



Recovering Reality

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Recovering Reality

BY CHRISTOPHER LASCH

Those positions that seem most radical—most uncompromising in their opposition to bourgeois cultural hegemony—often turn out today to render the most effective reinforcement to the status quo. As Gerald Graff shows so clearly, the problem goes deeper than our society's well-known capacity to absorb dangerous ideas. The ideas associated with the politics of "cultural revolution" have in fact ceased to be dangerous. The cultural vanguard has become a rear guard. It attacks bastions long since surrendered: the patriarchal family, repressive sexual morality, the conventions of literary realism. Proponents of "cultural revolution" merely give the sanction of enlightened opinion to changes already brought about by the corporation, the advertising industry, the mass culture industry, and the propaganda of commodities.

Yet the ideas in question retain an appeal that cannot be altogether explained by pointing out that they do not threaten or disturb familiar habits of thought and therefore represent the line of least intellectual resistance. That they make so few intellectual demands certainly guarantees them a sympathetic hearing; but this is not enough to explain why they persist in the work of so profound a theorist as Marcuse, and why they persist with so little modification, moreover, from one of his books to the next.

At one time, the defense of the autonomy of art constituted a necessary and constructive, even a revolutionary political act. It served as an indispensable counter, not merely to the middlebrow demand for a healthy-minded and morally up-lifting art, but to the socialist demand for a proletarian or "people's" art. The struggle against Babbity in the 1920s merged in the 1930s with the struggle against "socialist realism." Today these are dead issues. It is important, however, to understand how they arose, if we want to understand why the idea of cultural revolution remains attractive to so many people on the left.

In the thirties, members of the Frankfurt School, the writers and critics associated with *Partisan Review*, and other left-wing intellectuals called for a theory of subjectivity, in the hope that it would help to explain both subjective resistance to socialism and support for fascism. Objective conditions in advanced industrial countries had been ripe for a socialist revolution for some time, yet the people of those countries had shown little interest in socialism and in several cases had turned to dictators instead. The explanation of this deeply rooted resistance to progress, according to Wilhelm Reich, Erich Fromm, Max Horkheimer, and others, lay in the reproduction of an authoritarian personality type by the authoritarian bourgeois family. The intellectual attack against a purely mechanical, positivistic Marxism thus allied itself with political criticism of the family and of the bourgeois values it allegedly transmitted to the young: respect for property, submission to authority, sexual repression. Men would never be free, it appeared—even under socialism—as long as authoritarian habits of thought implanted themselves so deeply in the individual unconscious. Without a cultural revolution against the family and the authoritarian culture it transmitted, socialism itself would merely recapitulate the history of capitalism. Witness the rise of Stalinism and its reinstatement of the family and of revolutionary puritanism in the Soviet Union.

Today we hear echoes of these earlier battles, in which the defense of literary modernism went hand in hand with criticism of patriarchal culture, in Barthes's claim that quotation marks establish the "paternity" of ideas and that "multivalence" therefore subverts intellectual authoritarianism and bourgeois "propriety." Today, however, an assault against bourgeois ownership, bourgeois propriety, property rights, and the authoritarian family no longer carries any critical weight. Advanced capitalist society has collectivized property under corporate control and socialized the functions of fatherhood in the hands of a professional and managerial elite. The individual now suffers not from the strength of family ties but from their weakness. The "revolution in manners and morals," which took shape in the twenties when capitalism began to outgrow its dependence on the work ethic, has eroded familial authority, undermined sexual repression, and set up in their place a permissive, hedonistic morality tolerant of self-expression and the fulfillment of "creative potential." The same historical forces that have destroyed outmoded restraints on sexual expression have drastically altered ideas of literary propriety, abolishing conventional prejudices against experimentation and making continuous innovation, indeed, the most desirable attribute of art.

The collapse of bourgeois culture, as Graff explains so eloquently, has thus cut the ground out from under the artistic avant garde; and in retrospect it appears that the avant garde depended on and even preserved many of the cultural conventions in opposition to which it defined itself. The antagonism of artist and philistine loses its meaning in a post-bourgeois society in which no one wants to appear old-fashioned or out-of-date and the demand for novelty, boldness, and unconventionality shapes every form of artistic production. Marcuse himself has raised the possibility that "the cultural revolution [is] falling in line with the capitalist adjustment and redefinition of culture." Just as Horkheimer and Fromm, having shown the connection between political reaction and the authoritarian personality, were among the first to see the obsolescence of this analysis, so Marcuse, with his theory of repressive desublimation, called into question the subversive potential of the rebellion against an obsolete bourgeois morality. Yet the dawning awareness of the inadequacy of their early ideas about authority did not prevent the members of the Frankfurt School from "operationalizing" them, in *The Authoritarian Personality*, with the help of all the latest methods and jargon of the social sciences; and the reasoning that led Marcuse to formulate the theory of repressive desublimation, in *Eros and Civilization*, did not become central either to that work or to subsequent ones. In the latest reformulation of his ideas on art, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Marcuse has omitted even the qualifications that Graff has pointed out in *Counterrevolution and Revolt*. He repeats the arguments for the "critical function of art" in a mechanical fashion, without taking account of the criticism of those arguments launched not from the position of socialist realism but from a position close to his own. Many would agree that the "freedom and happiness of the individual" remain the "ultimate goal of all revolutions" and that "insistence on a private sphere" assumes a new importance in "a society that administers all dimensions of human existence." The question remains: How does art contribute to the defense of a "private sphere" when it surrenders the claim to make statements about reality and retreats into a realm of pure fantasy? How does art help the individual to resist the administration of existence when it no longer competes with the administrator's view of the world on its own terms, putting forth its own view, modestly, as another "mode of truth"? "Fiction creates its own reality," according to Marcuse. The "truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality (i.e. of those who established it) to *define* what is *real*." The artistic affirmation of anti-reality, however, leaves the administrative elite in control of their chosen terrain, relegating art to the margins of society.

And this very marginality, as Graff so compellingly argues, becomes the basis of a new integration in which even the guardians of “reality” admit that existence is an illusion, that distinctions between truth and falsehood have lost their meaning, and that it is futile to try to change the world or even to try to understand it.

The divorce between art and experience, the exaltation of Eros as a separate sphere, are precisely the conditions that underlie repressive desublimation, which frees erotic expression from censorship only when it has banished Eros to the margin of existence and deprived it of its transforming power. Defense of the “autonomy of art” no longer serves any critical purpose. An art that “subverts the opposition between the true and the false,” in Barthes’s words, merely completes the work of the advertising and propaganda industries, as does an art that “liberates” words from “signification” and substitutes images for concepts. It is not the “aesthetic dimension” we need to recover but the sense of reality itself.