control the amount of sleep enjoyed by their victims. This is the nightmare of brainwashing, created in the Korean War and endlessly replayed in a thousand versions from spy fiction to the reports of practices among religious "cults." Hannah Arendt has argued that the hidden rationale of the concentration camps of the Nazis was that it ultimately reduced human beings to a bundle of reflexes; and since a bundle of reflexes is not a human being, the ultimate extinction of life took on a different significance. I presume that something like total control over a human being in this way is possible; and that a person might indeed be reduced to a mere organism. Proper evidence on the matter is, for understandable reasons, extremely sparse, and I am inclined to think that some element of reflection and awareness will be found under all conditions. Nevertheless, two points seem to be clear. First, that in order to condition someone to anything more than a simple reflex, one must first destroy him as a human being. And second, there is the empirical point that the conditioning will not long outlast the control. How many returned American prisoners of war believed the nonsense about germ warfare in which they had been drilled? That the effect upon them of such horrible experiences may well still give them nightmares is indeed likely. But the interrogators could not determine their beliefs and attitudes once the subjects had passed out of their control.

It will be obvious, I think, that no society could possibly have the same control over its citizens as that of the interrogator over his prisoner. There is no doubt that totalitarian regimes do dominate the lives of their subjects in highly influential ways, but none of these ways begins to approach the level of conditioning. The fundamental objection to the whole idea is, then, very simple: it is that *people think*. They often think in muddled and idiotic ways, but their thoughts soon begin to modify the effects of anyone who tries to determine what they think and do.

### Conditioning or Influence?

Now there is, of course, an obvious objection to this knockdown argument against the possibility of conditioning. It is that most people don't use the word "conditioning" in this severely technical way. All that they mean by conditioning is a situation in which people are strongly influenced, thrown off balance, unable to make a rational response to what is happening to them. Is it not obviously the case that children are being constantly "conditioned" by the pressures of family life and of school, and consumers by the pressures of fashion and advertising? Was it not indeed the proud boast, attributed to him (perhaps mischievously) by Voltaire, of Ignatius Loyola: "Give me the child for the first seven years and I will give you the man." Are not human beings visibly the outcome of the role models and peer groups by which they are surrounded? Hence (so it might be said) the objections I have presented to the idea of social conditioning are mere pedantry, and depend upon an absurdly technical definition of the word. It may be admitted that the vogue for the actual word "conditioning" itself may be one more example of that deplorable vulgarity by which people misapply technical words in order to sound impressive. "Conditioning" thus belongs with "parameter" and "schizophrenia" in the class of frequently misapplied technicalities. But on the facts of the case, so it might be thought, there is no controversy. We all agree that human beings are often easily influenced, that they think in a crooked fashion, and that they acquire habits and attitudes of a mechanical kind which are remarkably difficult to break. Where else can they have acquired these habits and attitudes than from society?

This objection suggests that we all agree on the facts, and that the whole problem merely arises from confusion about definitions. And facts are facts, it will be said, whatever words we choose to describe them. Yet our understanding of the world is very greatly affected by the concepts we acquire in the course of our experiences. We sometimes, for example, have the illusion of having understood more when we have merely learned the technical word for a process which we understood perfectly well in the first place. Such intellectual experiences are the cognitive equivalent of swagger, and the problem is that people who understand a theory sometimes jump to the conclusion that they now understand the world the theory purports to explain. It no doubt did Molière's M. Jourdain little harm to discover that he had been talking prose all his life; but many of those who mastered the Keynesian theory of

fine-tuning an economy do seem to have ended up thinking (as Keynes did not) that the production of wealth depended entirely upon adjusting interest rates and managing demand. It is indeed true that there is widespread agreement upon such facts as that human beings are often easily influenced, can be very gullible, are more affected by what they wish to happen than by objective considerations, and apply such rational capacities as they have patchily and unevenly. But what happens when the simple idea of influence is replaced, in making this point, by the pseudo-scientific idea of conditioning?

For one thing, conditioning is crisp and clear, whereas influence is amorphous. To be subject to an influence is an ordinary human experience, and the influenced thinks about the influencer, and can generally select, according to his wits, what he will and what he will not imitate or accept. He may not select wisely or well, but some selection is inevitable. In the ordinary course of life, many influences bear upon us and they often come into conflict. We are thus forced to choose, and the process of responding to influences is one we are all familiar with. The very word "conditioning" however impels us toward an understanding of human life much more portentous than a mere change of wording: it impels us toward an entire model of explanation. All conditioning relationships involve an (active) conditioner and a (passive) conditioned. Great teachers who strongly influence their pupils often insist, and rightly, that they have learned as much from their pupils as their pupils from them; this would be an absurd thing for a "conditioner" to say about a collection of people who have been "conditioned." Conditioning, further, is a pretty low-grade activity which can only result in the appearance of an "attitude" which must itself be judged by some higher intellectual activity. One might sensibly say: "I was influenced in understanding this phenomenon by . . ." but one would not say "I was conditioned to understand this thing by . . ." Finally, we commonly judge influences upon us as being good or bad, but "conditioning" is something which, when we discover it, must be thrown off and replaced by something superior: presumably rational or intelligent understanding.<sup>10</sup>

It is thus the case that everyone, as they grow up, must recognize that they have been influenced in a great variety of ways; and

10. The exception to this is B. F. Skinner's benign conditioning in *Walden Two*. But a form of social control can hardly masquerade as a Utopia.

will feel grateful to many of these influences for the benefits they have conferred. But to discover that one has been conditioned is not at all the same thing. Such a discovery is a realization that some of one's thoughts, attitudes and reactions have been irrationally acquired by way of social pressures and ought at least to be reconsidered and perhaps abandoned.

It follows that the mere substitution of the pseudo-technicality of "conditioning" for such ordinary words used to describe the same field as "influence" already carries us into a much more activist moral idiom. Indeed, the very currency of the word is enough to set up a virtual program of moral reform consisting in the self-eradication of those conditionings which continue to be discovered. To adopt a Marxist position becomes a matter of warring against the bourgeois ideological conditioning which the convert will undoubtedly discover in himself; while conversion to feminism often involves "consciousness raising" sessions in which the battle against the conditioning of the traditional feminine role may be conducted. The general result of adopting the doctrine of conditioning is to establish a civil war within the soul, in which the convert finds himself doing battle against aspects of his or her own character. For what else is "character" (if seen in these terms) except some form of conditioning? It is true, of course, that the currency of the word "conditioning" is widespread in circles where people do not hold systematic theories about the actual content of conditioning such as I have used as illustrations; and the word may thus in many cases be a harmless inexactitude about terminology. But it retains a potential to influence later behavior, a kind of latency similar to that of our bodies which contain, so biologists say, many germs which can become harmful under special circumstances.

In developing this argument, I have on occasion referred to considerations of a high metaphysical level; and they become appropriate here once more. The traditional view of our own character which our civilization has inherited from Christianity is that how we are is something we must accept. We must, of course, change our behavior so as to conform to our duties, but for the rest, it is our business to accept ourselves, improve our character, and recognize with humility our inevitable deficiencies. The concept of conditioning, by contrast, belongs to what one can best call a technologico-spiritual idiom, in which our character is understood to be a kind of mechanism subject to malfunctioning which will reveal itself in lack of power to achieve the objects of

our will (commonly in such fields as eradicating habits we deplore in ourselves) and to achieve such a ration of reliable happiness as we think appropriate. Merely to transpose our idea of human life into such terms as conditioning thus tends to promote a self-consciously activist idea of the moral life.

The subject being impossibly large for this format, I shall focus on what I shall call the rhetorical structure of the conditioning model of explanation. The model incorporates a Conditioner, a Conditioned, and a third abstract personage whom we shall have to call, clumsily, a Realizer. Let me consider each of these components in reverse order.

### Self-Discovery by Numbers

The verb "to realize" belongs to a group of verbs ("refute" is another example) whose very meaning incorporates the idea that we know what the truth is. If it weren't true, I wouldn't say "I now realized that Smith had entered the room" but rather, "At that point I believed (or imagined, or thought) that Smith had entered the room." To realize, as Gilbert Ryle says about this type of expression, is a "success" word.<sup>11</sup> To say this is to make a point about the logical grammar both of "realize" and the psychological process of conversion. When a person has been converted to a religion or to an ideology, or away from either, he or she believes, in the moment of conversion, that he or she has "realized" a truth previously concealed. Realizations are very interesting moments of the moral life. Most short stories and plays deal with moments when the characters realize something about themselves or others which they had not previously believed. And it is of course particularly the case with educated people, who think a great deal in an abstract way, that the moral life consists in a succession of such realizations.

Now any structure of belief, whether it be Christianity, or Sufism, or Anarchism or anything else, is a kind of engine for producing whole successions of realizations or revelations about one's inner life. And to realize that one has always been conditioned in such and such a way is a very common content of modern realizations. Some people discover from their psychotherapist that they have been conditioned to be something rather mysteriously called "over-punctual" or "over-conscientious." (This conditioning is the

11. *Concept of Mind*, p. 143.

supposed generator of feelings of anxiety.) Some Marxists seem to have discovered that they had been conditioned (for example) to regard the unemployed as lazy, but they now realize that such people are the victims of a system. Feminists have been known to make the discovery that they had been conditioned, as women, to be agreeable to everybody, and a common "solution" has been a training in aggression, known as "assertiveness training." (Whole books are written about it.) Consumers are often thought to have been conditioned by advertisers to buy a new machine rather than repair a broken one. And so on.

It needs hardly to be said, of course, that these realizations are no more likely to be true (or indeed false) than any other idea that people get into their heads. The logical grammar of the verb "to realize" merely means that truth is entailed in the meaning of the word; not at all that the content of the realization must be true. But when we realize something, we are being active and we usually imagine we have discovered some previous blind or perhaps victimized part of ourselves. "God! What a fool I've been," the hero of Hollywood movies used to cry as he headed back to claim the heroine; but that was no guarantee that he wasn't also being just as big a fool at that moment. (Given some of those heroines, he almost certainly was.) When the content of the realization is that some habit or attitude of mind was in fact a matter of conditioning, then the person has, as it were, divided himself into an active and a passive part. The active part is the Realizer, the passive part is the Conditioned, and the person construes himself in that respect as having been victimized. As "conditioned to excessive punctuality" I was a mere thing, a mechanism, suffering experiences over which I had no control; in the moment of my realization, I take on personhood—at the price, however, of reifying some now rejected part of my personality as it has hitherto operated. Further, the conditioning has usually been an alien influence: parental mistakes in toilet training may perhaps have conditioned me in this way, but I am, in realizing, about to take the first steps in liberating myself. What I am liberated *from* must always be something construed as alien to me, even though it may in fact be my own natural propensities.

The crucial point is that, in construing some facet of my behavior as alien, I cut myself off from self-understanding. For it is obvious that there can be no habit of behavior which I develop which does not have *some* contact with my natural inclinations. In the traditional idea of the moral life as a process of continuing devel-

opment, I discover features of my own character never properly understood before. In the conditioning model, I merely discover that I have been the victim of alien influences. Self-discovery is thus impeded by the assumption that the rejected component of the self had no connection with the real me. And this feature of the concept of conditioning corresponds to a further fact about the model of conditioning: that what I am being liberated *into* is something abstract and fixed. The women who try to slough off their inherited femininity like an old snakeskin are drawn toward an abstract ideal of liberated womanhood entirely unconnected with their individual character. By contrast, the traditional theory of moral development, which depends upon realizations less dramatic and pretentious than the discovery that we have been conditioned, is a combined process of self-discovery and self-understanding in which the direction of movement must be given by the individual himself. Moral development must, indeed, be moral; but this means no more than that the process accords with abstract criteria of right and wrong. The concrete development depends upon the individual himself: urban or pastoral, philanthropic or intellectual, all depends upon the specific personality of the subject. This is why modern western society has produced, over the last four or five centuries, an abundance of individual personalities, a thriving interplay of nature and nurture, as in a *jardin anglais*, or in that most individualistic and characteristic art form of our civilization, the novel.

By contrast, the ideological and occult versions of the idea of conditioning are concerned with a de-individualized personhood of a much grander kind: socialist man (in whom the conditioned egoisms of capitalism will have been extinguished), liberated women who may or may not be masculine but will certainly be androgyne, and other more highly evolved forms of humanity,<sup>12</sup> none of them recognized as an individual, with both the weaknesses and the distinctiveness implied by that word. But what is, on this model, the "conditioned" is from another point of view simply the character I have developed.

### Personality and Reason

In general, the more automatic a response, the more plausibly it may be classified as conditioned. By such a test, most of our be-

12. For a compact version of this idea, the reader could do much worse than consult P. D. Ouspensky, *The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1951).



havior has been infected: everything, from our manners, our dietary preferences, the occasions when we smile or give way to expressions of discontent, and so on. In the much earlier versions of the idea of conditioning, which were closely linked to rationalism, the old-fashioned soldier on the drill ground was the very epitome of a conditioned man. He saluted his officers without a thought, and had been trained in such a way that obedience to a command was so deeply entrenched in his muscles as to require no intervention of thought. He was, as far as is possible to a human creature, untroubled by the noise of cannon or the fear of death. A soldier of this kind could certainly not turn himself over night into an intellectual or a peasant; but then, the infinite flexibility to which the idea of rationality points us is not in fact attainable by anyone. For it is part of a human being to be a structure of learned responses around which rationality plays in often indeterminate ways. And this point is so fundamental that there is much disagreement about what should replace it. For the rationalist, an individual's character is construed as habit, routine, and prejudice and must be sloughed off in favor of a rational response (which would not differ from man to man) to each new situation: a conception of life so fatiguing in prospect that it is a relief to recognize how impossible it is. More recently, we have seen those who wish to slough off their bourgeois conditioning in order to attain the authenticity of the proletariat. As we have suggested, such an aspiration leaves no room for individuality: that is, perhaps, its point. Encounter groups of a thousand kinds seek a way through the maze of a lifelong conditioning to the treasure house of authenticity by way of unbridled rip-roaring self-expression. Occult groups may be found purging the mind of thought, or developing consciousness so that it rises above the supposedly mechanical aspects of our personality. (They are in fact much less mechanical than they look to a superficial observer.) But in all cases it will be found that much if not all of individual character has been conceptually transposed into "the conditioned." Personality thus turns into a problem to be worked on by the Realizer.

It needs to be emphasized that what I am dealing with is a structure of thought so abstract that it can comprehend intellectual currents which in many ways are directly opposed to one another. I have observed that early versions of the conditioning model often look like reason gone mad. They would turn every man into a Socrates, subjecting to a continuous play of discursive reasoning every habit or judgment we inherited from five minutes

ago. But there are other currents of thought, both political and pseudo-spiritual, in which the capacity for discursive reasoning is precisely the problem: something to which we have become conditioned by the unbalanced nature of our civilization. Socrates and Sherlock Holmes cease to be models and turn into twisted sacrifices on the altar of abstract thought: victims of bourgeois objectivity, or the unbalanced development of the brain hemispheres.<sup>13</sup> For in this world of thought, there are only two gears: the conditioned and the liberated. But these concepts are merely vessels which may be filled with anything that human ingenuity and current desperation may suggest.

### Who Conditions?

What then of the Conditioner? It is in considering this component of the model that we can see most clearly that the idea of conditioning (outside its stricter uses in academic psychology) is but superficially scientific. For the conditioner is always an evil force in human life. It may be the capitalist system, the media, advertisers, the family construed as a vehicle of bad social forces, patriarchy, technocratic rationality or much else. It may be, as sometimes in a scientific utopian like Skinner, merely the accidental association which leads to a superstitious conviction; but it is, even in this case, clearly irrational. It is not, of course, entirely impossible for someone to remark: "I'm glad I was conditioned to be tidy," but it is certainly unusual, for conditioning almost always functions as a discovered evil which needs to be overcome. But how is it that an evil Conditioner can so cripple the higher qualities of humans with a destiny of higher development? The answer is always that the Conditioner strikes at human weakness. Capitalism can condition workers to false consciousness because it oppresses them and keeps them weak; advertisers can condition women to the use of vaginal deodorants because it strikes at their psychological insecurities. Cults are always supposed to acquire their domination over their members because (like the Evil One) they always

13. Robert E. Ornstein, *The Psychology of Consciousness* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Co., 1972). A different version of the same idea is to be found in Carlos Castaneda's account of yaqui shamanism in a series of books such as the aptly named *Tales of Power* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1975). I have discussed this particular version in an essay called "The Guru" in *The Don Juan Papers*, Ed. Richard de Mille (Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson, 1980). The essay was originally published in *Encounter* (August 1976).

wait for moments of weakness like grief, or loneliness. In a brief discussion, it is impossible to open up this fascinating area of rhetoric fully, but there is one central point to be made. It is that the whole argument rests upon the dogmatic assumption that there is one right way of looking at the world. In Marxist argument, it must be assumed that only convictions critical of capitalism are a true perception of the world as it really is, and that everything else must be taken to be a distortion of thought. In the advertising example, it must be taken for granted that only a psychologically deranged woman could have been brought to believe that vaginal deodorants were necessary or desirable. Similarly, the argument about cults must take it for granted that no healthy minded and rational person could possibly believe in, say, the doctrines of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon. No doubt there is something to be said on all these questions. I merely point out that the pseudo-technical concept of conditioning, as used in these and all other cases, systematically obscures the fact that its validity depends upon highly contestable arguments which it tries to render peripheral.

The move from Pavlov's scientific idea of conditioning to the pseudo-scientific idea that concerns me is a move from a concrete to an abstract conditioner. Pavlov and his associates, like the brainwashers of Korea, were highly specific individuals with clear and understandable purposes in mind. Once we float the idea out into the mists of vagueness where the Conditioner becomes something abstract—society, the system, the family and so on—then any explanatory magic it might have had in its stricter sense disappears altogether. And this is the reason why, even if it were possible to condition human beings, *social* conditioning would still be a foolish expression. We can make this point in another way. If we were socially conditioned, we would all be the same. But in fact, we are not. That, indeed, is precisely the thing which seems to weigh heavily upon the thoughts of those attracted to the conditioning model of explanation: Being unable to conceive how other people can think differently from the way they think, they are driven to construct a pseudo-scientific melodrama to explain this astonishing fact. The curious paradox is that all of those who say that our civilization is conditioned, and thus uniform and limited, invariably propose forms of liberation in which the great efflorescence of individual differences which have hitherto characterized the western world would disappear forever in the uniformities of a higher life.

The idea of conditioning thus stands for an alternative understanding of the moral life. The developing but forever imperfect moral character adumbrated in the traditional thought of our civilization has been dissolved by the conditioning model into a kind of civil war of the soul: higher realizations struggle with lower conditioning, and beckon us onward to a heaven on earth: a good society or an elite company of higher souls, wherein the irrationalities of conditioning have been forever extinguished.

### Myths and Spells

The word "myth" is often misused as no more than a contemptuous way of saying that a belief is false. I hope that what I have so far said will make it clear that I regard the idea of social conditioning as being, indeed, wrong, but also as an idea of such resonance that it may suitably be described as a myth. I have argued that, on logical grounds, social conditioning is an impossibility. How has this impossibility come to be so influential?

One reason is that in a technological age, we can hardly help construing *everything* as if it were no more than material for transformation; and one of the parts of our environment we are most keen on transforming is other human beings. The idea of conditioning fits in with this desire. Conditioning is, further, entirely consonant with our instinctive belief that, except on the superficial matters we enjoy disputing with our friends, there is only one sensible way of viewing the world: namely, our own. If so, how are we to explain the foolish beliefs of other people? Social conditioning gives us an answer. I am tempted to say that it gives us a "comfortable" answer, but this use of the word "comfortable" is, of course, no more than a sophistic jibe.

But there can be no doubt about the rhetorical convenience of the idea of conditioning. The world is full of peddlers of messages, and they all meet resistance. By using the conditioning model, they can avoid recognizing that other people have reasoned things out and come to a different conclusion. They are able to say: "Your resistance to my message is because you have been conditioned." Intellectually, this has about the same explanatory force as saying: "You are under the spell of an evil magician." Indeed, it amounts to about the same thing. And this is hardly surprising, for we are dealing with a pretty unsophisticated part of the rhetorical jungle.

There is perhaps one further point to be made about the place of the idea of conditioning in rhetorical strategies, and it is a polit-

ical one. It concerns the difficulty of promoting Marxist messages in the conditions of the late twentieth century. The problem arises from the fact that all communist governments have a grisly history of killing and lying.<sup>9</sup> Since about 1956, it has no longer been possible even to pretend that Russia and China have not been riddled with these things. The problem is, then, how can Marxist ideas be propagated when they have a practical history of such unmitigated disaster? The answer consists in arguing that in reality, our situation in the West is no different. The rhetorical elaboration of this strategy is a complicated subject, but fundamentally it consists in setting up a structure of notional parallels such that any criticism of a communist regime can be blocked by reference to some equally dire practice in the West. The idea that we are all the victims of ideological conditioning corresponds, within this strategy, to the totalitarian dominance over education, news, and art in communist countries. We are, on this view, no less oppressed and dominated than the peasant in Omsk largely dependent (except perhaps for bootlegged radio) upon the Party for his attitudes to the world. In terms of conditioning the diagnosed evils of capitalist society replicate exactly the admitted evils of Communist states.

Persuaded thus, my friend at the party symbolized his condition by wearing a dog's collar. He was only a pantomime dog dressed in an ill-considered theory. Still, both people and dogs sometimes grow into the masks — and the collars — they wear. And that would be unfortunate. It isn't a dog's life. Really it isn't.

# 7

# The Heritage Lectures

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