

THE RELEVANCE OF
CONTEMPORARY
RADICAL THOUGHT

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THE OBJECT of this paper is to discuss the relevance of 'contemporary radical thought' to the South African situation. The phrase 'contemporary radical thought' includes the ideologies of various issue-oriented movements such as 'Student Power', 'Black Power' and 'Women's Liberation' groups, and also refers to recent developments in Marxist theory and in Christian thought. In political terms it finds expression in a number of parties situated well to the left of the orthodox Communist parties in the political spectrum.

Although among all these groups, currents and movements there are wide divergences as to tactics, there is an underlying unity of approach concerning immediate objectives and details of analysis. This lies in a common rejection of these patterns of human relations imposed upon people by the exigencies of modern capitalist societies. For example, the difference between the Black Power movement in the United States and previous Civil Rights movements does not consist only in a change of tactics and a greater willingness to use violence. A change in goals is also involved.

The desire is no longer to be accepted into white middle-class society, as though this were the peak of human attainment. The way in which whites treat blacks is seen as having

its roots in the way that whites treat one another; therefore what is aimed at now is the construction of a new kind of society with a different value-system and a different culture, a better culture. In particular, this involves a rejection of the whites' assumption that they have the right to select the criteria of 'acceptability', 'responsibility', 'civilisation', or even beauty. Similarly, the Women's Liberation movement is not based merely on the idea that women are economically exploited by men, through getting lower wages at work, and not sharing properly in controlling the home budget. It is also argued that in the present system the whole nature of the woman-man relationship is vitiated by stereotyped role-play patterns which destroy the spontaneity of relationships. While this is more damaging to the woman, it nevertheless damages the man also.

I shall briefly sketch the theoretical basis for this critique which is based on a particular analysis of the nature of human beings. Ethical concepts such as 'justice' and 'equality' refer to a desired type of relationship between individuals. This relationship is desired because of what it does to each individual in the relationship. That is, we believe that it is good for individuals to be treated justly and equally. Equality and justice are *means* towards the end of individual happiness. The significance of this is that the content which we give to such nouns *depends on the way in which we believe individuals achieve happiness, or fulfil themselves*. I shall refer to a particular idea of fulfilment as a 'human model'.

If we advocate equality as a norm governing relations between people, we are not requiring identical treatment for all individuals in all situations. We mean that differences in treatment must be based on relevant differences in the nature or situation of the individuals concerned. In determining relevance, one factor which must be taken into account is this question of human models. The type of society one aims at depends on one's human model. If one sees human fulfilment in terms of a high level of consumption the sort of society one aims at will be very different from that which would be sought if one saw fulfilment as lying in achieving *satori*, or loving God, or communicating with one's fellows, or developing one's intellect, or serving the glory of one's nation. Central to any ideology is a human model. It is crucial to realise this, for often in political arguments the disputants fail to realise that they are operating with different human models, and so that they are giving different meanings to key terms.

If one accepts that different ideologies depend on different human models, then the problem arises of what criteria one

could possibly use in comparing various models. There are two possible approaches to this problem. The first is to say that an individual is fulfilled when his needs are satisfied, and so that it is necessary to find out what the needs of a human are in order to discover which model is correct. This approach suggests that there is an objective, empirically determinable answer to the question. However, such an answer assumes that there is a fixed and constant set of drives and needs: 'human nature'. Whether approaching the problem from an existentialist or from a marxist viewpoint, contemporary radical thinkers are unanimous in rejecting the concept 'human nature'.

It would require too large a detour to give their reasons for this with any rigour. Briefly, the fact of self-consciousness makes it possible for an individual to reflect on and reject his motives for any particular action. At the most elementary level, the statement 'man needs food' means 'if an individual wants to stay alive, he must have food'. The translation brings out the fact that the initial statement contains an implicit normative judgement, or an implicit choice-statement. Individuals can decide not to stay alive, and then they don't need food. Since nearly all people do in fact want to stay alive, the first statement is adequate for everyday use. In fact, in any given society, most people do seem to want roughly the same sort of things, and it is this uniformity which leads people to think in terms of 'human nature', as an explanatory hypothesis. If we are to reject it, we must replace it with a better explanation of the relative uniformity of human behaviour in any given society.

Once more, it is not possible to formulate such an explanation in detail. It is argued that people behave in terms of their culture and that a culture is largely a social product which is imposed on each individual by the socialising process to which he is subjected in his particular society. He is 'taught' a set of needs, and he acts in terms of these needs. This raises a number of problems, two of which are particularly relevant.

1. Once it is realised that a particular set of needs is merely the particular human model characteristic of that culture, one is faced with a value decision. Should one continue to accept this particular model? What criteria could be used in deciding between it and other possible models? These are very difficult problems in ethical theory. Here I shall not attempt to justify my own solution. I shall merely assume the validity of the Christian model, which I understand to be based on the concepts of freedom and love. Freedom means self-determination;

it means using one's powers of reason to the full in order to understand oneself and one's world, and in order to act in terms of this understanding. An individual remains unfree if he acts in terms of unexamined principles and socially-imposed norms.

The Christian principle of love implies that a certain type of relationship with other people is a way of achieving fulfilment. That is, community with other people is a good in itself, not a way of obtaining other goods. Love and freedom are interdependent. To love someone means to be open to him, to explore him, and this openness and exploration cannot occur where people are reacting to one another in terms of set, conventionally determined behaviour patterns. The development of reason and consciousness which underlies freedom can only occur in real interaction with other people, in community.

To repeat, love, freedom and reason are not means to an end. They constitute a way of life which is an end in itself, a mode of fulfilment.

2. Why is this particular set of needs imposed by this particular society? The structural functional school of sociology answers this question by pointing to the function which culture has in the overall social system. In order for the social structure to be maintained in existence, it is necessary for the individuals in the society to acquire the kind of behaviour pattern which is consistent with its continued existence, and the process of socialisation imposes this behaviour pattern. It has been pointed out by critics such as Easton (1) and Buckley (2) that the structural functional approach in terms of system maintenance introduces a conservative bias by assuming that it is necessary for the society to maintain its present structure, and so legitimising the culture which enables it to do so. Easton therefore introduces the concept of 'systems persistence'.

The distinction between systems persistence and systems maintenance makes it possible to distinguish between, on the one hand, the necessary prerequisites for the continued existence of some form of society, and, on the other hand, the much narrower set of necessary prerequisites for the continued existence of a given society *with its given structure*. One can then ask whether a given culture performs a 'maintenance' role or a 'persistence' role; whether it functions to maintain the given class, economic, and power structure, or whether it introduces the individual to an open-ended search for ways of living together with his fellows.

This distinction can be used to illuminate Marcuse's distinction between 'repression' and 'surplus repression' (3) (or

vice-versa, if you are more familiar with Marcuse than with Easton). Using his own version of Freudian psychology, Marcuse accepts that social living requires a certain amount of repression of libidinal drives, since both the material situation and the necessity of working in collaboration with other people makes a certain amount of abnegation inevitable. In order to prevent frustration and conflict every time this occurs, it is desirable that the socialisation process should impose a certain amount of repression. The less gratification possible in a given social situation, the more repression is necessary. Marcuse argues that in any given social situation one can distinguish between the optimum distribution of possibilities of gratification available with the best utilisation of the social and productive forces, and the actual distribution, which is a function of the way in which the society actually uses its resources, which is in turn a function of social organisation, and in particular of class structure. There may be a surplus of internalised repression required for the maintenance of the particular class structure. *That is, in order to produce people who will accept the type of life which the society can offer them, it may be necessary to impose upon them a highly limiting set of 'needs'.*

The 'Old Left' criticised capitalism largely on the grounds that it leads to an unfair distribution of wealth and an inefficient use of productive resources. On the whole it accepted the capitalist human model of fulfilment through the consumption and possession of material goods. The 'New Left' agrees with the initial criticism, but argues, further, that the human model imposed in capitalist society is a function of the needs of the capitalist system, and that it involves the destruction of important human potentialities. Galbraith makes similar points, using a different 'language game', in 'The New Industrial State'. For example, he shows how the concept of 'consumer sovereignty' no longer applies, since ways have been devised of controlling aggregate demand through advertising techniques in order to satisfy the need of the industrial system for a stable expanding market. He writes, 'But, as we have sufficiently seen, the system, if it accommodates to man's wants, also and increasingly accommodates men to its needs. And it must. This latter accommodation is no trivial exercise in salesmanship. It is deeply organic. High technology and heavy capital use cannot be subordinated to the ebb and flow of market demand. They require planning; it is the essence of planning that public behaviour be made predictable, that it be subject to control. And from this control flow further important consequences. It ensures that men and numerous women will work with undiminished effort however great their supply of goods. And it helps ensure that

the society will measure its accomplishment by its annual increase in production.... The management to which we are subject is not onerous. It works not on the body but on the mind. It first wins acquiescence or belief; action is in response to this mental conditioning, and is thus devoid of any sense of compulsion. It is not that we are required to have a newly configured automobile or a novel reverse-action laxative; it is because we believe that we must have them. It is open to anyone who can resist belief to contract out of this control. But we are no less managed because we are not physically compelled. On the contrary, though this is poorly understood, physical compulsion would have a far lower order of efficiency' (4). In a situation where productivity has reached a level at which rapidly increasing leisure possibilities open up, an ethic of consumption and need creation is imposed because the economy in its present form needs increasing demand, without there being any attempt to consider whether people need it.

The capitalist human model includes the following three elements:

- (a) Fulfilment through possession and consumption of material goods... what C.B. Macpherson calls 'possessive individualism'.
- (b) A tendency to compartmentalise life into a work sphere and a 'living' sphere, with work being seen as an unfortunate necessity, rather than an area of possible fulfilment. (This is because the work situation in such a society is not designed to be an area of fulfilment. It is designed to increase productivity, which is not necessarily the same thing).
- (c) The idea that exploitation is the natural relationship between people. In a capitalist enterprise the employee is essentially a 'means of production', who may be oiled to make him work better, as other pieces of machinery are, but who becomes redundant if he plays no role in the profit-making process. Human relationships become instrumental, rather than areas for finding fulfilment.

The use of personnel management techniques may make the worker more comfortable, but it does not change the nature of the basic relationship. Rather, it is a process of refining the system of controls imposed on the worker, of persuading him to co-operate willingly in his own exploitation. For example, giving the worker a token number of shares in the firm may make him feel that he has a greater interest and a more significant role in it, but it in fact gives him no real power. It is power which is the crux of the matter. The worker may be given

a consultative role, but power, in particular power to decide what shall be done with the profits, lies with ownership and management. The term 'exploitation' describes this power differential and its implications.

Contemporary radicals suggest two other areas of possible human experience which, they argue, are more fulfilling:

- (a) the idea of work as a creative activity. This means that work satisfaction should be seen as one of the products of the production process, and should not play a secondary role to narrow criteria of economic efficiency.
- (b) The idea of community, love, co-operation with one's fellows as an end in itself.

These two may be united in the concept 'participation'... a human model of fulfilment through creative involvement in the social process.

I said earlier that the Old Left had concentrated to a great extent on material problems. The lesser emphasis placed on such problems in contemporary theory is of course at least in part the result of much greater affluence in advanced capitalist societies. In such circumstances it is natural to turn to other unfortunate results of capitalism. But in South Africa our problems are perhaps closer to those of nineteenth century Europe than to those of contemporary Europe: an extremely inegalitarian society where large sections of the population still live at or below subsistence level. Any reasonable human model will include as real needs adequate housing, food, clothing and health, so perhaps at the moment in South Africa issues beyond this are irrelevant. Let us therefore consider the problem of inequality in South Africa.

There is certainly, in South Africa, considerable antagonism between the different 'race' groups. If we reject the thesis that this is due to some inherent incompatibility of the different 'races', we must inquire what the conflict is about. The history of South Africa since the beginning of white occupation is the story of the use by whites of political and military power to ensure first a near monopoly of land, and then a complete monopoly of skilled, highly-paid jobs. This means that today the large share of the wealth which accrues to the white section of the population is as much a result of their control of political power as it is of their actual contribution to production. It is this fact, I believe, that lies at the roots of conflict in South Africa.

Race prejudice itself is of course a reality, in that most whites in South Africa express, in their behaviour towards

