

# THE RISE AND FALL OF REICH'S THIRD

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## THE GREENING OF CHARLES REICH

Bernard Murchland

When Tocqueville wrote his celebrated essay on American democracy he initiated a tradition of social criticism that still flourishes. His estimate of democratic man was not an optimistic one. "It is believed by some," he wrote, "that modern society will be always changing its aspect; for myself, I fear that 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. . . ." Among the dangers Tocqueville foresaw with remarkable insight were the ascendancy of abstract reason, the tyranny of majority opinion, the subjugation of man to the machine, the breakdown of community, the destruction of the environment and, above all, the "endemic disease of commercialism." He expressed profound doubt about the possibility of human improvement in democracy. "I do not know when this long voyage will be ended," he said. "I am weary of seeing the shore in each successive mirage, and I often ask myself whether the *terra firma* we seek does really exist, and whether we are not doomed to rove upon the seas forever."

I was reminded of Tocqueville quite often as I read Charles Reich's *The Greening of America* (Random House. 399 pp. \$7.95.). The book is defective, marred by the exceeding vagueness of its central categories (rather awkwardly termed Consciousness I, Consciousness II, and Consciousness III.), a lack of historical perspective, gross generalizations, annoying question-begging, and windy rhetoric. But I come as it were to praise Reich rather than bury him. For in its best parts, *The Greening* is a thoughtful examination of the "stopped and circumscribed"

character of democratic America and supports some of Tocqueville's worst suspicions. As such, it is a commendable analysis of the problem of alienation in the United States (and, by implication, elsewhere) today. Reich elaborates upon this problem by analyzing such besetting maladies as civil disorder, war, poverty amid riches, law-making by private power, uncontrolled technology, the artificiality of work, and so forth. He carries out this analysis under the rubric of Consciousness II, which reflects the highly organized structure and repressive values of our technological society (as opposed to Consciousness I, which reflected the dream of 1789 of a free society and a republican form of government in which the people would be sovereign).

Reich characterizes the basic crisis in these words: "We no longer understand the system under which we live, hence the structure has become obsolete and we have become powerless; in turn the system has been permitted to assume unchallenged power to dominate our lives and now rumbles along, unguided and therefore indifferent to human ends." The question before all of us now is: What mind and what way of life can preserve man's humanity and his very existence against the domination of the forces he has created? It is a familiar refrain in the literature of social alienation that man has become the victim of his own creations. In *The German Ideology*, Marx spoke of the "consolidation of what we ourselves produce into an objective power above us, growing out of control, thwarting our expectations and bringing to naught our calculations." Alienation sets in when man's own works acquire an existence that is independent of him and threaten to subordinate him to their own autonomous laws, thus making man an appendage of a thingified world of machines and bureaucracies.

Indeed, Reich's discussion seems influenced by a Marxian perspective. Thus he notes that the two cultural events which did most to create the prevailing American consciousness were the emergence of the competitive market economy and scientific technique. Ironically, these influences began to make themselves felt shortly after the American experiment in a free society got underway; and they, more than anything else, are responsible for the withering of the American dream. They not only destroyed the

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traditional social fabric but made it virtually impossible to create any viable new fabric. Evidence of this destruction is writ large, both on our environment with its polluted air and bleak cities and on the scarred landscape of the human psyche. Thence comes the theme of the lost self which predominates in the art of our age.

# Some of Tocqueville's Worst Suspensions

Reich makes illuminating reference to such cultural classics as the novels of Dickens and the films (especially *Metropolis* and *M.*) of Fritz Lang. I also found Reich's exegesis of *Portnoy's Complaint*, as one man's effort to adjust to an organization world, very interesting: "Portnoy knows only too well that there is no existence for losers, no reality except the reality of society, that the world is filled with the incredible dangers and perils that his parents warned him about. Life is a desperate competitive footrace; to fall even a step behind is to forego all hope of keeping up."

Reich is also very good on the effect of the new economic imperatives on the original political structure of the country. As money rather than basic human needs became the motor force of society, the central constitutional idea of individual sovereignty gradually fell by the wayside. Large commercial conglomerates emerged after the Civil War with enormous and unprecedented powers. Reich refers to this development as "the conquest of the American nation." And not so much a conquest by individuals (powerful as they were) as by the impersonal forces of organization, technology and efficiency, i.e., "the forces of modern rationalism and scientific management." Consciousness I could neither comprehend

nor successfully resist this onslaught. Furthermore, Reich points out, reform efforts (especially the New Deal) also failed to do so. While the New Deal had some success in balancing the public interest against private interests, its most lasting product was neither its "idealism nor humanism, but a new consciousness that believed primarily in domination and the necessity for living under domination. . . . The final tragedy of the reform movement is that the power it created was amalgamated with the private power already in existence, and with the now overwhelming and terrible power of technology, to form the inhuman structure in which we now live."

I think the charge of inhumanity goes too far, for I continue to believe that, despite its many shortcomings, the American way of life remains a *comparatively* humane one. Nonetheless, Reich's portrayal in the central chapters of his book (4 through 7) of its dehumanizing aspects and the dangers it faces are cogently impressive and often prophetic. Although I am not lacking in a tragic sense of life and have always believed that civilized life is never immune from a more or less imminent threat of barbarism, I read these pages with an uneasy feeling that I may soon have to revise my estimate of the possibilities for authentic human existence in America. One becomes aware that the power of the state to separate us from the "sources of meaning and truth" is truly terrifying. Reich's discussion of the way law has come to serve inhuman ends especially struck me, and this may well be the most important thing he has to tell us. The situation is such, we are told, that the Bill of Rights is *inapplicable* today. Even if this were only a half truth, the implications would be quite frightening.

In the closing chapters of his book, Reich eulogizes the youth culture—Consciousness III—and proposes it as a solution to our manifold ills. Most of what he writes here is nonsense, which is surprising as well as disappointing, because it makes one wonder why he so suddenly took leave of his critical senses. As a matter of fact, there is no youth "culture" in this country. There is a youth market that buys records, tape recorders and other expensive commodities (all of which are produced in the very spirit of corporate capitalism that Reich and others decry); there is also a large element of middle-class hedonism that is conspicuous among youth—those who get stoned on pot, cop out, etc.; and on the serious side, there are those youths who are deeply committed to a reform of society. But what very often never gets mentioned about them is that their mentors are

invariably—from Marx to Marcuse and faculty members—adults. It is legitimate to speak of a counter-culture in our society, and large numbers of young people (mostly students) are part of it. But the ideas that sustain it do not come from youth nor, as a rule, are the organizations that give it expression led by them. The problems Reich depicts are in large measure political. It follows that their solution must be to that same extent political. A change in consciousness won't do the trick, even though this will help. A viable society is always the outcome of a dialectical relationship between the self and its world, between mind and structure.

On the other hand, it is clear that beneath the rhetoric of youth-mysticism Reich is calling for an enlargement and an enrichment of our experience.

As Sartre once remarked, a cloud of heavy boredom weighs over America; and Reich is certainly right in observing that "we have all known the loneliness, the emptiness, the plastic isolation of contemporary America." We all need to sing and dance more, to be more beautiful and compassionate and loving. We pant for a rebirth as a hart after the clear waters. But in life styles as in ideas, youth are followers rather than leaders. On the frontispiece of his book, Reich quotes Wallace Stevens to the effect that nothing endures or will endure like "April's green endures." But another poet has pointed out that April is the cruellest month, mixing memory with desire and displaying dry land and rotted roots as well as greenery. Consciousness III has not yet absorbed this insight.

## THE "BLACKENING AND BLUEING" OF AMERICA

James V. Schall

For a period of several months, myriad of my fellow middle-aged friends (all being "Consciousness I" and "Consciousness II" types) would ask breathlessly whether I had read Charles Reich's "The Greening of America," which appeared in *The New Yorker* last fall. Though assailed by vague feelings of guilt, I was content to go on reading John of Paris, Augustine, and J.R.R. Tolkien as before. But when one of my students reported that the article—which began on page 42 of the September 26th issue and ended on page 111!—had now become an even longer book, I chose the lesser of the two inescapable evils and gave the shorter, magazine piece a whirl. Certainly, no one likes to seem totally out of touch with "where it's at" (though, to be truthful, the notion of not being "where it's at" is not absolutely unattractive these days; there is a future for contemplative orders, I am convinced).

Thus, bleary-eyed, I read the now familiar clichés: (1) "The Constitution and Bill of Rights

have been steadily weakened"; (2) "America is one vast, terrifying anti-community"; (3) "We seem to be living in a society that no one created and that no one wants"; (4) "For the nineteen-fifties, the norm itself—the system itself—became degenerate"; (5) "The effects of the corporate state's autonomy are in themselves profoundly harmful"; (6) "The bitter truth is that despite our ideals of law and all the talk about law and order, we are today in the most literal sense of the word a lawless society . . ."; (7) "The Vietnam war represents a form of madness"; (8) "The machine has begun to destroy itself"; (9) "All features of the corporate state combine to cause the major symptom of our country's sickness and decay. . . ." And there are, by rough count, about twenty-three more such profound insights about your land and my land.

Well, how does one go about commenting on Mr. Reich's quaint thesis? Surely to list all the evident confusions and inconsistencies is useless, and most readers will be acquainted with the general criticism and comment that has already appeared. What I should like to note are Mr. Reich's silences and his political theory, for they are bound inextricably together.

The silences are, of course, horrendous—to use a word Reich himself would surely like—and the most glaring one is easy to miss because of its blinding brightness: It is difficult to discover from anything in the article itself that the rest of the world outside the United States even exists, or that it might just possibly have problems of its own that affect our social climate. Vietnam, to be sure, is frequently

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