

Black on White...*a post-disciplinary journal*

Philosophy and the Mirror of Culture:
Subjectivism in the Modern Tradition

L.E. CAHOONE

5

Deconstructing Violence:
A Sketch for Post-Disciplinary Thinking

THOMAS R. THORP

17

The Politics of Self-Fulfillment

SHELDON POLLACK

36

Forthcoming Issue

47

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articles on "institutionalized intellectual activity"

The Politics of Self-Fulfillment

SHELDON POLLACK

The persistence of a particular and peculiar strain of American "sociological criticism" is well exemplified by the recent publication of Daniel Yankelovich's *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down*. Free from any dogmatic rigidity, at times Yankelovich's examination of change in American mores in the previous decade lacks any perspective whatever. Ringing echoes of the "cultural revolution" of the sixties, this untimely herald of the quest for self-fulfillment re-emerges not just as farce; it appears just when it rings least true. Ignoring the longstanding centrality of self-fulfillment to the human condition, Yankelovich seems to believe that questions of happiness and meaning in human life were first raised in the last decades. Predictions of immanent change as a result of the penetration of an ethos of self-fulfillment within our culture sound particularly inappropriate in a world of contracting expectations. If the sixties were at least a period of economic prosperity and widespread political mobilization, the present climate lacks the material conditions to sustain a mass movement of social revolution founded upon the search for self-fulfillment. As Christopher Lasch has perceptively pointed out: "Yankelovich's survey reads like an updated version of Charles Reich's *Greening of America*—another announcement of the imminent triumph of forces already in retreat."¹

Yankelovich claims a neutral and empirical foundation for his study based upon surveys and interviews of individuals engaged in the search for self-fulfillment. It quickly becomes evident that the approach lacks any critical perspective. The fundamental question of how the satisfaction of the self is possible in a world of material scarcity is never fully confronted. In a world of unequal distribution and overall limited

wealth, the possibility of self-fulfillment (insofar as it is related to material conditions) becomes more difficult for a majority of Americans. Theoretically and historically, self-fulfillment is a luxury that comes after the more mundane requirement of labor has been solved, either by society or the individual in his own private manner. Rather than expecting significant social and political changes due to a widening search for self-fulfillment, one would be safer in predicting a greater gap between a self-indulgent "new class" and the majority of Americans who struggle within the confines of a "zero-sum" or perhaps even shrinking economy..

The tendency in Yankelovich's study to reduce questions of politics to a call for cultural revolution was endemic to the radical criticism of the American Left in the 1960's. The myth was that subjective alterations of consciousness would eventually lead to a mass movement of cultural revolution, affecting the objective world of politics. Individuals "getting their heads together" or conducting "life experiments" as Yankelovich puts it, can transform American political institutions and the economy as well. Such a naive conception of politics is the result of an over-estimate of the power of self-transformation and an under-estimate of the power of political and economic institutions. As opposed to Yankelovich's rosey picture of impending reforms, a more sober assessment of the possibility of political change through altered lifestyle was expressed by the late John Lennon. Retreating from the optimism of the sixties ("Changing a lifestyle and the appearance of youth didn't just happen, we set out to do it") Lennon saw the limits of cultural revolution: "the same bastards are in control. The same people are runnin' everything, it's exactly the same. They hyped the kids and the generation." Similarly, Yankelovich is just hyping the search for self-fulfillment. Such changes in lifestyle and the search for self-fulfillment ought not be mistaken for politics. Much of what passed for cultural and political criticism in the sixties (and in Yankelovich's study) is only a misguided revelling in the self, and hence a retreat from politics.

While the obsession with the self has long tradition in American thought (witness Emerson and Whitman), the roots of the movement for self-fulfillment are to be found in much more recent theory. Indeed, the focus upon the transformation of the self is essentially related to the rise of therapeutic psychology. What emerges in the sixties as a concern for self-fulfillment has its origin in the psychoanalytic movement of the 1930's. Undoubtedly (and unwittingly) the theorist most influential in directing social thought toward a focus upon the self and its health was Freud. The impact of Freud upon American social thought has been enormous, if not entirely true to Freud's own spirit. While Freud himself suggested the limitations of individual therapy and discounted the possibility of a mass therapy of social transformation,² psychoanalysis has been pointed in that direction by a number of theorists of the left who have been influenced by Freud's thought. Freud was sufficiently ambiguous to sustain such an interpretation of psychoanalysis as being a theory of psychological transformation. If social revolution will not change

human nature itself (as Freud cautioned the Russian revolutionaries) it is not irrelevant to human suffering and to the human condition itself. If Freud leaned toward repression and self-denial, many of his followers optimistically preferred polymorphous perversity and self-fulfillment. The "Freudian left" had much impact upon American radical thought in the past decades, and the concern with self-fulfillment as a substitute for politics itself can be traced to the impact of the psychoanalytic perspective.

As opposed to the more recent radical understanding of Freud, there was a conservative application of psychoanalysis to political thought. While the Freudian left focuses upon the self, the conservative Freudians have emphasized the group and the repression of the irrationality of the self (rather than its self-fulfillment) through political institutions. Repression rather than self-fulfillment is the key concept. This approach to the study of politics is most strikingly expressed by the eminent and influential political scientist Harold Lasswell. In his classic fusion of psychoanalytic theory and political science, *Psychopathology and Politics* (1930), Lasswell describes politics as an expression of group psychology: "political movements derive their validity from the displacement of private affects upon public objects."³ Politics is thus more than merely collective activity; it is also collective anxiety, neurosis, and aggression. Siding with Freud and Le Bon, Lasswell recognizes the irrational side to politics. Yet, he adds a new dimension—politics is also the most rational of action precisely because it seeks to control the irrational. Hence, the value of politics is its cathartic release of irrational emotions: "politics is the process by which the irrational bases of society are brought out into the open."⁴ Such a conception leads Lasswell to his theory of a "politics of prevention."

The politics of prevention is essentially a therapeutic politics; it suggests mass techniques of control and manipulation. Symbols, propaganda, and political leadership are to be used to suppress the destructive tendencies of the masses for the benefit of democracy. In this early work, Lasswell saw politics not as the regulation of interests ("who gets what, when, how"), but as the suppression of conflict.

The time had come to abandon the assumption that the problem of politics is the problem of promoting discussion among all the interests concerned in a given problem...The problem of politics is less to solve conflicts than to prevent them; less to serve as a safety valve for social protest than to apply social energy to the abolition of recurrent sources of strain in society.⁵

Later in his career Lasswell moved away from this notion of politics; however, he still retained the therapeutic emphasis in this thought. His studies of power, society, and personality all suggest that the democratic and psychologically balanced politician is a problem for therapy of some sort.⁶ Indeed, the whole question of the "democratic character" rests upon a notion of psychological therapy rather than a theory of political institutions.

This conservative perspective that appears in the early writings of Harold Lasswell did not emerge as the dominant application of psychoanalytic theory to political thought. Rather the turn toward a politics of subjective transformation was most strongly felt in American thought as an influence of the Freudian Left, especially as represented by Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse. While greatly divergent in their own positions, Reich and Marcuse were most responsible for bringing the psychoanalytic perspective into radical social thought in American circles. Marcuse always comprehended the dominance of economic and political institutions in the relationship between the objective and subjective. When he examined the self in *Eros and Civilization* (1955) and *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) it was always to understand how objective economic and political conditions alter and impose upon the subject realm. Wilhelm Reich, on the other hand, was the true prophet of the sixties politics of self-fulfillment. Early in his career, Reich attempted to merge psychoanalysis and Marxism, or rather to subordinate psychoanalysis to Marxist dialectics. Later, Reich increasingly conceived of mental and sexual health as his primary goal, subordinating politics to the purposes of sexual therapy. Regarding the fulfillment of libidinal drives as the secret of psychic health, Reich turned his attack upon the ego for its infringement upon happiness. For Reich, character and the ego work against the id in its pursuit of gratification. True to orthodox Freudian thought, Reich saw the genital orgasm as the most satisfying and desirable release of libidinal energy. His whole theory of psychic health made the orgasm the solution to human problems and the provider of human liberation.⁷ "Neurosis is a mass sickness"⁸; the cure for such a disease is mass sex therapy aimed at increased fulfillment through genital orgasm.

The anti-political tendency in Reich's work was implicit from the first as he conceived of sexual liberation as the major feature of revolutionary activity. In later years he completely turned against "the politician" as being insignificant compared to the theory of sexual liberation.⁹ Even before Reich's work led him to the "discovery" of orgone and the cosmic forces of biology, his theory of sexuality was largely indifferent to the fundamental questions of political theory. It was for this reason that the Frankfurt School saw his work after the early 1930's as essentially hostile to critical theory. Furthermore, his glorification of the genital organization of sexuality was seen as just as supportive of the dictates of the existing social structure as was Freud's own call for instinctual renunciation. Marcuse's theory of the eroticization of the entire body and of life itself was far more radical than Reich's insistent faith in the satisfying nature of the genital orgasm.

For Marcuse, the character of the social structure is decisive in preventing or furthering the attainment of pleasure in life. For Reich, specific forms of social organization were subsumed under the general category of repressive civilization, much as Freud treated civilization as a universal category. Even in Reich's most specific analysis of historical forms of repressive civilization, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, he

Continually retreated from concrete political analysis. In a study of the specific conditions which led to the neurotic psychological foundation for German fascism, Reich retreated into a general attack upon all repressive culture. "Fascism" became synonymous with a neurotic, authoritarian personality:

Man's authoritarian structure—is basically produced by the embedding of sexual inhibitions and fear in the living substance of sexual impulses... The result is conservatism, fear of freedom, in a word, reactionary thinking.¹⁰

Obviously, the solution to such a universal "fascist" tendency rooted in repressive society is not politics, but rather biological therapy. Orgone therapy replaced Marxist praxis.

The tendency of Wilhem Reich to reduce politics to a question of psychology (or sexuality) overwhelmed his theoretical approach. Reich's influence upon American "radical" thought was great, and his impact can be seen in the radical criticism of the New Left. Critical of orthodox Marxist dogma, the turn toward the subjective became a pervasive tendency among theorists of the left in American thought. The rambling, stream-of-consciousness tone that permeates such authors as Paul Goodman, and later Theodore Roszak, is an expression of their lack of rigid ideological perspective as well as an expression of their focus upon the self. Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd* (1956) gives the distinct impression that the fundamental problem of life in modern industrial society is the inability to "grow up." The measure of our culture is the proliferation of juvenile delinquents, beats, and hipsters: the outcasts point out the inhumanity of society.

Now the organized system is very powerful and in its full tide of success, apparently sweeping everything before it in science, education, community planning, labor, the arts, not to speak of business and politics where it is indigenus. Let me say that we of the previous generation who have been sickened and outraged to see earnest and honest effort and humane culture swamped by this muck, are heartened by the crazy young allies, and we think that perhaps the future may make more sense than we dared hope.¹¹

While we may sympathize with Goodman's critique of modern, slick, commercial society, it is difficult to see the solution as lying within those who are psychologically disaffected by the system. Vague calls for a "conservative" revolution "aiming at stability and social balance"¹² offer little of substance for politics. Or is politics the problem.

The social critique of Paul Goodman was at the heart of radical thought in America during the early period of the New Left. Goodman's line of thought was picked up and expanded by Theodore Roszak in *The Making of the Counter Culture* (1969). While Roszak does indeed focus upon the "technocratic society" and looks at the actual institutions of society, his solutions are found in mysticism and consciousness-raising. Actually, it is not consciousness-raising so much as consciousness-

destroying. His critique of "objective consciousness" is on solid ground as he discusses the requirements of a technological society. But his groping for a mystical consciousness that harkens back to an earlier age of democracy is as self-indulgent as it is anti-political.

The New Left that rebels against technocratic manipulation in the name of participative democracy draws, often without realizing it, upon an anarchist tradition which has always championed the virtues of the primitive band, the tribe, the village... Our beatniks and hippies press the critique even further... As long as the spell of the objective consciousness grips our society, the regime of experts can never be far off; the community is bound to remain beholden to the high priests of the citadel who control access to reality. It is, at last, reality itself that must be participated in, must be seen, touched, breathed with the conviction that *here* is the ultimate ground of our existence, available to all, capable of ennobling by its majesty the life of every man who opens himself.¹³

It is hard to imagine the "technocratic society" reeling in terror at such a critique or at such a notion of political activity as "opening oneself."

It is not the intention here to harp upon the inadequate and often irrelevant pronouncements of the radical elements in American thought. Instead, it is hoped that by showing the limitations of psychological therapy for solving political problems the case is strengthened for political solutions aimed at effecting psychological changes. American radicals have been quick to choose the former precisely because of a feeling that politics itself is corrupt and hence part of the problem. The Marxists have at least seen politics as the primary concern, and its relation to psychological and sexual problems as derivative. While the European New Left was reading such political works as Reimut Reiche's *Sexuality and Class Struggle* (1968), the American left was reading commercial best-sellers like Charles Reich's *The Greening of America* (1970).

The American name-sake of Wilhelm Reich is such an easy target simply because he carried the tendencies inherent in Roszak, Goodman, and Reich to their logical conclusions. If the problem of politics is that of psychological misery, then the cure for politics is psychological therapy. The retreat into mystical consciousness of Roszak is replaced by Charles Reich with a more central call to "get our heads together." The new consciousness that Reich seeks is itself the political revolution.

We must no longer depend wholly upon political or legal activism, upon structural change, upon liberal or even radical assaults on existing power. Such methods, used exclusively, are certain to fail. The only plan that will succeed is one that will be greeted by most social activists with disbelief and disparagement, yet it is entirely realistic—the only means that is realistic, given the nature of the contemporary State: revolution by consciousness.¹⁴

Such pronouncements would be as laughable as Reich's analysis of

The liberating effects of bell-bottom jeans were it not that such an approach fit in well with much of the American New Left. Where social revolution at the level of "getting a new head" replaces politics, there is little to be expected in the way of successful reform.

The problem that confronts Goodman, Roszak, and Charles Reich is that in judging society by the way it "feels" psychologically, they lose objective standards. As Reich himself was praising the "counter culture" it was already being devoured and resold by the system itself. The pop culture and experience of psychedelic consciousness could easily be absorbed and utilized by those institutions which supposedly were threatened by its pseudo-revolutionary Consciousness III. Marcuse had written about such "repressive desublimation" in *One Dimensional Man* and his sustained critique of the all-pervasive rationality of modern society. Using psychoanalytic theory, Marcuse pointed out the repressive nature of a culture which uses pleasure and play to reinforce rather than threaten the existing institutions of production. Such a critical perspective is absent in the writings of those who see self-indulgence and consciousness-raising as the motor of revolutionary activity.

Marcuse provides a convenient contrast to those who have substituted psychological therapy for politics. His insistence that even psychoanalysis be fixed into a historical framework is in opposition to those who wish to subsume politics under psychology. Perhaps the most extreme statement of such a position appeared nearly at the same time as Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*. Norman O. Brown's *Life Against Death* (1959) is often discussed in conjunction with Marcuse's study, and their exchange in *Commentary* magazine shed additional light upon their divergent interpretations of Freud.

Brown's confrontation with Freud began in 1953, resulted in *Life Against Death*, and culminated in *Love's Body* (1966).¹⁵ It might be said that Brown saw in Freud not only a source of method for hermeneutic interpretation, but also a path to mysticism and subjective experience. If Roszak objects to the "objective consciousness" of the technological society, Brown seeks escape from objectivity itself. Freud presented the key to such an escape by discovering the unconscious, the realm of non-repressive life. Brown takes Freud in opposite directions than the neo-Freudians and behavioral psychologists; he employs all of the most speculative and tentative of Freud's theories. The attempt is to turn Freud into the prophet of a mysticism found deep within the id.

Thus Brown sweeps out of view everything but an arbitrarily simplified "natural tendency of the body" and the deepest, unconscious, which is now taken to be "the 'noumenal' reality of ourselves." This *inverted Transcendentalism* is not the outcome of Brown's study of Freud but rather the governing theology behind that study.¹⁶

Yet, that study of Freud is indeed impressive. Brown focuses upon Freud's theory of the unconscious and its development toward ego-rationality. The lost dimension of psychoanalysis is its theory of the

freedom of the id and the pleasure found prior to repressive civilization. Brown follows themes similar to Marcuse's analysis: the liberating nature of art, the timelessness of the unconscious, the seriousness of the death instinct. In fact, Brown is more consistent than Marcuse in his rejection of repression *per se* and his embracing of the id and polymorphous perversity. But if Brown is more thorough in his pursuit of sexuality (both reject Reich's preoccupation with the genital), Marcuse is more political and ultimately more Freudian in his respect for "reality."

Brown carries psychoanalysis away from being a theory of how the unconscious confronts reality (dialectically progressing towards conscious ego-rationality). Brown suggests instead an over-arching idealism which seeks to overcome the duality between objective and subjective. As Marcuse complained: "The unity of subject and object is a hallmark of absolute idealism; however, even Hegel retained the tension between the two, the distinction."¹⁷ The interpretation of Freud found in *Life Against Death* opened the pathway for the mystical retreat from reality which blossomed in *Love's Body*.

Brown's initial retreat inward *via* the theory of the unconscious culminates in his wholesale rejection of objectivity and history itself: "Everything is symbolic, everything a parable."¹⁸ This rejection of reality is followed by a retreat into a mysticism of the body. As reality is negated by way of the mystic's experience, so the "false" dicotomy of objective and subjective is negated. The wound which civilization inflicts is rationality, objectivity, time, and death. In short, the problem of man is Man.

The anti-rationalism is obvious in Brown's work, and it leads him to the expected attack upon politics, the personification of reality. "Overcoming the world; overthrowing the government; overthrowing the government of the reality principle, which is the prince of darkness, the ruler of the darkness of this world."²⁰ Mystical experience overcomes the duality of the world, and hence sees politics as tied to repression.

To see is to see through. Political organization is theatrical organization, the public realm, where 'appearance—something that is being seen and heard by others as well as ourselves—constitutes reality.' To see through this show; to see the invisible reality; to put an end to politics.²⁰

It is no wonder that Marcuse objected to Brown's anti-political retreat which suggests not a "new rationality," but "the simple negation of rationality."²¹

Marcuse's critique of Brown exemplifies the distinction between their uses of Freud—both radical, yet one anti-political and one distinctly political. As Brown sees everything "objective" as symbolic of the sexual, Marcuse sees the symbols of sexuality within the context of the historical. The essence of Marcuse's critique is that while history may have a symbolic side, it is also a very real problem.

The King may be an erected penis, and his relation to the community may be intercourse; but unfortunately, it is also something very different and less pleasant and more real.²²

While Brown understand the symbolic nature of politics, he fails to acknowledge that symbols are not the real thing, but only just that, symbols. Analysis at the level of symbols is appropriate for psychoanalysis as a method of understanding, but not as a mode of political activity. Hence, Brown never confronts the world of historical events: "he is struck with the time-honored quandary of psychoanalysis: the airplane is a penis symbol, but it also gets you in a couple of hours from Berlin to Vienna."²³ If the world of airplanes (and politics) is symbolic, it also is deadly serious.

Brown's retreat from politics into a world of psychic therapy places the burden of change upon the individual. So long as the king sees himself as something other than an erected penis, the political world will exist outside the realm of mystical experience. In the end, all mysticism, whether a retreat from the body or into the body, is distinctly opposed to politics. Marcuse calls Brown to task for this. Indeed, all those who treat psychological therapy as a substitute for politics (or as irrelevant to it) follow that conservative tendency in Freud himself. Failing to recognize the historical nature of psychological domination means failing to recognize the possibilities of genuine, liberating political activity. The disagreement between Brown and Marcuse represents more than the symbolic fighting of brothers; it suggests the two radically divergent paths toward which psychoanalysis points. Behind the symbolic fighting of Romulus and Remus lies the actual historical founding of a polity—truly more important than the myth. When the symbolic takes prominence over the historical itself, politics is lost.

Conclusion

The psychoanalytic concern with the subjective and its related emphasis upon therapy for the self became important tenets within radical social thought in America. More immune to rigid and dogmatic Marxism, American radical theorists often have fallen under the sway of a therapeutic conception of politics—the politics of human liberation or self-fulfillment. Wilhelm Reich's focus upon sexuality and the orgasm found its way into radical social thought in the altered guise of "getting one's head together" or "Consciousness III" or the sexual revolution itself. (Witness former Weatherperson Jane Alpet in *Growing Up Underground* (1981): "Orgasms are the most political subject there is.") Yankelevich's over-estimation of the power of experiments in lifestyle and the search for self-fulfillment reflects a deep-rooted and traditional misinterpretation of politics. Politics may lead to changes in lifestyle as well as diminish or enhance the search for self-fulfillment; however, changing lifestyles or pursuing self-fulfillment is not itself politics or even a sufficient substitute for it. Fascination with the self offers little to recommend to those who have not yet solved the problems of scarcity, labor, and production. Self-fulfillment is a luxury reserved for those who already enjoy the benefits of a secure and just politics.

NOTES

- ¹Christopher Lasch, "Happy Endings, *The New York Review of Books*, December 3, 1981, pp. 23-24.
- ²Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 1961), p. 91.
- ³Harold Lasswell, *Psychopathology and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1951), p. 173.
- ⁴*Ibid.*, p. 184.
- ⁵*Ibid.*, p. 197.
- ⁶Harold Lasswell, *Power and Personality* (New York: Norton, 1976), Chapter IX.
- ⁷Wilhelm Reich, *The Future of the Orgasm* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), Chapters III and IV.
- ⁸*Ibid.*, Chapter III, p. 75.
- ⁹See Wilhelm Reich, *Listen, Little Man* (New York: Octagon, 1971).
- ¹⁰Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), pp. 30-31.
- ¹¹Paul Goodman, *Growing Up Absurd* (New York: Vintage, 1970), p. 241.
- ¹²*Ibid.*, p. 232.
- ¹³Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1969), p. 265.
- ¹⁴Charles Reich, *The Greening of America* (New York: Bantam, 1970), p. 323.
- ¹⁵For a concise account of Brown's work see: Paul Robinson, *The Freudian Left* (New York: Harper, 1969), pp. 223-243. Also see the introduction to Norman O. Brown's *Life Against Death* (New York: Vintage, 1959), p. xi.

¹⁶Frederick C. Crews, "Love in the Western World," *Partisan Review*, Spring, 1967, p. 279.

¹⁷Herbert Marcuse, "Love Mystified: A Critique of N.O. Brown," *Commentary*, February, 1967, p. 74.

¹⁸Norman O. Brown, *Love's Body* (New York: Vintage, 1966), p. 216.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 233.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 235.

²¹Marcuse, p. 75.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 73.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 73.