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THE IMPACT OF THE ACADEMY IN THE FORMATION OF OPINION: SOME SECOND THOUGHTS

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No myth of the 20th century is more pervasive than the belief that intellectuals, whether they are journalists or academicians, determine the climate of opinion and shape the values and the politics of their society. This is a view of social reality which is especially flattering to those who have power over the word and from Plato to Daniel Bell the cry has always been the same: corruption is the work of Sophists, "spoiled priests," philosophes, "the running dogs of the capitalist press," or left-leaning liberal academicians. Newspapermen love to call themselves "the fourth estate," poets like to believe that they are the "unacknowledged legislators of the human race" and some of my colleagues on university faculties imagine themselves, to put it in the modest language of the philosopher Hegel, "Napoleons of the spirit."

John Maynard Keynes wrote in the final paragraphs of the *General Theory* in an often quoted passage:

> .....the ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back. I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas. Not, indeed, immediately, but after a certain interval; for in the field of economic and political philosophy there are not many who are influenced by new theories after they are twenty-five or thirty years of age, so that the ideas which civil servants and politicians and even agitators apply to current events are not likely to be the newest. But, soon or late, it is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil.[1]

Keynes' views, however elegantly expressed, are muted compared to those of Thomas Molnar who wrote in his book, *The Counter-Revolution*, published in 1969, that "the principal strategy of revolution for the past two hundred years has been the purposeful utilization of the communications media."[2] Molnar went on to argue in that book that:

> .....a revolution is often, if not always, a contest of two wills in which the more aggressive one has a clear advantage ....therefore it is vital that the milieu in which the contest of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary wills takes place is prepared in advance so as to favor the former. Here the crucial role of the *republique des lettres*, or generally of the intelligentsia, of the intellectual classes, cannot be sufficiently emphasized.[3]

Molnar views the *republique des lettres* essentially as a conspiracy of the intellectuals; a kind of Grand Orient of the intellect, capable of deposing kings and emptying churches. He sees, as did Edmund Burke and Hippolyte Taine, the French Revolution as the consequence of this great conspiracy, "the loose yet

im•pri•mis (ĭm-prī′ mĭs) adv. In the first place. Middle English, from Latin in primis, among the first (things). . .

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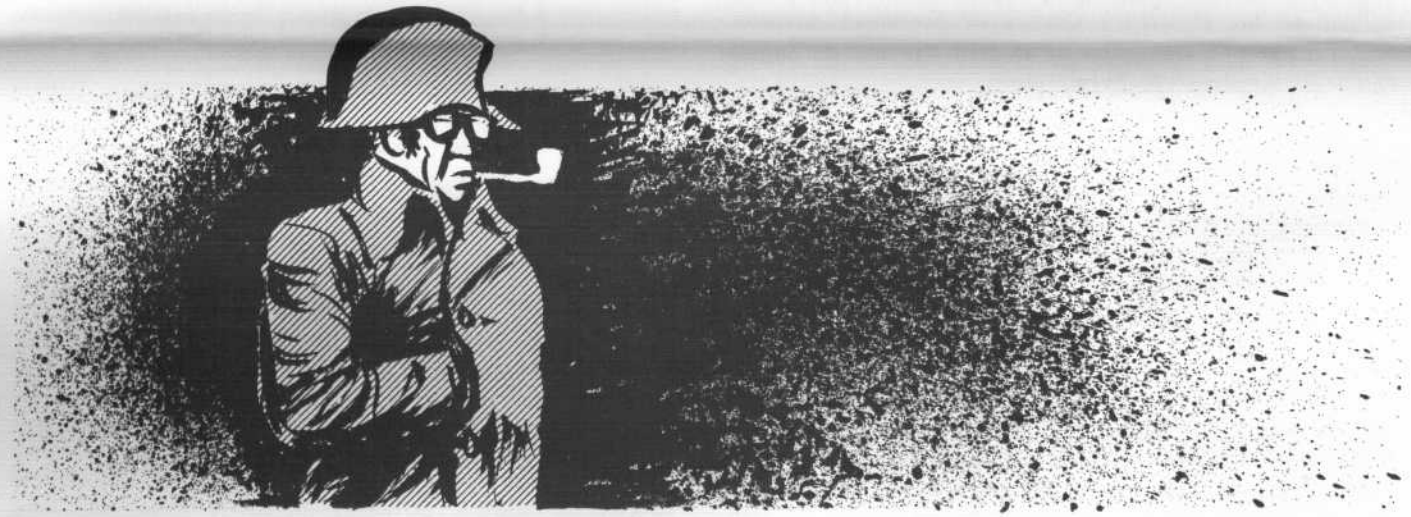
solid framework of writers and philosophes"[4] who became, as Louis XVI's minister Necker said, the "invisible power which commands everywhere, including the king's palace."[5] Moreover, Molnar believes that "a replica of the intellectuals' republic exists"[6] at the present time in the United States composed of "the manipulators of ideas and images, writers, professors, artists, journalists"[7] with sufficient power to make revolutionary attitudes "respectable to the point of gradually being looked upon as legitimate, and more ....as the only legitimate thesis and attitudes."[8]

Of course Molnar is not alone in arguing this thesis. Kevin Phillips last year published a book, *Mediacracy*, which makes essentially the same argument. Phillips writes:

> America's new mandarins are not the people who sell manufactured items but the people who shape and market ideas and information. The media have become pivotal. Politics have also been affected. Instead of having a vested economic interest in stability, as did previous conservative business establishments, the knowledge sector has a vested interest in change – in the unmooring of convention, in socio-economic experiments, in ongoing conception of new ideas.... The intelligentsia's traditional support for liberal credos is bolstered by economic interest in social and research spending, plus involvement in the mores of the new affluent knowledge-sector culture.[9]



Let me offer one final opinion on this subject. This time the opinion is that of a social-democrat whose intuitions have shifted him to the right. Daniel Bell, the Harvard sociologist, published this year *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. It is a compilation of Bell's essays over the past several years and is one of the most provocative and interesting pieces of cultural diagnosis to have appeared within a decade. Bell's line of argument is very like that of Molnar and Phillips. Bell writes:

> The adversary culture has come to dominate the cultural order....The protagonists of the adversary culture, because of the historic subversive effect on traditional bourgeois values, substantially influence, if not dominate, the cultural establishments today: the publishing houses, museums, the galleries, the major news, picture, and cultural weeklies and monthlies; the theater, the cinema, and the universities.[10]

One can hardly quarrel with the assertion that liberals, leftists, and cultural subversives dominate the media, the arts and the academy. It is a fact so obvious that the liberals proclaim it openly. Nor is the impact of an "establishment" something wholly new to the Western world. My own mentor, a staunchly liberal Protestant who had studied at the Sorbonne shortly before World War I, remarked to me one day that in order to hold an academic chair at a French University in those days it was necessary for the academician to demonstrate that he was anti-clerical. One accomplished this in any of three ways. One could be Protestant, one could be a Jew and one could be a Free-Mason. It was better still if one were able to combine two of these affiliations.

Granted that establishments enforce a measure of uniformity and control in cultural and political institutions, does it follow that these establishments are able to exercise effective control over the climate of opinion and determinative influence over values and politics? I believe this latter assumption very doubtful. Moreover the conservative assumption that our ills, our failure to sweep public sentiment before us at the polls, are due to the fact that we do not control the media and the academy, is a dangerous assumption which prevents conservatives from seeing either their great strength or the sources of their weakness.

Periodically the advertising business and American industry as a whole is attacked for misleading the American public. Most recently John Kenneth Galbraith and Ralph Nader have argued that advertising keeps the whole shaky structure of capitalist enterprise erect by persuading people to buy things which they really do not need, do not want and which are harmful to them anyway. In a socialist society, one supposes, uncorrupted by advertising, high government officials would abandon their black limousines

and walk to work even though exactly the opposite is true of every socialist society the world has known.

Now obviously men do not, as Ralph Nader and John Kenneth Galbraith suppose, purchase anything just because the trumpets of Madison Avenue have sounded. No amount of advertising will popularize the green persimmon as a between meals snack. Nor does anyone need to mount an extravagant advertising campaign in order to sell motorcycles to teenaged males. In short, certain things cannot be sold because they are essentially antithetical to human wants and satisfactions and certain things need no selling because of human desires and predilections.

Neither do people shift from one candidate to another, abandon traditional values, or even accept interpretations of the news solely or even wholly on the basis of saturation propaganda produced by a pervasive establishment. Any set of ideas which receives wide currency must bear some close resemblance to a reality perceived by relatively large numbers of people. Abraham Lincoln, a very able politician, pointed out in a deservedly much quoted speech at Clinton, N.Y., in 1858 that "you can fool all the people some of the time, and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all the time."

It is precisely in those states where control is total and where intellectuals, journalists and artists are all the creatures of the power elite that art and ideas are received with the greatest skepticism. Everyone in the Soviet Union listens with the third ear for the echoes of truth which lurk somewhere in the fog of party-Chinese and even the readers of the *New York Times* have learned to ask themselves precisely what political motives lie behind an unflattering article on Senator Edward Kennedy or a picture of Presidential Candidate Jimmy Carter addressing an American Legion Convention and featured on the front page, a picture which reveals the candidate to be a weak and confused man. Nothing appears by accident in the *Times* just as nothing appears by accident in *Pravda* but not everything is equally effective in the formation of public opinion.

Current conservative interpretations of the impact of the media and the academy in the formation of public opinion have a curiously Leninist flavor to them. You will recall that Lenin too held elaborate notions about the value of elite leadership cadres and the importance of holding what Lenin called "the commanding heights." In fact, however, no revolution is ever made until the ruling elite has discredited its mandate; until the ruling elite has deauthorized itself. The only instance of which we know where the walls came tumbling down at the sound of the trumpets is the fall of Jericho as reported in the Book of Joshua. It is the fact of deauthorization and a discredited mandate which conservatives ought to examine rather than the supposed power of the media and the academy. Ruling elites are never overthrown by revolution. They, in fact, commit suicide and their bodies are disposed of by the jackals and vultures of the ideological world.

Revolutions are not the work of entrenched establishments. Those great movements which lead men to reinterpret reality and reorder and restructure the world are not made by established claques, but by the powerful and the well-placed and the intellectuals and artists in their employ. The history of Christianity and nearly every other great world religion is instructive in this matter. The founder of Christianity was the leader of a despised sect within a despised race. His followers were totally without influence and position. In the ordinarily tolerant Hellenistic world into which Christianity was born Christians were a persecuted minority from the outset and continued to be persecuted for another three hundred years. Yet the triumph of Christianity in the late-Roman world was complete. Some commentators have argued that it was only after Christian control of power and intellectuality was complete that Christianity lost its ability to persuade. Since 325 A.D., some critics would say, "it has been downhill all the way."

Recently a good deal of attention has been given to the way in which natural scientific explanations are generated, old scientific theories displaced and new explanations established. These revolutions in scientific thought are made against an established position which is as dominant and as complete as that maintained in most orthodox theological systems. Changes occur as sudden and complete shifts of viewpoint, often made in the face of received opinion. They have the characteristics of a conversion experience.

Thomas S. Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* describes them in the following fashion:

> ...Paradigms are not corrigible by normal science at all. Instead, as we have already seen, normal science ultimately leads only to the recognition of anomalies and to crises. And these are terminated, not by deliberation and interpretation, but by a relatively sudden and unstructured event like the gestalt switch. Scientists then often speak of the "scales falling from the eyes" or of the "lightning flash" that "inundates" a previously obscure puzzle, enabling its components to be seen in a new way that for the first time permits its solution.[1]

Those who have observed the social sciences closely over the past decade have the sense that much the same sort of experience has shaken and converted individual social scientists. Suddenly the older and established explanations are perceived as no longer true. It is not a case of an adjustment or a reinterpretation being necessary, a sort of theoretical "fine-tuning." No, it is as though the scholar for the first time sees that the whole of the old theory is wrong and that it must be jettisoned and replaced. You will note that this happens in spite of and not because of the establishment. As Galileo is reported to have said to the inquisitors: "But it does move."

In the academy, as in the world at large, one ought not to expect support for a reevaluation or restructuring of society, a reconsideration which flies in the

ce of the "establishment" whether liberal or conrvative. Intellectual change, the transvaluation of alues, transition in the political order does not take ace in that fashion.

One of the most interesting aspects of the current beral ascendency in the academy is its rather recent ate. Fifty years ago departments of history, as ineed nearly every department in the social sciences in he United States, were filled with what John Higham as described as "conservative evolutionists." Their olitics were Republican and their historical writing ntensely nationalistic. Theodore Roosevelt not only ecame President of the United States; he served as resident of the American Historical Association.

In economics, even though German-educated conomists infected with the "socialism of the chair" ad begun to appear on faculties of American unirsities, the field was dominated by men who would

national cultural life is not bought at a dear price. It is. And the mockery of the myth of free enquiry in a social situation which, in reality, penalizes the deviant view is a costly bit of social hypocrisy. I am arguing that, short of the ruthless mechanisms of the totalitarian state all establishments are rather shaky affairs and that those moments in which they appear most secure are their moments of greatest danger.

However, let us assume that the contemporary liberal establishment is unlike past establishments and has discovered the secret of the fountain of youth. Let us assume that it is not only able to maintain its dominant position but it succeeds in excluding all deviant and contrary ideas from the public arena. Ought we then to expect a decade or two of revolution in America?

It is very unlikely that such will be the case, for

ause Milton Friedman to appear as a dangerous adical. The shift which has taken place in the cademy over the past fifty years is a shift which has aken place in the society as a whole and far from stigating and propagandizing that remarkable transion, the academy, if anything, lagged somewhat ehind the movement of society. For, in spite of *hat university professors say of themselves*, as nnovators and harbingers of revolution they are, in ct, apologists for the past, whatever that past may e. They rationalize established intellectual positions. he great bulk of academicians are entirely unriginal men who dot the i's and cross the t's of ne revolutionary generalizations of a generation revious. They write the simple-minded textbooks nd boil down the "General Theories" into popular ctures.

But, in fact, no establishment is less secure than t the moment it seems to have achieved its widest urrency and its most dominant position. It is then nat the small Galileo-like voices are heard in the ight saying, "But it does move." Establishments are ragile and temporary structures and not even inuisitors and secret policemen can shore them up orever. Of course I am not arguing here that homoeneity and conformity in the academy and in our

revolutions are inconsistent with democratic societies. Democratic societies are essentially and deepseatedly conservative. I wish to explore the content of this conservatism a bit later, but for the moment I want to demonstrate the existence and cause of this conservatism.

Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*, published in 1834, made the following observation:

> I hear it said that it is in the nature and habits of democracies to be constantly changing their opinions and feelings. This may be true of small democratic nations, like those of the ancient world, in which the whole community could be assembled in a public place and then excited at will by an orator. But I saw nothing of the kind among the great democratic people that dwells upon the opposite shores of the Atlantic Ocean. What struck me in the United States was the difficulty of shaking the majority in an opinion once conceived or of drawing it off from a leader once adopted. Neither speaking nor writing can accomplish it; nothing but experience will avail, and even experience must be repeated.[12]

Tocqueville continued his observations by noting:

> It is a mistake to believe that, when once equality of condition has become the old and uncontested state of society and has imparted its characteristics to the manners of a nation, men will easily allow themselves to be thrust into perilous risks by an imprudent leader or a bold innovator. Not indeed that they will resist him openly, by well-contrived schemes, or even by a premeditated plan of resistance. They will not struggle energetically against him, sometimes they will even applaud him; but they do not follow him. To his vehemence they secretly oppose their inertia, to his revolutionary tendencies their conservative interests, their homely tastes to his adventurous passions, their good sense to the flights of his genius, to his poetry their prose. With immense exertion he raises them for an instant, but they speedily escape from him and fall back, as it were, by their own weight. He strains himself to rouse the indifferent and distracted multitude and finds at last that he is reduced to impotence, not because he is conquered but because he is alone.
>
> I do not assert that men living in democratic communities are naturally stationary; I think, on the contrary, that a perpetual stir prevails in the bosom of those societies, and that rest is unknown there; but I think that men bestir themselves within certain limits, beyond which they hardly ever go. They are forever varying, altering, and restoring secondary matters, but they carefully abstain from touching what is fundamental. They love change, but they dread revolutions.[13]

In this dread of revolutions Tocqueville saw a great weakness in democratic societies, strange as this seemed to Tocqueville's readers who were living in an era characterized by revolution and strange as it may seem to us who have lived with contemporary revolutionary movements. Tocqueville closed the chapter in *Democracy in America* which he entitled "Why Great Revolutions Will Become More Rare" with the following paragraph:

> It is believed by some that modern society will be always changing its aspect; for myself, I fear it will ultimately be too invariably fixed in the same institutions, the same prejudices, the same manners, so that mankind will be stopped and circumscribed; that the mind will swing backwards and forwards forever without begetting fresh ideas; that man will waste his strength in bootless and solitary trifling, and, though in continual motion, that humanity will cease to advance.[14]

More than fifty years after the publication of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, another Frenchman, Gustave le Bon, having lived through repeated revolutionary upheavals, produced one of the classics of modern sociology, a book entitled *The Crowd*. Le Bon uses the word "the crowd" as a kind of shorthand for modern democratic society and he is even more emphatic than Tocqueville in asserting the conservative character of crowds. Here is what he says:

> However, to believe in the predominance among crowds of revolutionary instincts would be to misconstrue entirely their psychology. It is merely their tendency to violence which deceives us on this point. Their rebellious and destructive outbursts are always very transitory. Crowds are too much governed by unconscious considerations, and too much subject in consequence to secular hereditary influences not to be extremely conservative. Abandoned to themselves, they soon weary of disorder, and instinctively turn to servitude....It is difficult to understand history, and popular revolutions in particular, if one does not take sufficiently into account the profoundly conservative instincts of crowds. They may be desirous, it is true, of changing the names of their institutions, and to obtain these changes they accomplish at times even violent revolutions, but the essence of these institutions is too much the expression of the hereditary needs of the race for them not invariably to abide by it. Their incessant mobility only exerts its influence on quite superficial matters. In fact they possess conservative instincts as indestructible as those of all primitive beings. Their fetish-like respect for all traditions is absolute; their unconscious horror of all novelty capable of changing the essential conditions of their existence is very deeply rooted.[15]

And then Le Bon appends a most interesting observation which permits us to see into the goals of democratic majorities.

> Had democracies possessed the power they wield today at the time of the invention of mechanical looms or the introduction of steam-power and the railways, the realization of those inventions would have been impossible, or would have been achieved at the cost of revolutions and repeated massacres. It is fortunate for the progress of civilization that the power of crowds only began to exist when the great discoveries of science and industry had been effected.[16]

It seems then, to me, that two sets of errors are involved in the overestimation of the influence of the arts, the academy and the media on the formation of public opinion. Conservatives perceive liberal control of the academy and the media as a dominant and irresistible force in society. In fact its powers are extremely limited. It is effective only so long as it articulates and rationalizes the values, politics and socio-economic conceptions of the folk-mind. When it enunciates ideas which are clearly in conflict with these ideals or when it presents a view of the world clearly in conflict with the popular reality principle it will be rejected and no amount of control or electronic puffery will make its views acceptable. Conservatives need to concern themselves less with discussions of the liberal media and the liberal

academy and far more with popular values and aspirations. For while these values and aspirations are traditional and conservative they are hardly those shared by most Americans who today call themselves conservatives.

If conservatives are mistaken as to the extent of liberal power, liberals are even more mistaken. Not only do liberals fail to recognize the limits of their power in transforming or changing society, they fail to perceive the kind of society which will emerge as a consequence of their agit-prop activities.

Let me be explicit. Democratic societies are not socialist; indeed, they are deeply anti-socialist, for socialism is a rational construct which is post-industrial and post-traditional. Democratic societies are deeply populist, anti-rational and anti-intellectual, egalitarian and submissive to authority when that authority presents itself in a democratic guise. The current liberal conception of society as a value-free exploration of all the possibilities of human experience is, because even the dumbest clod knows better, simply anathema to the great masses of the people. It is true that the values of that society are pre-capitalistic, that is traditional, anti-rational, oriented to consumption rather than production, distributive rather than agglomerative. They are not socialist, for socialism demands a degree of concentration, manipulation, rationalization and bureaucratization which traditional society simply rejects.

When one deals with the realm of values it is even clearer that the cultural world of the liberal intelligentsia is simply rejected by the people. Indeed this liberal world of the media, the academy and the arts would receive its most stunning check from the very forces it perceives as its support. The behavior of that splendid populist politician from California, young Governor Brown, is a case in point. A close friend and chairman of a University of California department, rather more liberal than myself, wrote me recently in rather naive confusion, "Governor Brown seems to have been invented by God in order to punish the intellectuals." To American liberals I say that it is, for their own sakes, wise to look the gift horse of populism in the mouth.

Finally, liberals ought to realize that only a portion of their habitual vocabulary is effective in addressing the democratic folk-mind. That mind is essentially selective. It accepts those elements of the liberal vocabulary which are congruent with its prejudices, and then only for a time. What a tragedy for liberals that the world which they strive so mightily to build is one in which they cannot possibly live.

[1]John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (London, 1936), pp. 383-384.

[2]Thomas Molnar, *The Counter-Revolution* (New York, 1969), p. 71.

[3]*Ibid.*, p. 29.

[4]*Ibid.*, p. 6.

[5]*Ibid.*, p. 25.

[6]*Ibid.*, p. 24.

[7]*Ibid.*, p. 58.

[8]*Ibid.*, p. 57.

[9]Kevin Phillips, *Mediacracy* (Garden City, New York, 1975), p. 17.

[10]Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York, 1976), pp. 40-41.

[11]Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Second edition, enlarged (Chicago, 1970), p. 122.

[12]Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, the Henry Reeve text as revised by Francis Bowen, Vol. II (New York, 1966), p. 257.

[13]*Ibid.*, p. 255.

[14]*Ibid.*, p. 263.

[15]Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd, A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York, 1960).

[16]*Ibid.*