

One-Dimensional Man

Chapter 3: The Conquest of the Unhappy Consciousness: Repressive Desublimation

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Having discussed the political integration of advanced industrial society, an achievement rendered possible by growing technological productivity and the expanding conquest of man and nature, we will now turn to a corresponding integration in the realm of culture. In this chapter, certain key notions and images of literature and their fate will illustrate how the progress of technological rationality is liquidating the oppositional and transcending elements in the “higher culture.” They succumb in fact to the process of *desublimation* which prevails in the advanced regions of contemporary society.

The achievements and the failures of this society invalidate its higher culture. The celebration of the autonomous personality, of humanism, of tragic and romantic love appears to be the ideal of a backward stage of the development. What is happening now is not the deterioration of higher culture into mass culture but the refutation of this culture by the reality. The reality surpasses its culture. Man today can do *more* than the culture heroes and half-gods; he has solved many insoluble problems. But he has also betrayed the hope and destroyed the truth which were preserved in the sublimations of higher culture. To be sure, the higher culture was always in contradiction with social reality, and only a privileged minority enjoyed its blessings and represented its ideals. The two antagonistic spheres of society have always coexisted; the higher culture has always been accommodating, while the reality was rarely disturbed by its ideals and its truth.

Today’s novel feature is the flattening out of the antagonism between culture and social reality through the obliteration of the oppositional, alien, and transcendent elements in the higher culture by virtue of which it constituted *another dimension* of reality. This liquidation of *two-dimensional* culture takes place not through the denial and rejection of the “cultural values,” but through their wholesale incorporation into the established order, through their reproduction and display on a massive scale.

In fact, they serve as instruments of social cohesion. The greatness of a free literature and art, the ideals of humanism, the sorrows and joys of the individual, the fulfillment of the personality are important items in the competitive struggle between East and West. They speak heavily against the present forms of communism, and they are daily administered and sold. The fact that they contradict the society which sells them does not count. Just as people know or feel that advertisements and political platforms must not be necessarily true or right, and yet hear and read them and even let themselves be guided by them, so they accept the traditional values and make them part of their mental equipment. If mass communications blend together harmoniously, and often unnoticeably, art, politics, religion, and philosophy with commercials, they bring these realms of culture to their common denominator—the commodity form. The music of the soul is also the music of salesmanship. Exchange value, not truth value counts. On it centers the rationality of the status quo, and all alien rationality is bent to it. As the great words of freedom and fulfillment are pronounced by campaigning leaders and politicians, on the screens and radios and stages, they turn into meaningless sounds which obtain meaning only in the context of propaganda, business, discipline, and relaxation. This assimilation of the ideal with reality testifies to the extent to which the ideal has been surpassed. It is brought down from the sublimated realm of the soul or the spirit or the inner man, and

translated into operational terms and problems. Here are the progressive elements of mass culture. The perversion is indicative of the fact that advanced industrial society is confronted with the possibility of a materialization of ideals. The capabilities of this society are progressively reducing the sublimated realm in which the condition of man was represented, idealized, and indicted. Higher culture becomes part of the material culture. In this transformation, it loses the greater part of its truth.

The higher culture of the West—whose moral, aesthetic, and intellectual values industrial society still professes—was a pre-technological culture in a functional as well as chronological sense. Its validity was derived from the experience of a world which no longer exists and which cannot be recaptured because it is in a strict sense invalidated by technological society. Moreover, it remained to a large degree a feudal culture, even when the bourgeois period gave it some of its most lasting formulations. It was feudal not only because of its confinement to privileged minorities, not only because of its inherent romantic element (which will be discussed presently), but also because its authentic works expressed a conscious, methodical alienation from the entire sphere of business and industry, and from its calculable and profitable order.

While this bourgeois order found its rich—and even affirmative—representation in art and literature (as in the Dutch painters of the seventeenth century, in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, in the English novel of the nineteenth century, in Thomas Mann), it remained an order which was over-shadowed, broken, refuted by another dimension which was irreconcilably antagonistic to the order of business, indicting it and denying it. And in the literature, this other dimension is represented not by the religious, spiritual, moral heroes (who often sustain the established order) but rather by such disruptive characters as the artist, the prostitute, the adulteress, the great criminal and outcast, the warrior, the rebel-poet, the devil, the fool—those who don't earn a living, at least not in an orderly and normal way.

To be sure, these characters have not disappeared from the literature of advanced industrial society, but they survive essentially transformed. The vamp, the national hero, the beatnik, the neurotic housewife, the gangster, the star, the charismatic tycoon perform a function very different from and even contrary to that of their cultural predecessors. They are no longer images of another way of life but rather freaks or types of the same life, serving as an affirmation rather than negation of the established order.

Surely, the world of their predecessors was a backward, pre-technological world, a world with the good conscience of inequality and toil, in which labor was still a fated misfortune; but a world in which man and nature were not yet organized as things and instrumentalities. With its code of forms and manners, with the style and vocabulary of its literature and philosophy, this past culture expressed the rhythm and content of a universe in which valleys and forests, villages and inns, nobles and villains, salons and courts were a part of the experienced reality. In the verse and prose of this pre-technological culture is the rhythm of those who wander or ride in carriages, who have the time and the pleasure to think, contemplate, feel and narrate.

It is an outdated and surpassed culture, and only dreams and childlike regressions can recapture it. But this culture is, in some of its decisive elements, also a post-technological one. Its most advanced images and positions seem to survive their absorption into administered comforts and stimuli; they continue to haunt the consciousness with the possibility of their rebirth in the consummation of technical progress. They are the expression of that free and conscious alienation from the established forms of life with which literature and the arts opposed these forms even where they adorned them.

In contrast to the Marxian concept, which denotes man's relation to himself and to his work in capitalist

society, the *artistic alienation* is the conscious transcendence of the alienated existence—a “higher level” or mediated alienation. The conflict with the world of progress, the negation of the order of business, the anti-bourgeois elements in bourgeois literature and art are neither due to the aesthetic lowliness of this order nor to romantic reaction—nostalgic consecration of a disappearing stage of civilization. “Romantic” is a term of condescending defamation which is easily applied to disparaging avant-garde positions, just as the term “decadent” far more often denounces the genuinely progressive traits of a dying culture than the real factors of decay. The traditional images of artistic alienation are indeed romantic in as much as they are in aesthetic incompatibility with the developing society. This incompatibility is the token of their truth. What they recall and preserve in memory pertains to the future: images of a gratification that would dissolve the society which suppresses it. The great surrealist art and literature of the 'Twenties and 'Thirties has still recaptured them in their subversive and liberating function. Random examples from the basic literary vocabulary may indicate the range and the kinship of these images, and the dimension which they reveal: *Soul and Spirit and Heart*; *la recherche de l'absolu*, *Les Fleurs du mal*, *la femme-enfant*; *the Kingdom by the Sea*; *Le Bateau ivre* and the Long-legged Bait; *Ferne* and *Heimat*; but also demon rum, demon machine, and demon money; Don Juan and Romeo; the Master Builder and When We Dead Awake.

Their mere enumeration shows that they belong to a lost dimension. They are invalidated not because of their literary obsolescence. Some of these images pertain to contemporary literature and survive in its most advanced creations. What has been invalidated is their subversive force, their destructive content—their truth. In this transformation, they find their home in everyday living. The alien and alienating oeuvres of intellectual culture become familiar goods and services. Is their massive reproduction and consumption only a change in quantity, namely, growing appreciation and understanding, democratization of culture?

The truth of literature and art has always been granted (if it was granted at all) as one of a “higher” order, which should not and indeed did not disturb the order of business. What has changed in the contemporary period is the difference between the two orders and their truths. The absorbent power of society depletes the artistic dimension by assimilating its antagonistic contents. In the realm of culture, the new totalitarianism manifests itself precisely in a harmonizing pluralism, where the most contradictory works and truths peacefully coexist in indifference.

Prior to the advent of this cultural reconciliation, literature and art were essentially alienation, sustaining and protecting the contradiction—the unhappy consciousness of the divided world, the defeated possibilities, the hopes unfulfilled, and the promises betrayed. They were a rational, cognitive force, revealing a dimension of man and nature which was repressed and repelled in reality. Their truth was in the illusion evoked, in the insistence on creating a world in which the terror of life was called up and suspended—mastered by recognition. This is the miracle of the *chef-d'oeuvre*; it is the tragedy, sustained to the last, and the end of tragedy—its impossible solution. To live one's love and hatred, to live that which one *is* means defeat, resignation, and death. The crimes of society, the hell that man has made or man become unconquerable cosmic forces.

The tension between the actual and the possible is transfigured into an insoluble conflict, in which reconciliation is by grace of the oeuvre as *form*: beauty as the “promesse de bonheur.” In the form of the oeuvre, the actual circumstances are placed in another dimension where the given reality shows itself as that which it is. Thus it tells the truth about itself; its language ceases to be that of deception, ignorance, and submission. Fiction calls the facts by their name and their reign collapses; fiction subverts everyday

experience and shows it to be mutilated and false. But art has this magic power only as the power of negation. It can speak its own language only as long as the images are alive which refuse and refute the established order.

Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is distinguished from equally sad love stories of contemporary literature by the fact that the humble vocabulary of her real-life counterpart still contained the heroine's images, or she read stories still containing such images. Her anxiety was fatal because there was no psychoanalyst, and there was no psychoanalyst because, in her world, he would not have been capable of curing her. She would have rejected him as part of the order of Yonville which destroyed her. Her story was "tragic" because the society in which it occurred was a backward one, with a sexual morality not yet liberalized, and a psychology not yet institutionalized. The society that was still to come has "solved" her problem by suppressing it. Certainly it would be nonsense to say that her tragedy or that of Romeo and Juliet is solved in modern democracy, but it would also be nonsense to deny the historical essence of the tragedy. The developing technological reality undermines not only the traditional forms but the very basis of the artistic alienation—that is, it tends to invalidate not only certain "styles" but also the very substance of art.

To be sure, alienation is not the sole characteristic of art. An analysis, and even a statement of the problem is outside the scope of this work, but some suggestions may be offered for clarification. Throughout whole periods of civilization, art appears to be entirely integrated into its society. Egyptian, Greek, and Gothic art are familiar examples; Bach and Mozart are usually also cited as testifying to the "positive" side of art. The place of the work of art in a pre-technological and two-dimensional culture is very different from that in a one-dimensional civilization, but alienation characterizes affirmative as well as negative art.

The decisive distinction is not the psychological one between art created in joy and art created in sorrow, between sanity and neurosis, but that between the artistic and the societal reality. The rupture with the latter, the magic or rational transgression, is an essential quality of even the most affirmative art; it is alienated also from the very public to which it is addressed. No matter how close and familiar the temple or cathedral were to the people who lived around them, they remained in terrifying or elevating contrast to the daily life of the slave, the peasant, and the artisan—and perhaps even to that of their masters.

Whether ritualized or not, art contains the rationality of negation. In its advanced positions, it is the Great Refusal—the protest against that which is. The modes in which man and things are made to appear, to sing and sound and speak, are modes of refuting, breaking, and recreating their factual existence. But these modes of negation pay tribute to the antagonistic society to which they are linked. Separated from the sphere of labor where society reproduces itself and its misery, the world of art which they create remains, with all its truth, a privilege and an illusion.

In this form it continues, in spite of all democratization and popularization, through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. The "high culture" in which this alienation is celebrated has its own rites and its own style. The salon, the concert, opera, theater are designed to create and invoke another dimension of reality. Their attendance requires festive-like preparation; they cut off and transcend everyday experience.

Now this essential gap between the arts and the order of the day, kept open in the artistic alienation, is progressively closed by the advancing technological society. And with its closing, the Great Refusal is in turn refused; the "other dimension" is absorbed into the prevailing state of affairs. The works of alienation are themselves incorporated into this society and circulate as part and parcel of the equipment which adorns and psychoanalyzes the prevailing state of affairs. Thus they become commercials—they

sell, comfort, or excite.

The neo-conservative critics of leftist critics of mass culture ridicule the protest against Bach as background music in the kitchen, against Plato and Hegel, Shelley and Baudelaire, Marx and Freud in the drugstore. Instead, they insist on recognition of the fact that the classics have left the mausoleum and come to life again, that people are just so much more educated. True, but coming to life as classics, they come to life as other than themselves; they are deprived of their antagonistic force, of the estrangement which was the very dimension of their truth. The intent and function of these works have thus fundamentally changed. If they once stood in contradiction to the status quo, this contradiction is now flattened out.

But such assimilation is historically premature; it establishes cultural equality while preserving domination. Society is eliminating the prerogatives and privileges of feudal aristocratic culture together with its content. The fact that the transcending truths of the fine arts, the aesthetics of life and thought, were accessible only to the few wealthy and educated was the fault of a repressive society. But this fault is not corrected by paperbacks, general education, long-playing records, and the abolition of formal dress in the theater and concert hall.¹ The cultural privileges expressed the injustice of freedom, the contradiction between ideology and reality, the separation of intellectual from material productivity; but they also provided a protected realm in which the tabooed truths could survive in abstract integrity—remote from the society which suppressed them.

Now this remoteness has been removed—and with it the transgression and the indictment. The text and the tone are still there, but the distance is conquered which made them *Luft von anderen Planeten*.² The artistic alienation has become as functional as the architecture of the new theaters and concert halls in which it is performed. And here too, the rational and the evil are inseparable. Unquestionably the new architecture is better, i.e., more beautiful and more practical than the monstrosities of the Victorian era. But it is also more “integrated”—the cultural center is becoming a fitting part of the shopping center, or municipal center, or government center. Domination has its own aesthetics, and democratic domination has its democratic aesthetics. It is good that almost everyone can now have the fine arts at his fingertips, by just turning a knob on his set, or by just stepping into his drugstore. In this diffusion, however, they become cogs in a culture-machine which remakes their content.

Artistic alienation succumbs, together with other modes of negation, to the process of technological rationality. The change reveals its depth and the degree of its irreversibility if it is seen as a result of technical progress. The present stage redefines the possibilities of man and nature in accordance with the new means available for their realization than, in their light, the pre-technological images are losing their power.

Their truth value depended to a large degree on an uncomprehended and unconquered dimension of man and nature, on the narrow limits placed on organization and manipulation, on the “insoluble core” which resisted integration. In the fully developed industrial society, this insoluble core is progressively whittled down by technological rationality. Obviously, the physical transformation of the world entails the mental transformation of its symbols, images, and ideas. Obviously, when cities and highways and National Parks replace the villages, valleys, and forests; when motorboats race over the lakes and planes cut through the skies—then these areas lose their character as a qualitatively different reality, as areas of contradiction.

¹No misunderstanding: as far as they go, paperbacks, general education, and long-playing records are truly a blessing.

²“Air from Another Planet”, Stefan George, in Arnold Schönberg’s Quartet in F Sharp Minor. See Th. W. Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik*. (J.C.B. Mohr, Tübingen, 1949), p. 19 ff.

And since contradiction is the work of the Logos—rational confrontation of “that which is not” with “that which is”—it must have a medium of communication. The struggle for this medium, or rather the struggle against its absorption into the predominant one-dimensionality, shows forth in the avant-garde efforts to create an estrangement which would make the artistic truth again communicable.

Bertolt Brecht has sketched the theoretical foundations for these efforts. The total character of the established society confronts the playwright with the question of whether it is still possible to “represent the contemporary world in the theater”—that is, represent it in such a manner that the spectator recognizes the truth which the play is to convey. Brecht answers that the contemporary world can be thus represented only if it is represented as subject to change³—as the state of negativity which is to be negated. This is doctrine which has to be learned, comprehended, and acted upon; but the theater is and ought to be entertainment, pleasure. However, entertainment and learning are not opposites; entertainment may be the most effective mode of learning. To teach what the contemporary world really is behind the ideological and material veil, and how it can be changed, the theater must break the spectator’s identification with the events on the stage. Not empathy and feeling, but distance and reflection are required. The “estrangement-effect” (*Verfremdungseffekt*) is to produce this dissociation in which the world can be recognized as what it is. “The things of everyday life are lifted out of the realm of the self-evident. . .”⁴ “That which is ‘natural’ must assume the features of the extraordinary. Only in this manner can the laws of cause and effect reveal themselves.”⁵

The “estrangement-effect” is not superimposed on literature. It is rather literature’s own answer to the threat of total behaviorism—the attempt to rescue the rationality of the negative. In this attempt, the great “conservative” of literature joins forces with the radical activist. Paul Valéry insists on the inescapable commitment of the poetic language to the negation. The verses of this language “ne parlent jamais que de choses absentes.”⁶ They speak of that which, though absent, haunts the established universe of discourse and behavior as its most tabooed possibility—neither heaven nor hell, neither good nor evil but simply “le bonheur.” Thus the poetic language speaks of that which is of this world, which is visible, tangible, audible in man and nature—and of that which is not seen, not touched, not heard.

Creating and moving in a medium which presents the absent, the poetic language is a language of cognition—but a cognition which subverts the positive. In its cognitive function, poetry performs the great task of *thought*:

le travail qui fait vivre en nous ce qui n’existe pas.⁷

Naming the “things that are absent” is breaking the spell of the things that are; moreover, it is the ingression of a different order of things into the established one—“le commencement d’un monde.”⁸

For the expression of this other order, which is transcendence within the one world, the poetic language depends on the transcendent elements in ordinary language.⁹ However, the total mobilization of all media for the defense of the established reality has coordinated the means of expression to the point where commu-

³Bertolt Brecht, *Schriften zum Theater* (Berlin and Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1957), p. 7, 9.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁶Paul Valéry, *Poésie et Pensée Abstraite*, in *Oeuvres* (Edition de la Pléiade, Paris, Gallimard, 1957), vol I, p. 1324.

⁷“the effort which makes us live with that which does not exist.” *Ibid.*, p. 1333.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 1327 (with reference to the language of music).

⁹See chapter VII below.

nication of transcending contents becomes technically impossible. The spectre that has haunted the artistic consciousness since Mallarmé—the impossibility of speaking a non-reified language, of communicating the negative—has ceased to be a spectre. It has materialized.

The truly avant-garde works of literature communicate the break with communication. With Rimbaud, and then with dadaism and surrealism, literature rejects the very structure of discourse which, throughout the history of culture, has linked artistic and ordinary language. The propositional system¹⁰ (with the sentence as its unit of meaning) was the medium in which the two dimensions of reality could meet, communicate and be communicated. The most sublime poetry and the lowest prose shared this medium of expression. Then, modern poetry “détruisait les rapports du langage et ramenait le discours à des stations de mots.”¹¹

The word refuses the unifying, sensible rule of the sentence. It explodes the pre-established structure of meaning and, becoming an “absolute object” itself, designates an intolerable, self-defeating universe—a discontinuum. This subversion of the linguistic structure implies a subversion of the experience of nature:

La Nature y devient un discontinu d’objets solitaires et terribles, parce qu’ils n’ont que des liaisons virtuelles; personne ne choisit pour eux un sens privilégié ou un emploi ou un service, personne ne les réduit à la signification d’un comportement mental ou d’une intention, c’est-à-dire finalement d’une tendresse . . . Ces mots-objets sans liaison, privés de toute la violence de leur éclatement . . . ces mots poétiques excluent les hommes; il n’y a pas d’humanisme poétique de la modernité: ce discours debout est un discours plein de terreur, c’est-à-dire qu’il met l’homme en liaison non pas avec les autres hommes, mais avec les images les plus inhumaines de la Nature; le ciel, l’enfer, le sacré, l’enfance, la folie, la matière pure, etc.¹²

The traditional stuff of art (images, harmonies, colors) re-appears only as “quotes,” residues of past meaning in a context of refusal. Thus, the surrealist paintings

sind der Inbegriff dessen, was die Sachlichkeit mit einem Tabu zudeckt, weil es sie an ihr eigenes dinghaftes Wesen gemahnt und daran, dass sie nicht damit fertig wird, dass ihre Rationalität irrational bleibt. Der Surrealismus sammelt ein, was die Sachlichkeit den Menschen versagt; die Entstellungen bezeugen, was das Verbot dem Begehrten antat. Durch sie errettete er das Veraltete, ein Album von Idiosynkrasien, in denen der Glücksanspruch verraucht, den die Menschen in ihrer eigenen technifizierten Welt verweigert finden.¹³

¹⁰See chapter V below.

¹¹“destroyed the relationships of the language and brought discourse back to the stage of *words*.” Roland Barthes, *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture*. Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1953, p. 72 (my emphasis).

¹²“Nature becomes a discontinuum of solitary and terrible objects because they have only virtual links. No one chooses for them a privileged meaning or use or service. No one reduces them to mean a mental attitude or an intention, that is to say, in the last analysis, a tenderness. . . . These word objects without link, armed with all the violence of their explosive power . . . these poetic words exclude men. There is no poetic humanism that it entity: this heady discourse is a discourse full of terror which means nature relates man not to other men, but to the most inhuman images nature, heaven, hell, the sacred, childhood, madness, pure matter etc. *Ibid.*, p. 73 f.

¹³“[Surrealist paintings] . . . gathered together what functionalism covers with taboos because it betrays reality as reification and the irrational in its rationality. Surrealism recaptures what functionalism denies to man; the distortions demonstrate what the taboo did to the desired. Thus surrealism rescues the obsolete—an album of idiosyncrasies where the claim for happiness evaporates that which the technified world refuses to man.” Theodor W. Adorno, *Noten zur Literatur*. (Berlin-Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1958), p. 160.

Or, the work of Bertolt Brecht preserves the “*promesse de bonheur*”, contained in romance and Kitsch (moonshine and the blue sea; melody and sweet home; loyalty and love) by making it into political ferment. His characters sing of lost paradises and of unforgettable hope (“Siehst du den Mond über Soho, Geliebter?” “Jedoch eines Tages, und der Tag war blau.” “Zuerst war es immer Sonntag.” “Und ein Schiff mit acht Segeln.” “Alter Bilbao Mond, Da wo noch Liebe lohnt”)—and the song is one of cruelty and greed, exploitation, cheating, and lies. The deceived sing of their deception, but they learn (or have learned) its causes, and it is only in learning the causes (and how to cope with them) that they regain the truth of their dream.

The efforts to recapture the Great Refusal in the language of literature suffer the fate of being absorbed by what they refute. As modern classics, the avant-garde and the beatniks share in the function of entertaining without endangering the good conscience of the men of good will. This absorption is justified by technical progress; the refusal is refuted by the alleviation of misery in the advanced industrial society. The liquidation of high culture is a by-product of the conquest of nature, and of the progressing conquest of scarcity.

Invalidating the cherished images of transcendence by incorporating them into its omnipresent daily reality, this society testifies to the extent to which insoluble conflicts are becoming manageable—to which tragedy and romance, archetypal dreams and anxieties are being made susceptible to technical solution and dissolution. The psychiatrist takes care of the Don Juans, Romeos, Hamlets, Fausts, as he takes care of Oedipus—he cures them. The rulers of the world are losing their metaphysical features. Their appearance on television, at press conferences, in parliament, and at public hearings is hardly suitable for drama beyond that of the advertisement,¹⁴ while the consequences of their actions surpass the scope of the drama.

The prescriptions for inhumanity and injustice are being administered by a rationally organized bureaucracy, which is, however, invisible at its vital center. The soul contains few secrets and longings which cannot be sensibly discussed, analyzed, and polled. Solitude, the very condition which sustained the individual against and beyond his society, has become technically impossible. Logical and linguistic analysis demonstrate that the old metaphysical problems are illusory problems; the quest for the “meaning” of things can be reformulated as the quest for the meaning of words, and the established universe of discourse and behavior can provide perfectly adequate criteria for the answer.

It is a rational universe which, by the mere weight and capabilities of its apparatus, blocks all escape. In its relation to the reality of daily life, the high culture of the past was many things—opposition and adornment, outcry and resignation. But it was also the appearance of the realm of freedom: the refusal to behave. Such refusal cannot be blocked without a compensation which seems more satisfying than the refusal. The conquest and unification of opposites, which finds its ideological glory in the transformation of higher into popular culture, takes place on a material ground of increased satisfaction. This is also the ground which allows a sweeping *desublimation*.

Artistic alienation is sublimation. It creates the images of conditions which are irreconcilable with the established Reality Principle but which, as cultural images, become tolerable, even edifying and useful. Now this imagery is invalidated. Its incorporation into the kitchen, the office, the shop; its commercial release for business and fun is, in a sense, desublimation—replacing mediated by immediate gratification. But it is desublimation practiced from a “position of strength” on the part of society, which can afford to

¹⁴The legendary revolutionary hero still exists who can defy even television and the press—his world is that of the ‘underdeveloped’ countries.

grant more than before because its interests have become the innermost drives of its citizens, and because the joys which it grants promote social cohesion and contentment.

The Pleasure Principle absorbs the Reality Principle; sexuality is liberated (or rather liberalized) in socially constructive forms. This notion implies that there are repressive modes of desublimation,¹⁵ compared with which the sublimated drives and objectives contain more deviation, more freedom, and more refusal to heed the social taboos. It appears that such repressive desublimation is indeed operative in the sexual sphere, and here, as in the desublimation of higher culture, it operates as the by-product of the social controls of technological reality, which extend liberty while intensifying domination. The link between desublimation and technological society can perhaps best be illuminated by discussing the change in the social use of instinctual energy.

In this society, not all the time spent on and with mechanisms is labor time (i.e., unpleasurable but necessary toil), and not all the energy saved by the machine is labor power. Mechanization has also “saved” libido, the energy of the Life Instincts—that is, has barred it from previous modes of realization. This is the kernel of truth in the romantic contrast between the modern traveler and the wandering poet or artisan, between assembly line and handicraft, town and city, factory-produced bread and the home-made loaf, the sailboat and the outboard motor, etc. True, this romantic pre-technical world was permeated with misery, toil, and filth, and these in turn were the background of all pleasure and joy. Still, there was a “landscape,” a medium of libidinal experience which no longer exists.

With its disappearance (itself a historical prerequisite of progress), a whole dimension of human activity and passivity has been de-eroticized. The environment from which the individual could obtain pleasure—which he could cathect as gratifying almost as an extended zone of the body—has been rigidly reduced. Consequently, the “universe” of libidinous cathexis is likewise reduced. The *effect* is a localization and contraction of libido, the reduction of erotic to sexual experience and satisfaction.¹⁶

For example, compare love-making in a meadow and in an automobile, on a lovers’ walk outside the town walls and on a Manhattan street. In the former cases, the environment partakes of and invites libidinal cathexis and tends to be eroticized. Libido transcends beyond the immediate erotogenic zones—a process of nonrepressive sublimation. In contrast, a mechanized environment seems to block such self-transcendence of libido. Impelled in the striving to extend the field of erotic gratification, libido becomes less “polymorphous,” less capable of eroticism beyond localized sexuality, and the *latter* is intensified. Thus diminishing erotic and intensifying sexual energy, the technological reality *limits the scope of sublimation*. It also reduces the *need* for sublimation. In the mental apparatus, the tension between that which is desired and that which is permitted seems considerably lowered, and the Reality Principle no longer seems to require a sweeping and painful transformation of instinctual needs. The individual must adapt himself to a world which does not seem to demand the denial of his innermost needs—a world which is not essentially hostile.

The organism is thus being preconditioned for the spontaneous acceptance of what is offered. Inasmuch as the greater liberty involves a contraction rather than extension and development of instinctual needs, it works *for* rather than *against* the status quo of general repression—one might speak of “institutionalized desublimation.” The latter appears to be a vital factor in the making of the authoritarian personality of our

¹⁵See my book *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1954), esp. Chapter X.

¹⁶In accordance with the terminology used in the later works of Freud: sexuality as “specialized” partial drive; Eros as that of the entire organism.

time.

It has often been noted that advanced industrial civilization operates with a greater degree of sexual freedom—"operates" in the sense that the latter becomes a market value and a factor of social mores. Without ceasing to be an instrument of labor, the body is allowed to exhibit its sexual features in the everyday work world and in work relations. This is one of the unique achievements of industrial society—rendered possible by the reduction of dirty and heavy physical labor; by the availability of cheap, attractive clothing, beauty culture, and physical hygiene; by the requirements of the advertising industry, etc. The sexy office and sales girls, the handsome, virile junior executive and floor walker are highly marketable commodities, and the possession of suitable mistresses—once the prerogative of kings, princes, and lords—facilitates the career of even the less exalted ranks in the business community.

Functionalism, going artistic, promotes this trend. Shops and offices open themselves through huge glass windows and expose their personnel; inside, high counters and non-transparent partitions are coming down. The corrosion of privacy in massive apartment houses and suburban homes breaks the barrier which formerly separated the individual from the public existence and exposes more easily the attractive qualities of other wives and other husbands.

This socialization is not contradictory but complementary to the de-erotization of the environment. Sex is integrated into work and public relations, and is thus made more susceptible to (controlled) satisfaction. Technical progress and more comfortable living permit the systematic inclusion of libidinal components into the realm of commodity production and exchange. But no matter how controlled the mobilization of instinctual energy may be (it sometimes amounts to a scientific management of libido), no matter how much it may serve as a prop for the status quo—it is also gratifying to the managed individuals, just as racing the outboard motor, pushing the power lawn mower, and speeding the automobile are fun.

This mobilization and administration of libido may account for much of the voluntary compliance, the absence of terror, the pre-established harmony between individual needs and socially-required desires, goals, and aspirations. The technological and political conquest of the transcending factors in human existence, so characteristic of advanced industrial civilization, here asserts itself in the instinctual sphere: satisfaction in a way which generates submission and weakens the rationality of protest.

The range of socially permissible and desirable satisfaction is greatly enlarged, but through this satisfaction, the Pleasure Principle is reduced—deprived of the claims which are irreconcilable with the established society. Pleasure, thus adjusted, generates submission.

In contrast to the pleasures of adjusted desublimation, sublimation preserves the consciousness of the renunciations which the repressive society inflicts upon the individual, and thereby preserves the need for liberation. To be sure, all sublimation is enforced by the power of society, but the unhappy consciousness of this power already breaks through alienation. To be sure, all sublimation accepts the social barrier to instinctual gratification, but it also transgresses this barrier.

The Superego, in censoring the unconscious and in implanting conscience, also censors the censor because the developed conscience registers the forbidden evil act not only in the individual but also in his society. Conversely, loss of conscience due to the satisfactory liberties granted by an unfree society makes for a *happy consciousness* which facilitates acceptance of the misdeeds of this society. It is the token of declining autonomy and comprehension. Sublimation demands a high degree of autonomy and comprehension; it is mediation between the conscious and the unconscious, between the primary and secondary processes,

between the intellect and instinct, renunciation and rebellion. In its most accomplished modes, such as in the artistic *oeuvre*, sublimation becomes the cognitive power which defeats suppression while bowing to it.

In the light of the cognitive function of this mode of sublimation, the desublimation rampant in advanced industrial society reveals its truly conformist function. This liberation of sexuality (and of aggressiveness) frees the instinctual drives from much of the unhappiness and discontent that elucidate the repressive power of the established universe of satisfaction. To be sure, there is pervasive unhappiness, and the happy consciousness is shaky enough—a thin surface over fear, frustration, and disgust. This unhappiness lends itself easily to political mobilization; without room for conscious development, it may become the instinctual reservoir for a new fascist way of life and death. But there are many ways in which the unhappiness beneath the happy consciousness may be turned into a source of strength and cohesion for the social order. The conflicts of the unhappy individual now seem far more amenable to cure than those which made for Freud's "discontent in civilization," and they seem more adequately defined in terms of the "neurotic personality of our time" than in terms of the eternal struggle between Eros and Thanatos.

The way in which controlled desublimation may weaken the instinctual revolt against the established Reality Principle may be illuminated by the contrast between the representation of sexuality in classical and romantic literature and in our contemporary literature. If one selects, from among the works which are, in their very substance and inner form, determined by the erotic commitment, such essentially different examples as Racine's *Phedre*, Goethe's *Wahlverwandtschaften*, Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, sexuality consistently appears in a highly sublimated, "mediated," reflective form—but in this form, it is absolute, uncompromising, unconditional. The dominion of Eros is, from the beginning, also that of Thanatos. Fulfillment is destruction, not in a moral or sociological but in an ontological sense. It is beyond good and evil, beyond social morality, and thus it remains beyond the reaches of the established Reality Principle, which this Eros refuses and explodes.

In contrast, desublimated sexuality is rampant in O'Neill's alcoholics and Faulkner's savages, in the *Street-car Named Desire* and under the *Hot Tin Roof*, in *Lolita*, in all the stories of Hollywood and New York orgies, and the adventures of suburban housewives. This is infinitely more realistic, daring, uninhibited. It is part and parcel of the society in which it happens, but nowhere its negation. What happens is surely wild and obscene, virile and tasty, quite immoral—and, precisely because of that, perfectly harmless.

Freed from the sublimated form which was the very token of its irreconcilable dreams—a form which is the style, the language in which the story is told—sexuality turns into a vehicle for the bestsellers of oppression. It could not be said of any of the sexy women in contemporary literature what Balzac says of the whore Esther: that hers was the tenderness which blossoms only in infinity. This society turns everything it touches into a potential source of progress *and* of exploitation, of drudgery *and* satisfaction, of freedom *and* of oppression. Sexuality is no exception.

The concept of controlled desublimation would imply the possibility of a simultaneous release of repressed sexuality *and* aggressiveness, a possibility which seems incompatible with Freud's notion of the fixed quantum of instinctual energy available for distribution between the two primary drives. According to Freud, strengthening of sexuality (libido) would necessarily involve weakening of aggressiveness, and vice versa. However, if the socially permitted and encouraged release of libido would be that of partial and localized sexuality, it would be tantamount to an actual compression of erotic energy, and this desublimation would be compatible with the growth of unsublimated as well as sublimated forms of aggressiveness.

The latter is rampant throughout contemporary industrial society.

Has it attained a degree of normalization where the individuals are getting used to the risk of their own dissolution and disintegration in the course of normal national preparedness? Or is this acquiescence entirely due to their impotence to do much about it? In any case, the risk of avoidable, man-made destruction has become normal equipment in the mental as well as material household of the people, so that it can no longer serve to indict or refute the established social system. Moreover, as part of their daily household, it may even tie them to this system. The economic and political connection between the absolute enemy and the high standard of living (and the desired level of employment!) is transparent enough, but also rational enough to be accepted.

Assuming that the Destruction Instinct (in the last analysis: the Death Instinct) is a large component of the energy which feeds the technical conquest of man and nature it seems that society's growing capacity to manipulate technical progress also increases its *capacity to manipulate and control this instinct*, i.e., to satisfy it "productively." Then social cohesion would be strengthened at the deepest instinctual roots. The supreme risk, and even the fact of war would meet, not only with helpless acceptance, but also with instinctual approval on the part of the victims. Here too, we would have controlled desublimation.

Institutionalized desublimation thus appears to be an aspect of the "conquest of transcendence" achieved by the one-dimensional society. Just as this society tends to reduce, and even absorb opposition (the qualitative difference!) in the realm of politics and higher culture, so it does in the instinctual sphere. The result is the atrophy of the mental organs for grasping the contradictions and the alternatives and, in the one remaining dimension of technological rationality, the *Happy Consciousness* comes to prevail.

It reflects the belief that the real is rational, and that the established system, in spite of everything, delivers the goods. The people are led to find in the productive apparatus the effective agent of thought and action to which their personal thought and action can and must be surrendered. And in this transfer, the apparatus also assumes the role of a moral agent. Conscience is absolved by reification, by the general necessity of things.

In this general necessity, guilt has no place. One man can give the signal that liquidates hundreds and thousands of people, then declare himself free from all pangs of conscience, and live happily ever after. The antifascist powers who beat fascism on the battlefields reap the benefits of the Nazi scientists, generals, and engineers; they have the historical advantage of the late-comer. What begins as the horror of the concentration camps turns into the practice of training people for abnormal conditions—a subterranean human existence and the daily intake of radioactive nourishment. A Christian minister declares that it does not contradict Christian principles to prevent with all available means your neighbor from entering your bomb shelter. Another Christian minister contradicts his colleague and says it does. Who is right? Again, the neutrality of technological rationality shows forth over and above politics, and again it shows forth as spurious, for in both cases, it serves the politics of domination.

"The world of the concentration camps . . . was not an exceptionally monstrous society. What we saw there was the image, and in a sense the quintessence, of the infernal society into which we are plunged every day."¹⁷

¹⁷E. Ionesco, in *Nouvelle Revue Francaise*, July 1956, as quoted in *London Times Literary Supplement*, March 4, 1960. Herman Kahn suggests in a 1959 RAND study (RM-2206-RC) that 'a study should be made of the survival of populations in

It seems that even the most hideous transgressions can be repressed in such a manner that, for all practical purposes, they have ceased to be a danger for society. Or, if their eruption leads to functional disturbances in the individual (as in the case of one Hiroshima pilot), it does not disturb the functioning of society. A mental hospital manages the disturbance.

The Happy Consciousness has no limits—it arranges games with death and disfiguration in which fun, team work, and strategic importance mix in rewarding social harmony. The Rand Corporation, which unites scholarship, research, the military, the climate, and the good life, reports such games in a style of absolving cuteness, in its “RANDom News” volume 9, number 1, under the heading *BETTER SAFE THAN SORRY*. The rockets are rattling, the H-bomb is waiting, and the space-flights are flying, and the problem is “how to guard the nation and the free world.” In all this, the military planners are worried, for the cost of taking chances, of experimenting and making a mistake, may be fearfully high. But here RAND comes in; RAND relieves, and “devices like RAND’S SAFE come into the picture.” The picture into which they come is unclassified. It is a picture in which “the world becomes a map, missiles merely symbols [long live the soothing power of symbolism!], and wars just [just] plans and calculations written down on paper. . .” In this picture, RAND has transfigured the world into an interesting technological game, and one can relax—the “military planners can gain valuable ‘synthetic’ experience without risk.”

PLAYING THE GAME

To understand the game one should participate, for understanding is “in the experience.”

Because SAFE players have come from almost every department at RAND as well as the Air Force, we might find a physicist, an engineer, and an economist on the Blue team. The Red team will represent a similar cross-section.

The first day is taken up by a joint briefing on what the game is all about and a study of the rules. When the teams are finally seated around the maps in their respective rooms the game begins. Each team receives its policy statement from the Game Director. These statements, usually prepared by a member of the Control Group, give an estimate of the world situation at the time of playing, some information on the policy of the opposing team, the objectives to be met by the team, and the team’s budget. (The policies are changed for each game to explore a wide range of strategic possibilities.)

In our hypothetical game, Blue’s objective is to maintain a deterrent capability throughout the game—that is, maintain a force that is capable of striking back at Red so Red will be unwilling to risk an attack. (Blue also receives some information on the Red policy.)

Red’s policy is to achieve force superiority over Blue.

The budgets of Blue and Red compare with actual defense budgets. . .

It is comforting to hear that the game has been played since 1961 at RAND, “down in our labyrinthine basement—somewhere under the Snack Bar,” and that “Menus on the walls of the Red and Blue rooms list available weapons and . . . hardware that the teams buy. . . About seventy items in all.” There is a

environments similar to overcrowded shelters (concentration camps, Russian and German use of crowded freight cars, troopships, crowded prisons. . . etc.). Some useful guiding principles might be found and adapted to the shelter program.”

“Game Director” who interprets game rules, for although “the rule book complete with diagrams and illustrations is 66 pages,” problems inevitably arise during the play. The Game Director also has another important function: “without previously notifying the players,” he “introduces war to get a measure of the effectiveness of the military forces in being.” But then, the caption announces “Coffee, Cake, and Ideas.” Relax! The “game continues through the remaining periods—to 1972 when it ends. Then the Blue and Red teams bury the missiles and sit down together for coffee and cake at the ‘post mortem’ session.” But don’t relax *too* much: there is “one real-world situation that can’t be transposed effectively to SAFE,” and that is—“negotiation.” We are grateful for it: the one hope that is left in the real world situation is beyond the reaches of RAND.

Obviously, in the realm of the Happy Consciousness, guilt feeling has no place, and the calculus takes care of conscience. When the whole is at stake, there is no crime except that of rejecting the whole, or not defending it. Crime, guilt, and guilt feeling become a private affair. Freud revealed in the psyche of the individual the crimes of mankind, in the individual case history the history of the whole. This fatal link is successfully suppressed. Those who identify themselves with the whole, who are installed as the leaders and defenders of the whole can make mistakes, but they cannot do wrong—they are not guilty. They may become guilty again when this identification no longer holds, when they are gone.