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Political Radicalism in the United States and Its Critique

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The mode of production and consumption in Western industrial societies makes man an appendix of the machine, ruled by its very rhythm and its necessities. It transforms him into *homo consumens*, the absolute and total consumer, whose only aim is to *have* more and to *use* more.

This society produces many useful things, and to the same degree many useless people. Man, as a cog in the production machine, becomes a thing, and ceases to be a man. He spends his time doing things in which he is not interested, with people in whom he is not interested, producing things in which he is not interested, and when he is not producing he is consuming. He is the eternal suckling with the open mouth, taking in passively, without effort and without inner activeness whatever the boredom-preventing (and producing) industry forces on him—cigarettes, liquor, movies, television, sports lectures, and sex without much passion can be afforded by everybody. But the boredom-preventing industry, that is to say, the gadget-selling industry, the automobile industry, the movie industry, the television industry, and so on only succeed in preventing the boredom from becoming conscious. However unconscious, boredom remains boredom nevertheless. If life is not interesting, if he is completely passive, if man does not participate and relate himself in an active way to life, he becomes anxious, lonely and desperate, because he spends his life

only on securing his mere existence; to exist, as an end in itself, is senseless, humanly speaking. The absence of interest and joy results in an inner despair and anxiety which remains mainly unconscious. But who dares to be aware that he is unhappy if unhappiness means being »a failure?«

Are this boredom, anxiety and loneliness, this chronic depression, entirely unconscious? Anyone who has the occasion to speak to Americans, young or even middle-aged and old frankly and directly, knows that the answer is »no«. Many are quite aware of many of these feelings, and many more, when such things are mentioned, suddenly light up showing the feeling of recognition one has if something well known that one has not dared to think of is mentioned, and they pour out their feelings and illustrate them with many concrete examples.

There is probably no country in the world where the values of a consumer culture—the number of cars, the split-level houses, the cocktail parties, notoriety, etc.—are as much questioned, as they are in the United States. The people of countries that have not yet reached the level of consumption of the United States seem to hope that one day, when everybody has one car, or two cars, or three cars, they will be happy, and they continue to wait for that time to come, be it in their own lives or in that of their children or grandchildren. But most Americans know already how it feels to own a car, a television set, a refrigerator, a freezer, a washing machine, and it has dawned upon many that in spite of all that they have and use, they are still not on the way to happiness. In fact, they are more ready to question these consumer values than their fellowmen in the relatively less industrialized countries.

What are the various reactions to this state of growing doubt and dissatisfaction?

One, that occurs in perhaps the majority, is to deny the existence of doubts. The people in this group hold on to the old notions, concepts, feelings and methods, with all the more rigidity or fanaticism the more they try to escape from the awareness of the doubt. They deny that there is any great change going on in the world beyond the purely technological which they consider a one-sided blessing. They re-emphasize outdated notions of national sovereignty and of war (including nuclear war) as a continuation of politics with different means. Many compensate for their own sense of personal powerlessness by the wish for the achievement of unrestricted power of the United States all over the world. They cling against all reason to the faith that nothing is basically different, and that power can solve all problems. And if that is so, why not use it? That they and their children will perish in the test of ultimate power, that is to say, nuclear war, hardly touches them. If one is desperate, unable to make sense of life and to experience joy, even the image of complete destruction is

pallid as against the fear of becoming aware of the fact that one is nothing but an impotent thing. And besides that, if one has not the courage to live, the courage to die is the next best substitute.

Another reaction, that of a considerable part of the American public, is one of increasing thoughtfulness and conscious doubt. People begin to think and to ask questions, and this is a growing process occurring in the last ten years. They are not satisfied with the glib explanations given by the spokesmen of the administration. They even question the wisdom of generals in military matters. They demand the truth, because they are aware that they are told only part of the truth, which is more devastating than a complete lie.

Their sense of humanity and their conscience protests against the inhuman mass slaughter of the population of a far-off country in South East Asia, and against the ineffectiveness and half-heartedness of measures undertaken to help the American Negro and the poorest sector of American whites to achieve a materially dignified position that means, even though indirectly, their freedom in more than a purely formal, political sense. From this group of people—largely intellectuals, students, business men, industrialists representing that sector of industry which is not part of the big corporate structure, and many honest, human and intelligent political leaders—come the leaders and the followers of the organizations for peace, disarmament, world government, racial equality; these organizations have had a certain indirect influence on the action of the administration, although nobody can be sure of its extent.

This group is not ›radical,‹ but it is critical, sensitive and concerned. But at the same time many of its members are gripped by a sense of impotence and helplessness because their views find only scanty expression in the press, little attention is given to them by the members of the administration, sometimes they are received with derision. They feel themselves as having the role of the Greek choir which knows and predicts the tragic outcome and yet has no influence on the course of events. They warn, petition, protest, and the more active they are the more desperate they feel that no amount of activity on their side seems to have any effect.

The third group is small. It is composed of the »radicals,« mainly of young people, mostly students, although some older people sympathize or act with them. The radicals themselves are by no means a unified group, and a description by their differences would require a book rather than merely some paragraphs.

The most conservative part of the radical group is made up by the communists; they are in a real dilemma. Since the Soviet Union became, after the ascendancy of Stalin, one of the most conservative countries in Europe, using a revolutionary ideology to cement its social fabric, and since the Communist

parties have always been the spokesmen for the line of the Soviet Union, they are of necessity forced into a conservative stance. If one admires the Soviet Union as the realization of Communist dreams, one cannot help being a conservative. At the same time, however, not living within the Soviet Union and being in the role of a persecuted minority on the American scene, they have also kept a certain radical, critical, rebellious, or perhaps even revolutionary streak, which gives them a revolutionary image in the eyes of their fellow citizens. To combine the inherent conservatism of admirers of Soviet »socialism« with the ideological and sometimes even actual radicalism rooted in a tradition which goes back to the days of Lenin and Trotsky is a difficult and in fact paralyzing enterprise. This group of radicals or as they often think of themselves, Marxists, is a very small minority in the spectrum of American radicalism.

At the other end of the spectrum is another small minority: the one which finds expression in the movements of the beatniks and hippies. They are not primarily political; they do not cling to any revolutionary tradition; theirs is a rather genuine protest against the insincerity, emptiness and lovelessness of their elders. They protest against the bourgeois form of existence more by their way of being than by any concerted action or ideologies. Many of them are probably more overtly neurotic than their conservative and adjusted contemporaries, and many of them are more a part of the consumer culture than they think. Many seek a short-cut to »enlightenment«, a deeper and more real experience of life, by taking drugs. Yet they cultivate quite sincerely a greater freedom of feeling, of living in the here and now, of joy, including sexual pleasure. They are the avant garde of an extremely widespread group among the young generation for whom the Beatles with their simple and often sentimental or senseless text of a song, the rhythm of music, have become the substitute for their elders more mechanized and lifeless pleasures in cars and freezers. Their enthusiasm is pathetic and touching. What would have sounded sentimental and trashy to the young generation of the twenties is for them an expression of life and spirituality. How empty of stimuli, of interest, of hope, must a youth be if it finds its solace in the Beatle culture, the very same Beatles who themselves are a product of a publicity-minded mass culture, showing their phoniness by becoming adherents of an Indian fake guru who sells personal mantras for a minimum of \$35 and prepares spiritual leaders in a four-months' cram course to be had for a trip to the foothills of the Himalayas and \$400. Probably the Maharishi needs their endorsement for his enterprise as much as they need a remodeled image which emphasizes their spirituality.

It is not enough just to be young, because youth has the drawback that it does not stay, and what may be exciting to the »children of love« today will have become a bore to the same »children« when they are 40. Beards hide

more than they express, and carelessness in dress is not the expression of hope. Perhaps it can be said that they are freer and more spontaneous in their physical movement and in their sexual enjoyment. In this respect they are perhaps different from their suburban parents, who practice a kind of sexual freedom which only marks their inner emptiness. For them, the elders, sexual freedom is the one little thrill that relieves their profound boredom, but it is so barren of emotional intensity that it can hardly be classified as an enrichment of life. It should be said in passing that this was the mistake of a gifted psychoanalyst like Wilhelm Reich, and of a gifted philosopher like Herbert Marcuse, that they think in terms of the older conservatives for whom sexual repressiveness was part of their political and moral credo. This is not so any more. Just as the Nazis, in contrast to the Nationalist Conservatives favored sexual freedom the suburbanite sub-culture is not a bit more humanly or politically progressive because of its sexual licentiousness. Sex has become an article of consumption and as Aldous Huxley foresaw so perspicaciously in *The Brave New World*, it is used as a very important compensatory activity to relieve boredom, to create the illusion of adventurousness, and thus to strengthen the coherence of the bureaucratic industrial society. Freud's emphasis on the dangers of sexual repression were a legitimate protest against Victorian middle-class society, but he, like the new middle class, failed to analyze the nature of the sexual satisfaction of the alienated man.

A third section of the radicals is made up by the radical activists. Those who use more drastic and even violent methods of civil disobedience, or demonstrations, sit-downs, etc., than the less activist members of the peace movement and the civil right movement. In themselves, these activist radicals are also not a united group. Some of them concentrate on the Vietnam war and the anti-draft campaign; some of them are allied to the more radical elements among the Black Power movement; a few of them probably see in Castro's Cuba the great promise for the future. Naturally these sub-groups overlap, and sometimes it is only a matter of time and energy whether a member of the radical activists concentrates his efforts in the one or the other direction. There is another and more important division among them: there are some who are mainly filled with hate against the existing order, and who are greatly attracted by violence.

There are others who feel indignant, but with little hate, and who do not believe in the productive function of violence—in fact, who abhor violence regardless of what aim it serves. It is natural and cannot be helped that a movement of radical activists, like any revolutionary movement, will attract neurotics, fanatics, narcissistic seekers of power, self-righteous dogmatists. But I am sure it would be a rash and unjustified conclusion to believe that the rad-

ical activists consist mainly of such people. One does not need to be a fanatic nor power-drunk nor a hater to feel revulsion, which sometimes may resemble hate, against systems and policies that command and justify the performance of barbaric atrocities, and which are coldly engaged in preparing the destruction of their own country as well as that of most of the world by the clever gamble with nuclear weapons.

Indeed, what seems to be wrong with this group of radical activists is not the fact that among them are haters and fanatics. What seems to be wrong is something quite different, and much more fundamental. They spend their energy on protesting, showing indignation, emoting, defying, and in the execution of dramatic gestures. They criticize—and often very soundly—and repeat again and again and again how immoral, stupid and dangerous the Vietnam war, the foreign policy of the United States, and the treatment of the Negroes are. Not that there is anything wrong with this critique, nor its manifestation in protests of one kind or another. In fact, it is important and needs to be done. But the great weakness and, as I see it, failure of these radicals lies in the fact that essentially they think of nothing else than to give expression to their critique and indignation. What is wrong is that they do not point out an alternative, or indicate the problems which need to be solved in order to transform their society into one which has a promise of life, both physically and spiritually.

There is also a great deal of confusion among these activists who favor civil disobedience. Inasmuch as civil disobedience is meant to express in a dramatic and impressive form the voice of their conscience, they have the right to be witnesses to the truth and deserve full respect for their action. But the problem does not end here. Quite a few of them believe that by acts of civil disobedience they can have a direct impact on the government; in fact that they could force the government to change its course.

These groups sometimes do not seem to be quite clear whether it is revolution they want or whether they want to move an important sector of American public opinion in the direction of radical reform. They do not analyze sufficiently that direct action may be advocated in the case of a revolutionary situation when large masses of the population are on the verge of political action, and where drastic acts of small groups can have the function of igniting the »critical mass.« In a situation like the one in the United States, which is very definitely not a revolutionary situation, these same activist means tend to bolster reactionary forces and to alienate a large segment of the population which should be won over to the cause of radical reform. It is politically naive to use revolutionary tactics in a non-revolutionary situation. It is time for the radical left to make up its mind whether or not it believes in the revolutionary

possibilities of the United States in this period, and to analyze carefully for which strategy and tactics are adequate to revolutionary, and non-revolutionary situations respectively.¹

What I have been saying is not that no one has the right to criticize unless he can show a way to do it better. Everyone has the right to criticize – in fact the duty to do so, even if he cannot offer any alternative answer. But what I do say is that the criticism remains futile and historically ineffective if it is not related to at least the attempt to raise those questions which in turn might lead to an answer, and if not to an answer at least to pointing to the direction in which the answer lies. Criticism which does not even attempt this must remain suspect of a peculiar kind of egotism in which one saves one's soul and one's conscience by trying to prove that one is better than the rest.

The patron saint of these critics is the biblical prophet Jonah, who wanted the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah to be punished for their sins and was disappointed when they repented and were spared. The great prophets, from Isaiah to Marx, also were critics, but they went beyond indignation and did not dwell on despair or hate. Their main effort was to explain, to convince, to warn, and most importantly, to show new ways, to show new alternatives. *The failure of the radical activists lies in the fact that they do not show alternatives.*

This feeling is related to another failure of the radicals: their lack of contact with traditional thought or, as one sometimes even suspects, their contempt for it. The Communists, of course, cannot be accused of this, at least literally speaking. They believe they represent the tradition of Marx, and that means in the case of the more sophisticated ones that they have even a certain contact with Hegel and philosophers before him. But by and large their concept of Marx is as distorted as that of the Soviet Marxists, and can hardly be called a living connection with the tradition of Western, not to speak of Eastern, thought. Since they are unimportant this problem does not matter much one way or the other.

The core of the radicals, both the hippies and the radical activists, show as a rule no knowledge of, no interest in, and no concern with tradition. It may be that their contempt and their distrust of the older generations makes them also contemptuous and distrustful of books and theories. If this were a mere criticism of the way in which theories are often taught at universities it would be justified; but it is not just that. They are simply not interested in the complicated and profound thought of Marx, or Hegel, or Goethe, or Feuerbach, or Spinoza, to mention but a few names. They seem to think that to be young

1 This problem has been pointed out very succinctly by Martin Oppenheimer in »Resistance: Rebellion or Reform?,« in: *Fellowship*, January 1968, pp.5–6.

and indignant is enough to change the world; but they are too young and too indignant to realize that they are mistaken in this attitude. They do not understand why Marxism of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries became a philosophy that seized the masses, even the uneducated and relatively unsophisticated. They do not see that culture, including its revolutionary phases, has developed on the basis of the development of human thought, of reason, of imagination, of intellectual effort, and not as a result of emoting or hating. If we lose contact with tradition of thought we are like a plant that is still flourishing because of the waters of yesterday's rains, but which will die tomorrow.

There is something else they do not understand. You can appeal to people by appealing to their indignation, their ambitions, or even their hate. But you cannot move people to sustained, constructive and truly revolutionary action by any of these emotions. People can be motivated to change only if they have hope. They can have hope only if they have a vision; they can have a vision only if they are shown alternatives, and they can have alternatives only by a tremendous effort of thought and imagination—not by a concentration of all energies in protest and indignation.

It is easy to unite people under a banner of indignation and hate. Hitler showed this, and any war shows it. But it is easy only when the people know that power is with them. Indignation and violence will remain limited to small minorities if the power is on the other side. There are some people who reason that if indignation and protest and violence spread, it will lead to victory, and after the victory there will be time to consider what to do and where to go. They are naive. They do not see that unless there is a much more deep-seated and human change in people, the increase of violence will only be a stepping stone toward Fascism in America and the rest of the world.

It seems that many of the »radical« left have little faith. They do not believe that man can be touched and can be changed, and hence they are not interested in finding out in what way such transformations can occur. They stick to this disbelief in spite of the fact that there are examples in history of the miracle having happened where masses have been seized by an idea, and where deep changes have taken place. By that I do not mean that each individual has undergone something like religious conversion, but that the hidden and repressed feelings and thoughts in many of them have come to the fore and have united with the same elements that came to the fore in others, thus creating a »critical mass«, a new atmosphere, a new sense of solidarity, and a new common hope.

How is a person touched deeply? How is a person moved to make a radical change in his views and in his whole outlook on the world? The answer to this question can be given, although tentatively. The analysis of historical

movements, and the psychoanalysis of individuals offer rich material for the observation of the conditions which affect profound and lasting changes. This statement may meet with a good deal of doubt. Was not the religious enthusiasm and hope of the early Christians defeated and replaced by a bureaucratic and conservative Church organization? Was not Jan Hus defeated after he had succeeded initially in uniting the Czech peasants in common enthusiasm and action? Did the French Revolution not end in Bonapartism, the Russian Revolution in Stalinism? Was the Commune of Paris not a failure? Did not most of the enthusiastic intentional communities in America end as failures?

All these questions make a good argument in a brief for hopelessness and despair. But they do not quite prove what they claim. Jesus and St. Paul, Hus and Danton, Marx and Lenin, and the many leaders of the smaller enthusiastic movements did succeed in appealing to the hearts and minds of not only a few, but of hundreds of thousands and millions of people. The fact that they were defeated later on does not negate the fact of their success in transforming and changing the hearts and the thinking of man. Their defeat was due to the counter-forces which by the use of power and intimidation killed the newborn »child.«

We do know something about the conditions by which men are deeply touched.

First of all and principally, by making them see reality or, to use another word, the truth. By »reality« and »truth« I am not referring to reality in general, or to truth about everything, but to reality inasmuch as it affects one's own personal life, its outer circumstances, and its inner processes.

Reality and truth have to be relevant to a person, to a social class, or to a whole population. This statement needs to be clarified. It has to be relevant and hence it does not need to refer to every bit of reality, but inasmuch as it is relevant it has to be total, and not fragmentalized and partial. If one shows the reality only on the political *or* economical *or* cultural level, *or* the emotional level, that is to say, partially, this partial truth has no effect, or very little. It cannot have much effect, since man is a total entity and not separated into various departments between which there is no connection. The same fact which can be described on the economic level is reflected on a psychological level and vice versa, and so with all other levels of individual and social existence.

There is one more clarification needed: the truth must be not only relevant and total; it must also be radical and not embellished, sweetened, sugar-coated. Most people think that a person will understand better if one tells him the truth in fragments, like parents talking about the stork and the flowers and the bees, and that later they will tell the next part of the story. Experience shows that the truth, that is to say, the presentation of reality, has a peculiar effect if

one can see it fully, clearly, without compromise. It is very difficult for anyone to escape it. This does not mean that he cannot escape it. Indeed, people are afraid of the truth because it forces them to change sacred customs and habits of thinking and behaving.

Confronting reality creates momentary anxiety; it makes one feel unsure for the moment. This »resistance« against the reality one does not want to see is often strong enough to make the effort ineffective, even if this effort refer to the relevant, to the totality, and even if it is radical and not an »installment« of the truth. But anyone with some experience with this problem knows the often unexpected and sometimes seemingly miraculous reactions of people when they are shown reality objectively, without fanaticism or fear and with the intention of being helpful to them. There occurs, indeed, a »moment of truth« in which something happens which is quite unexpected, very sudden, and hardly to be described in terms of time. A person suddenly sees and senses that »this is it«. In fact, he has the feeling that he has always known it, or he wonders how he could have been so blind not to have known it. It is like awakening from a dream, or from half-slumber.

This process cannot be described in words to anyone who has not experienced it. But many people have experienced it, at least in minor ways. They have seen a gesture, a face of a person whom they have »known« for many years, and it suddenly occurs to them that they are seeing and knowing this person for the first time—for better or worse. They are often blind to certain economic and social motivations, or political action, and at one moment they »see«. Whenever this happens, whenever man touches reality more deeply than he has before, whenever he awakens a little more from the state of half-sleep in which he customarily lives, he feels stronger, although perhaps for a moment sadder and disillusioned. There is nothing miraculous about this.

Man's security lies in his contact with reality, both external and internal. Inasmuch as he lives in a fiction and is guided by false, insinuating and suggestive forces he is paralyzed in the use of his own forces and faculties. He is a puppet executing the movements desired by the men who manipulates the wires. The more he himself is in contact with reality, feeling it, sensing it, thinking it, the more he is in control, the more he is himself active and independent: the less does he have to fear that the man who pulls the wires may stop pulling them, and leave him a helpless, paralyzed creature.

Am I not using a very ambiguous concept here when I refer to the inner conviction »this is it«? Does not the fanatic, does not the paranoid person have precisely this conviction; even to a greater degree than that to which a normal person can have it? Indeed, sometimes conviction and faith are not easy to distinguish from delusion and fanatical irrationality. But this is so only for the

untrained or unobserving eye. The difference between the conviction based on awareness of reality and the conviction based on irrational fanaticism and narcissism, while perhaps not obvious to many, is nevertheless very clear and well definable. Sometimes you can recognize a fanatic just by the peculiar glitter in his eyes, or by the distortion of his face by the repetitiveness and sterility of his argument, and very importantly, by his lack of interest in others and in the problems of others, except those in which his own narcissism is invested. Granted, one can make mistakes, especially since sometimes even the true discoverer of a truth may be at the same time a fanatic. But for all practical purposes these are the exceptions, and it is not too difficult to distinguish between the personality of one who is a seeker of reality and truth, and one who is a self-seeker and narcissist, convinced that something is true for the only reason that it is what he believes in. Needless to add that fanatics are often very effective; precisely because they are so far away from reality they have no doubts whatever, and they talk with a kind of absolute conviction which is appealing to the many who doubt and look for God in the man they can hear and touch.

Closely related to this problem is another. In the 20th century people distrust those who show passion. Passion seems to be all right in love, and that seems to be about its only proper place. In addition hate as a passion is all right in times of war, whether hot or cold, if directed against the proper enemy, even though the enemy may change in the course of a few years into a friend and *vice versa*. But when passion appears in a reasonable argument it is suspect, especially so in the English-speaking countries. There is a strict division between reason and passion. The reasonable argument should not be contaminated by passion, not even by feeling, and if it is, this proves that the person involved cannot be trusted intellectually.

To be suspicious of passion is justified if passion is isolated from reason. But reason is equally suspect if it is isolated from passion, because in that case it is inhuman. It is a product of the brain-machine which may one day be replaced, as far as its purely intellectual function is concerned, by the computer. Indeed, the robot has no passion. Perhaps it would be more adequate not to speak of reason but of intellect, because the use of the word »reason« is itself an ambiguous one with a long and complicated history.

In our contemporary world, passion is usually separated from truth. Where there is passion there is no truth, and where there is truth there is no passion. This separation between truth and passion, between thought and feeling manifests itself particularly clearly in a new style of social science writing. This new style requires that thinking about human affairs be strictly separated from affects or moral judgments. Human affairs have to be described with the same

detachment with which one would analyze the operation of freight cars or the most advanced techniques for operating a slaughterhouse. The possibility of the death of eighty million Americans in case of a nuclear war, or the projection of the fully developed, total bureaucratization of society in which individuality has practically disappeared, are described on a purely intellectual level with complete affective detachment. This is supposed to be the example of a truly scientific and rational treatment of the subject matter. The authors make it even more difficult to be fully aware of the schizophrenic quality of this style by acknowledging here and there that certain outcomes might be regrettable, or even dangerous from the human viewpoint. This embellishment is so convincing that for many readers it becomes very difficult to locate the authors' personal standpoint as far as values or emotional reactions are concerned. A good example is Hermann Kahn, who has made nuclear war appear quite palatable to many Americans, and yet who in some has evoked an image of his being a pacifist.

The real problem of a new integration of man and society can be formulated precisely as a new synthesis between passion and truth. Passion without truth is blind, and truth without passion is impotent. Passion geared to reality and truth connected with that reason of the heart, of which Pascal speaks can be awakened if reality is shown; and if it is shown not in an alienated, detached way, but as something to which the total man responds with his brain and with his heart.