

PSYCHOBABBLE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

by ADAM GARFINKLE

Not long ago, the *New York Times* ran a short series on the impact of the Cold War on American life. Timesman Joel Brinkley's analysis in the first essay focused on how American institutions had been perverted by government secrecy and the militarization of foreign policy. He mused that without the Russians in our face, there was some question about the cultural coherence of the country.

Two of the figures Brinkley drew on heavily in reaching his conclusions were Robert Jay Lifton, director of the Center of Violence and Human Survival at City University of New York, and John E. Mack, Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard. Both of these men are identified with what might be called Psycholeftism and have specialized in anti-American statements and apocalyptic indictments of capitalist wrongdoing that would seem automatically to disqualify them from being cited as experts about the future.

Psycholeftism combines one part pseudoscientific mumbo-jumbo from the outer limits of Zen psychiatry and one part moral unktion. Whipped up and well beaten, these elements combine to form the basic premise that capitalism and its discontents make all who live within it spiritually sick and driven to destructive and self-destructive behavior. Psycholeftism is obsessively drawn to events like Vietnam and Hiroshima as the royal way to an understanding of the dark core of the American soul.

The politicization of the therapeutic goes back a long way, of course. The psychiatric metaphor came to have significant power in American popular culture in the Fifties. In 1957, Congress established a Joint Commission on Mental Health to find out how "well or badly adjusted" Americans were. Five years later, Congress passed the Mental Health Act mandating the establishment of federal services to solve all problems of maladjustment and unhappiness—marriage counselling, alcohol treatment, the reclamation of juvenile delinquents.

The medical analogy was soon applied to politics as a whole. Poverty, delinquency, and crime were characterized as social diseases, not moral or political problems. The same metaphors found their way into conceptions of foreign and military policy. Liberals approached the Cold War with a social worker mentality, imagining, as James Burnham put it, that the entire globe was a "gigantic slum eagerly awaiting the visit of an international legion of case workers." And it was only a matter of time before some psychiatrist applied his trade to strategic matters, as Jerome Frank in fact did in 1967 in *Sanity and Survival*.

Twenty five years later, America is strapped down on the couch like Gulliver, its id picked at and prodded by an army of little men and women who consider themselves Freud's descendants. It is not science that drives the Psycholeft, but politics. The "science" part of Psycholeftism works about the same way that it worked when actor Robert Young, dressed up like Marcus Welby, used to sell Sanka. Or the way that astro-impressario Carl Sagan used his background to sell nuclear winter to his millenarian fan club.

The politics that drive Psycholeftism aren't Old Left Marxist, but more New Left Marxoid. Given the nature of the discipline (as its adherents call it) this makes perfect sense, for true believing Marxists have always rejected Freud because he gave the lie to their notion that human nature was fully malleable to the radical agenda. Marxoids are much less particular. They enjoy mixing high-sounding talk about the psychological deficits caused by capitalist exploitation and coercion with reassurances that today is the first day of the rest of our lives. Marxoidism is less demanding intellectually than Marxism, but its results exemplify the virtues of what Robert Nisbet once called half bricks—not as solid as whole bricks, perhaps, but twice as useful because they can be thrown twice as far.

John Mack's collection of half bricks, for example, can really sail. Mack's role in the Psycholeftist pantheon, along with a group called Educators for Social Responsibility, used to be in persuading everyone that nuclear deterrence was corrupting the innocence and moral lives of children. During the nuclear freeze movement, Mack and his colleagues went

about terrifying otherwise normal kids of the middle class with visions of nuclear devastation as a way of creating self-fulfilling prophecies about the effects of possible nuclear devastation on the mental health of the young. Arguing from similar grounds some years later, Mack defended the Soviet government's coverup of the Chernobyl disaster. He said that the coverup kept Soviet children "more optimistic."

The end of the Cold War, it seems, has driven Mack over the brink. He now believes that alien beings have intermarried with earthlings, and that perhaps half the planet is now bi-speciel. (No wonder Americans have so many psychological problems!) In a foreword to David M. Jacob's *Secret Life: Firsthand Accounts of UFO Abductions*, Mack warns that a "huge, strange interspecies or interbeing breeding program has invaded our physical reality and is affecting the lives of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people and perhaps in some ways the consciousness of the entire planet." At the Twelfth International Transpersonal Conference in Prague in June, 1992, Mack addressed the gathering on "The UFO Abduction Phenomenon: What Does it Mean for the Transformation of Human Consciousness?"

Robert Jay Lifton happened to be at that same meeting, but his views, unlike Mack's, have not departed from prevailing notions of reality, at least not yet. He has always been a more serious writer than Mack, more the travel agent of Psycholeftism than a fellow traveller. His old enthusiasms for the Protean man of the counterculture and for Maoist notions of revolutionary immortality are somewhat muted these days. He has also stopped arguing for an orgy of mass guilt over Vietnam. But new expressions of his abiding faith in Psycholeftism continue to appear.

In the 1980s, Lifton's Psycholeftism held that capitalism not only gives rise to the military industrial complex (which gives rise to a voracious appetite for nuclear weapons and to the "national security state"), but it also gives rise to a collective psychological disease—"nuclearism."

Lifton coined the term in a 1967 book called *Boundaries*, in which he characterized nuclearism as a religious belief designed to achieve symbolic immortality for the believer. Fifteen years later, the term was less theological and more ideological. In *Indefensible Weapons*, written in 1982 with fellow Marxoid Richard Falk, nuclearism had become a politico-spiritual sickness that inevitably follows as a result of nuclear capitalism's corrosive influence upon our lives. It was a very bad sickness; it literally threatened the entire planet. Freeze activists were foolish to want only to freeze nuclear weapons. Good hearted perhaps but pathetically unscientific, they failed to understand that the mere existence of such weapons drives governmental institutions to want to incinerate the planet.

Lifton has continued to harp on the strings of nuclearism in the 90s. With Eric Markusen, he published *The Genocidal Mentality* in 1990, which argues that American security policy is comparable to Naziism. "Nazi and nuclear ideologies," Lifton and his partner write, "have in common an impulse to slaughter human beings in numbers that can only be termed infinite, and to do so in the name of preserving one's own group." Further to the point, "In the United States, the nuclear system takes on the configuration of a vast industrial corporation...centrally animated by a deadly purpose... Profit making is at the heart of most of the separate elements of the system."

The psychological disease flowing from the sickness of capitalism was both consequence and cause of the U.S. led nuclear arms race; it had nothing whatever to do with Soviet strategic programs or geopolitical motives. Only our attainment of "species consciousness," say Lifton and Markusen could spare the world a nuclear arms race leading to eventual mass destruction and planetary extinction.

Within months of the publication of Lifton's sonorous nonsense, the US and USSR were engaged in a bidding contest over maximum feasible nuclear weapons reductions. This was not because the capitalist demons in our own country got species consciousness or because they were raptured by extraterrestrials. It happened because the USSR went out of business, breaking apart the international political gridlock of the last 45 years. Lifton ought to be embarrassed; he ought to ante up with an admission of how wrong he has been for the last 25 years. But it is safe to bet that he will not give up nuclearism, although saving it after the end of the Cold War is going to involve quite a stretch.

The thing that is amazing in all this is that the nation's media continue to treat people like Lifton and Mack as if they had been mainstream analysts whose predictions were more right than wrong. Unfazed by Mack's journey into the hyperspace of interspeciesism, the *New York Times'* Joel Brinkley reported his worries that today's children would

transfer their terror about nuclear war into terror about the greenhouse effect and ozone depletion. Similarly, Brinkley quotes Lifton in his Cold War piece to the effect that "the country is confused." The country? This from someone who only yesterday was predicting for the umpteenth time that Americanism would involve the world in a nuclear holocaust.

It is not that the end of the Cold War should involve a national outbreak of finger pointing. But there has been much ink spilt over the past half century, far more ink, thankfully, than blood. And it would be nice for the people of the Psycholeft who have set themselves up not only as the scourge of the national soul but also as the clairvoyants of the global conflict to engage in a little self criticism. We need to have a reality check on the debates of the last quarter century especially, not only to get the story straight for future generations, but because it might encourage some of the people who have been wrong from the start to establish a personal moratorium on further charges and predictions while we clear the air. There are some cases, after all, in which a cigar is only a cigar.



LETTERS continued

Dear *Heterodoxy*,

How could you omit Andrea Dworkin from your collection of wacky feminists? She is the godmother of them all. Andrea Dworkin is to feminism what Jack the Ripper is to date rape. No one does it with more purity of heart.

According to Dworkin, the origin of woman's oppression lies in the fact that woman "has a hole." (See her treatise on the subject: *Intercourse*.) "The slit between her legs...which means entry into her—intercourse—appears to be the key to women's lower human status." It means lesser privacy, lesser integrity, lesser self and thus "establishes her lesser significance." The hole at the center of women's being "is synonymous with entry" and therefore—according to Dworkin—invasion, occupation, as in a country that is occupied. This creates the political meaning of intercourse, which is the question: "Can an occupied people...be free?"

Of course Dworkin does not believe for a moment that biology is destiny. A hole is only a hole until it is "socially constructed," in particular by women-hating, hetero-patriarchal males. By itself, nature is nothing. "Law creates nature." It is male-made law that makes the hole what it is (see Catharine MacKinnon for further enlightenment). Sodomy laws prevent other holes from being occupied, and thus their owners—men—from being condemned to inferiority and oppression. "They protect men as a class from the violation of penetration." The same laws define the function of intercourse as procreation and thus "the whole meaning of the fuck—gender—[is] resolved by its outcome in producing children."

Intercourse in a male-defined universe is thus the source of women's oppression. "Intercourse is the pure, sterile, formal expression of men's contempt for women." All-powerful, misogynist men define intercourse just as they define women. As the rulers of the body politic they have the power to decide how women will suffer, and specifically which sadistic acts against the bodies of women will be construed to be normal. "In the United States, incest is increasingly the sadism of choice," says Dworkin. According to her, this form of sadism is directed against the female child with the idea of socializing her to her female status. The conclusion follows logically: "Perhaps incestuous rape is becoming a central paradigm for intercourse in our time."

Dworkin's work is the center of a whole philosophical school of feminists. The editor of *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, Robin Morgan, praises the "elegance" and "scholarship" of *Intercourse*; the author of *The Hite Report* cherishes "its pure insights," while feminist theologian Mary Daly proclaims it a "monumental work." The author of *Mothers On Trial*, Phyllis Chesler writes: "Dworkin's prose is elegant, her passion for truth profound, her longing for justice both lyrical and unrelenting, her use of history and literature stunning..."

This philosophical school of which Andrea Dworkin is the founding mother could be called Cartesian feminism: I hate, therefore I am.

Vincit Veritas