

# On Refusing

Personal preface to a handbook on selective trouble-making

Kingsley Widmer

1969

Not long ago I spoke at an anti-war rally to a few hundred people under the eucalyptus trees in a Southern California city park. I've been doing that, as part of my obligation of public refusal, whenever asked by student or liberal-left political groups for some years now. Indeed, for more than twenty years, though the opportunities to speak against the American political megalomania were rare until the war in Vietnam reached major scale. As usual, my remarks in the park were brief arguments against the destructive hypocrisies of United States institutions and a plea for resisting them.

Though mostly a recital of what should be obvious, I like to think that I added a few touches of the tangible and sardonic to the usual protest oratory. My reception by the largely youthful audience was politely positive. The next speaker, a black-bereted black militant, started about like this: "Who owns and runs this goddam country? White mother-fuckers! Who kills brown Vietnamese? Who kills black Americans? The same white mother-fuckers! We're gonna make a revolution and take this country away from the white mother-fuckers!" When he finished his half-hour black mass on white American mother-fuckerism, he raised his right fist above his head and chanted, with the audience enthusiastically joining in, "Power to the people! Power to the people!" Then an exceptionally well-amplified rock group took up the applause, the beat vibrating even the ancient eucalyptus, and overpowered all mere people in the park.

Peace, brother, but that's not my style. I do not object to the ghetto poetry – the metaphors of sexual violation have always, and quite properly, been central to rebellion – nor do I object to the performance's surreal irrelevance to "peace" since protest actions primarily serve as aesthetic rituals for dissident para-communities. But the racist anti-racism, the resentful populist cry for power, and the muddling of tangible rebellion with pretences to revolution, seem finally repressive. Aggrandizing black mother-fuckers would not necessarily be much improvement over aggrandizing white mother-fuckers. That's just the old politics, again, when we need to de-race and de-power in erasing a whole imposed mode of consciousness.

Underneath the generous rage of my fellow speakers I heard the beat of a parochial and sadly reversible revolutionism. Granted, we should support authentic protest, which this also included, whenever and wherever. Purist political fantasies, whether of bureaucratic reformism, proletarian revolution, or technological and educational magic, subserve even greater moral ambiguities. Yet radical intelligence must also be detachment and I felt that the tone and style the occasion

serviced were not sufficiently radical. I also later wryly reflected that I may have gotten through more successfully to the undercover military cop (so identified to me by a reporter) who slyly questioned me after my speech than I did to much of the audience. So: Whose radical am I?

Let me answer with a couple of stories which, I ruefully note, must partake of history since for an American radical these days I am old – not only paunchy and suburbanized but necessarily responsive to an accumulated reality. After all, it has been a generation since I first bit the bullet of social bitterness as a field hand and factory worker, as an infantry soldier and prison convict, as a *déclassé* and dissident. But the ancient radicalism I would affirm has less to do with political “generations” – that ideological sleight of hand to reduce the critical to the merely chronological or a fleeting biology of discontent – than with the persistent refusal of a false social ordering. If radical criticism and refusal mean much, then they must apply beyond the topical and generational, residing finally in a permanent radicalism of social transformation. Only that deserves allegiance.

Society, for example, must still redeem the curse of labour. That will not be done, as our latest piety pretends, by technology alone since its processes do not contain outraged human awareness – indeed, technological order discourages and represses any larger human responsiveness. Yet most of our technologists and economists and political moralists grievously obscure the work issues. Long ago I lost the knack of understanding such people. Was it when I hoed beans in a hot midwestern sun for ten cents an hour? Or unloaded, for subsistence pay, freight cars of coal with a scoop and wheelbarrow? Or worked twelve-hour shifts running a dangerous steam filler, in 120-plus degree heat, in a canning factory? No matter when or at what, that bitter sense of monotonous, arbitrary, body-and mind-wracking labour, without autonomy or reasonable reward, remains a basic and black reality. May theorizing never undercut the truths of memory!

Granted, my examples are old-fashioned, though they still apply to millions of Americans, not to mention most of the rest of the human world. Because of those experiences, I am permanently deaf to talk of Gross National Product affluence, or technologically marvellous social order, or any other claim to “advanced” civilization that does not minimize the sweated drudgeries and maximise the just solace for those forced to do our unpleasant labours.

Most basically, liberty must always be tested on the labour and eroticism and vitality of the body. Except in the fantasies of bureaucratic technology, whose pathological quality is evident in its current Egyptian monumentality and rocketing lunacies, our struggle remains for the tangible necessities of the human flesh. For society to honestly recognize the burden of labour means that no businessman receive higher rewards than the field hand hacking with a short hoe; that no exalted professional merits as much honour as those mucking out our coal and crap; that no fashionable entertainer or artist receive as good a treatment as the most menial labourer or domestic. I know on my nerves, having been both, that the garbageman deserves to be better paid and comforted than the college professor. Any contrary social ordering is not only wrong but certain, by its corrupting denial of basic human reality, to be pervasively ugly and vicious.

But let me take an example of dehumanized labouring beyond the essential moral revulsion. A few years ago I practised the trade of airframe “template maker” in various plants and job-shops in three western states. After several months of making metal patterns in one of the largest, and reputedly most “progressive” plants, my boredom reached such excruciation that some gesture towards critical change was imperative. From the better writings on the subject as well as from my co-workers I know that my reaction was unexceptional. Many a factory worker, not just a *poete maudet* with a hand drill, finds his routine painful, his conditions of work arbitrary and his

sense of life emptied. Above a certain minimum, issues of pay and other “benefits” only concern the condiments, not the life-diet. To those reduced to being controlled functions in a factory (and the similar, if sometimes lavish, dehumanizations of office and business and profession), the alternatives consist of escape, degeneration and counter-assertion.

My counter-assertion no doubt revealed a peculiar naivete. I combined my responses to the tooling shop with some of the studies on industrial organization and came up with a moderate list of rational changes that would help humanize my work. When I then consulted a noted academic specialist on how I might initiate these, he exhibited acute embarrassment. He did provide two pieces of wisdom on how I might modify my life in the factory: I should go back to school to major in Industrial Relations, thus both getting out of the shop and “getting ahead” – the usual American ideal of “opportunity” substituting for justice and meaning – and I should spend my spare time in politics, in liberal-Democratic chores in a Republican suburb. Such counselling passes for “realism” in therapy as well as in politics.

Next, the labour union. With difficulty, I finally presented my critical suggestions to someone at a low level in that hierarchy. My points ranged from making the “breaks” concur with the job (i.e. take a smoke or coffee at a natural place in the work instead of being bound by a rigid plant-wide schedule), through co-operative decisions on work assignments to a procedure for electing foremen. All such proposals were angrily rejected. The union, like most “pressure groups” in a pseudo-pluralistic society, usually bends and bulges only in the accepted ways: I quickly learned that individual and various conditions, such as flexible rest periods, lacked drama and therefore had no chance as bargaining issues; everybody knew that assignments and promotions were purely corporate prerogatives; and that I’d better “get with it.” Though too dumb to say it, the union official’s tone insisted that arbitrary production requires arbitrary authority, including his own, rather than autonomy for those doing the work.

My even raising such questions was suspect: “Just what *are* your politics?” They certainly weren’t going to appear anti-union. Some years earlier I had raised some questions to an official in a different union and obtained my answers from two persuasive gentlemen who wanted me to make contact with the hard realities of the problems and so repeatedly put my head against a brick wall. In addition to my cowardice, I felt some reluctance in pushing things because my experience in a non-union shop, where I was fired for talking too much, inclined me to prefer a union which re-enforced false conditions to no union at all. (The dilemma remains: as president of a college professor’s union local, I find that a majority of my colleagues want to aggrandize salaries and the institutional surrogate for themselves rather than radically change education. One can only serve by subverting.)

Then I started arguing my way up the company hierarchy, finally reaching one of the biggest incompetents, the Plant Superintendent. That was a scene of comic pathos in a cubicle high above the assembly line: the thickly nervous factory Major General, on company time, trying to get rid of a loquacious, unshaven, T-shirted third-rate toolmaker inexplicably spending his off-time arguing about perfectly standard shop procedures. The Super came on with phony geniality, than irritated belligerence, and finally collapsed into a self-made-boss intimacy, lamenting that he’d never understood those “industrial psych” courses he had to take in night school, and concluding, hand on my shoulder, “What can I do for you? Put you in for a promotion?” No, I wanted to be able to smoke my pipe at reasonable intervals, to work out with the other template men the divvying up of the jobs – it might even be more “efficient”! – rather than be trapped by engineering numbers and foremen’s caprice, and, in sum, we wanted to be a bit more our own bosses

and make some changes. Wasn't that reasonable? He agreed but wearily assured me that what I asked would require getting rid of all those goddam personnel people, changing the company and union contractual procedures, and not only reorganizing the whole plant but the prime contractor, the US Government. Such a vicious circle allows only one real rational reform; by its own logic, the system must go.

The standard escapes urged upon me – becoming an “industrial relations” decorator or climbing the shop hierarchy – would only aggrandizingly re-enforce the viciousness. In the long run, such an order must be radically transformed; in the short run, it must be resisted if one is to remain humanly distinct. For both, we need more effective and intransigent ways of negation. That is the main “social issue” of our time. At that point all I could do was give my humble bit: take “breaks” when I damn well pleased, set my own slowed-down work schedule, knock off days, and agitate others to go the same way. Personal intransigence must ground any genuine radical awareness, not least as defence against the self-destructive schizophrenia which sickens our institutions. While neither demands for individuality nor group social justice will be sufficient to give real freedom, equality and meaning to most work in our society, that is where a communal politics must start.

Surely refusal can take more subtle, less naive, ways than mine – though they had better not be too subtle. The essential obtuseness of our institutions to humanely rational amelioration from below can also be put in a harsher light. When I was a convict in a federal prison I found that there, too, that radical intransigence, personal as well as ideological, provided the only pertinent responses. Though prison was less nastily totalitarian than the US Army, the grim, gray tedium – the surface of the basic terrorism which controls all “total” institutions such as armies and prisons and hospitals – forces almost everybody to “hard time” it. Aside from that, my own situation as head convict librarian, combined with the fortuitous double protection of a senior “screw” and an extortionist who was an inmate leader, became downright comfortable, for a prison.

But since the prison system (run in large part by the more corrupt inmates) was grossly unjust, and since I was there for having defied the government, a radical response was imperative.<sup>1</sup>

In that “correctional institution” usual ameliorist criticisms were undercut by a “liberal” administration. For example, the place was racially segregated but since the “ghetto” sections of the cell blocks and mess hall were the most desirable ones, the Negroes protested any efforts to reduce them to “equal” conditions – a shrewd bigotry which may show a useful future. When I also objected that the educational system only existed on paper and in rare dress appearances of “rehabilitation,” my complaints got me the additional job of convict-head of the prison school. As with most official educational roles, the main effect was moral solace since I didn't really do a very good job of teaching aged illiterates. Finally, my recognition of the co-opting pattern discouraged me from very vigorous complaints about the psychiatric and religious services for fear that I might be led to unnecessary additional lessons in humility.

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<sup>1</sup> Though as a combat veteran of World War II I was not legally subject to further military service, I refused as a point of anti-authoritarian principle, to complete a registration when conscription was reinstated in 1948. I was convicted of felonious violation of the Selective Service Act and, from characteristic American righteousness (plus some of the Cold War psychology developing then) sentenced to eight months in prison instead of the more logical suspended sentence. While I am now less naive about the American character, I would still emphasize such action as a necessary self-definition against a false society. Radicalism without some such grounding appears to me as often dubiously abstract-sentimental.

But what could I do? Certainly I could have joined a prison reform society, after I got out. Or I could have stuck to my intellectual bench and worked out a sociological theory of the imperviousness of “total” institutions to the usual forms of criticism, as correctly do the few good writings on the society of captives. Or I could make the selfish “best of a bad situation,” which I had already done though I was not quite self-regarding enough to claim it as a social philosophy. Since the authorities were constitutionally incapable of making more than trivial gestures of justice and were psychotically deaf to cons (except for the Captain of the Guards, all too open to persuasion since he was the biggest crook around), and since the elite among the cons (confidence men, extortionists, and similar professionals) were intelligent but over-adaptable types with power-roles to conserve, the usual elitist and educational theories of change were irrelevant. (There’s nothing like a totalitarian institution for checking out the social and political theorists!)

But one discovers another elite, usually submerged: the “brilliant psychopaths,” the extreme, “deviant” personalities who lead riots and escapes. While “outside” institutions make elaborate efforts to remove these dissidents – probably because they are usually superior persons in intelligence and competence to those in power – prisons, themselves the place of removal, find it difficult to be inhumanly pure. (Following contemporary educational and psychological programming, prisons and armies their imitators now do attempt to change this by a “scientific” – that is, conservative – process of segregation.) To the degree that most of our institutions parallel the totalitarian ones – and that must be considerable since the total institutions do the basic controlling of the society – we may find that “psychopaths” provide the real possibilities for change. We need not draw any sentimental conclusion that such efforts will always be for the best, only that this is the major route of possibility, still not fully excluded in our carefully modulated and dehumanized orderings. Any serious social-political theory of change, then, must in effect include a Table of Organization entitled “Beating the System: Where To Have the Madmen.” If it doesn’t it’s the usual bullshit, so out with it.

What I am defending here is what one of my Neomarxist friends condemns as my “lumpen elitism of the desperate poetic imagination.” Lovely phrase, but I more than once, and in a variety of roles – from merchant seaman through advertising hack and university professor – discovered the significance of that psychopathic elite not by theory but by need and by natural taste in friends. They are more lively, if somewhat more difficult.

And this led me to one of the few ways of meaningful action in prison. A psychopathic young con, the compulsive captive and congenital hard-timer, mildly screwed-up and was bum rapped with a bad work reassignment. He confided his rage, and break-out plans, to me. As in most institutions in our society, prison job replacement and promotion primarily come about through sycophancy (and related corruption), custodial security, and (at the unconscious level) psychosomatic typologies, not by competence and need and desire. The human discrepancies show up most glaringly in closed systems but, even when admitted, are not likely to be corrected since rational standards for jobs would not only displace convicts whose power situations (as in the bakery and dispensary) were crucial to the illicit structure of business and pleasure but would threaten the pathology of the whole system. If one kiss-ass goes, why not the rest of them? While “advantage” and “avoiding trouble” block revision, the basic warping, not just the usually claimed “self-interest,” needs to be assaulted. Change, therefore, requires a psychic as well as practical disproportion. To be *rational* appropriate, efforts at reform must be *excessive* in apparent style, disruptive not only of identification and advantage but of over-all order. Contrary

to the smug pieties of narrow rationality in so much of our social and political thought, nothing less will do. True politics is the art of trouble-making.

I encouraged my psychopathic fellow con to dramatically refuse his new job assignment, and backed him up by “unreasonably” refusing to work myself. Further steps included encouraging the other psychopaths to “act out,” refusing to go to the mess hall as the start of a hunger strike, and making demands about everything. These direct actions depended less on the moral suasion often claimed for civil disobedience than on countering “advantage” (a lot of unpleasant extra work for the short-handed screws), on dramatic enlargement (people were pushed into choosing sides almost in spite of themselves), and on the obviously swelling psychic explosiveness. The authorities took the easy out and made the sensible changes in job assignments, and I went back to eating, work and ineffective liberalism. Later, my friend went over the wall anyway. Granted, in this prison such methods had previously been used by “political” prisoners so that my role, and therefore the action, were identified as ideological rather than just sick or selfish. Without such definition, the sequence would have been quite unlikely. What radicals do, the justification for their interminable argument and dramatization, is essentially esthetic: they not only— [*in the version anthologized in A Decade of Anarchy (1961-1970), ed. Colin Ward, there is a lacuna at this point in the essay.*]

Perhaps in this case (as also in the army when I several times led buddies “over the hill” but also back again) I took the cowardly way out in not pushing additional demands, fomenting more drastic responses, upping the ante to violent disruption. I may be guilty of excessive moderation, which rationalizes as a search for a continuing refusal rather than a spastic riot, selective rebellion rather than chiliastic revolution. Of course I know that total institutions can only be reformed by being negated, but overwhelming violence may less defeat them than demythification and continuing refusal and rebellion. So, I believe, generally with this social order.

Factories and prisons led to much the same experiential conclusions. But, for a social theory, what of the other institutions? To which I can only reply with a sincerity no longer naive: What *other* institutions? Someone usually suggests “good” institutions, say, schools and universities. Agreed, they may well be more pleasant as well as more honorifically glossy. Probably that is much of the cause of the proliferation of educational institutions these days. After all, the technicians and bureaucrats which they primarily produce could be trained and indoctrinated on the job. But our fancied up bureaucracies serve as half-escapes, selective and pious substitutes, from our most obviously indefensible institutions of control and exploitation.

Everyone, of course, sense that the schools are dominated by custodial functions and indoctrination for submission. And the half-dozen universities in which I have professed can best be compared, in exact as well as broad detail, to factories of a more sloppily indulgent but malicious and incompetent sort. Hired learning, of course, reveals itself more comfortably hypocritical than “total” stitutions [*sic*] but less rationally ordered than “productive” institutions which come up more directly against material nature.

However, all institutions these days, even if we still manage to distinguish those for products or education or pure control, seem increasingly ambiguous as they synthetically merge indoctrination with products and technical services with control. Suggestively, such synthetic organizations may arrive at similar weaknesses so that, say, student revolts can provide paradigms for refusal in all institutions. Presently our “best” institutions would seem to be, contrary to my own libertarian sentiments for small organizations, the large and mediocre. The controls, such as hierarchical anxiety, cannot be taken too seriously, and the purposes and functions are suffi-

ciently confused and inefficient to allow tolerance and autonomy. If we encourage this cynical state, and I see no reasonable alternative in the desire for freedom, then we must try to simultaneously create new life, which would therefore be oppositional social and cultural styles, within and without.

Naturally (to answer an obvious objection) one recognizes differences between various institutions. Anyone who has been in a few jails knows the drastic dissimilarities between the small “county tank,” usually a vicious hole, and the large “federal correctional facility,” which can be outgamed and resisted like any other bureaucratic institution. But jails remain jails. Control can be nice or nasty without ceasing to be control. So, too, with indoctrination; change in costume is not change in character. (*Mea culpa*: the infantry non-com who once gave compulsory lectures – it was that or punishment – to the troops on “Why America Fights” now gives, for a slightly dishonourable professional living, covertly compulsory lectures on “Conflict in American Culture.”) Strategies for liberation must vary – guerrilla tactics don’t work well against “nice” repression in “good” institutions (a mistake of some recent student rebels) – so that one refuses the covert order actually present and thus brings to consciousness the functional and ideological similarities of most of our institutions. The most appropriate disenchantment still focuses on “the authorities,” the realization that essentially the same people as well as ideologies run the “good” and the “bad” institutions, not only the businesses and the governments, and the factories and the services, but the schools and the jails, and the universities and the armies. In several senses, it is all a “total” order.

I desist from an academic anecdote to parallel those of factory and prison and complete my institutional sketch, though my file on Academic Bureaucracy Baiting swells largest of all. Just a passing illustration. I have usually been shocked by the people I know who become successful, powerful, rich, famous. Not that stupid machine and human toad! So with the news that a former college room-mate of mine had become executive officer of one of the leading American universities. I remembered him as a real dummy, a silly cheater, and a generally inadequate person. Surely I overlooked something which made him more than an ambitiously unprincipled jerk. Didn’t he have some sort of special quality? A moral chameleon sensitivity...an unusual energy for trivia...a crypto-homosexual responsiveness to superiors...Any talent to justify my former room-mate as a top administrator turns out to be a social and human deficiency. Of course he also has the special craft it takes to identify with institutional ideology and power, and to suck on. I hear that he acts a trifle better than some in his role because still impulsively muddled. Perhaps, to look for the happy side, people partly boosted him up as a substitute for someone much more competent and evil.

Since I’ve been mostly at the bottom of orders, I admit some puzzlement over those at the top. Might I be mistaking the ways of peripheral examples for the real thing – for the big entrepreneurs, the major organizers, the military masters, the driving technologists, the famed authorities? But careful researches lead only to the conclusion that most of the controlling and wealthy and celebrated turn out to be even less adequate human beings than my successful ex-room-mate. Indeed, many in power can only be explained with antique notions of insanity and evil. Most of our power figures deserve the greatest contempt. Why don’t more people say so?

All the usual selfish and sick explanations apply, but some that can certainly be changed include the pretences at objectivity, the pseudo-scientific intellectual fashions, which turn out to be merely conservative manners. Even the better social moralists these days do not often savage the powerful and rich and celebrated, except when their behaviour seems exceptionally unfair.

But the unfairness is really what all of them are, and nothing more. Even if they were only as you and I, they would tend to be worse because of what one must be as well as do in getting, and staying, on top. More often the powerful are the less intelligent and responsive to start with. One must simply conclude, and act, as if the powerful were no good, which is true. In the long run they must go; in the short run we should refuse them, not least by treating them with the scorn they merit.

Though probably justifiable, the violent destruction of the powerful does not seem very tempting. The sensible arguments against violence apply, the most rational of which is that the wrong people usually get it in the neck. Also, the politics of resentment puts other vicious people on top. The only true radical alternative is not to have any top and right now. Our refusing of power, our de-authorisation, must be both specific and pervasive. Currently, Western societies seem midway towards demythification of power. Not only do we find an increasing amorphousness (where is the boss?) characteristic of control in bureaucratic-technological programming but an undercutting culture in which the hierarchical submission combines with surreal contempt. So silly are our “leaders” – the comic statesmen, the administrative nullities, the rootless rich, the fatuous celebrities – so lacking in social imagination and moral style and even interesting personal qualities, that some humane people hopefully assume that we have already achieved self-rule by default. Unfortunately, in the amorphous order of overwhelming mass-technological power even what little our leading fools do comes out disproportionately destructive. Also from that arises our recurrent disguised authoritarianism, the destructive ambivalence in which many “decent” people yearn for some pretence at authoritative power instead of demanding self-rule. Then we get the fancy statesmen and swinging administrators and charming leaders who would claim to really lead. They, in fact, start our wars and put outmoded rhetoric into counterfeit social ordering, thus inhibiting real change. Should radical refusal here prefer the mediocre fools, just as, in truth, we prefer the large ineffective bureaucracies?

Some choice! Yet, in effect, we must sometimes make it. More importantly, we must make the system make it. If we chose political and economic and institutional leaders by random selection – frequent blind drawings for celebrities and artists as well as administrators and rulers – we would no doubt come out with a better selection than we generally get. We should find ways to encourage such devaluations as steps towards a better social ordering which quite separates real authority – the ability to do, to know, to say, to exemplify – from most prerogative and force. In the meantime, we refuse anything less by resisting all claims to authoritative power. If Oedipus can't find Laius, we move towards the day when he no longer rages when he does find him, and his own guilt. To dissolve the ancient curse means to turn it into a daily dance of life.

You may label the social-politics I have been sketching “sceptical anarchism” (in partial contrast to the positivistic and optimistic sort) or “conservative nihilism” (a persistent unfrenzied negation of false order). In any dramatic sense of society, one recognizes that such action must be played out, so we might just as well be self-conscious about it. Certainly I would not claim for refusal a total politics. But negation prepares for creation. Only the paranoid, on both sides, take destruction as definitive. And by far the most destructive among us seem to be those who never claim it. Not the anarchists and nihilists but the positive saviours advance the great historical crimes. Even on the smaller scene, institutions which cannot bear with considerable refusal deserve to go under. Since we should never reduce the human to equation with its institutions, better them than us. And by so doing we might just possibly move towards that new communal order of human proportions which we so desperately need.

Somewhat elliptically, to lessen the false abstraction of social-political theorizing, I have been refusing some often accepted premises of social criticism and change. Anecdotally, I have been arguing for a community of refusal, a libertarian praxis in which ideological radicalism (the vision of an institutionally transformed society) and personal radicalism (intransigent behaviour and variant life-style) must go together. Their separation still pervades most of what passes for politics. Partly a 19th-century mania for repressively respectable virtue even in opposition – Jacobin puritanism – only now do we see it dissolving with such liveliness as the beat-hippy-underground styles of contemporary radicalization. A polymorphousness of sexuality and imagination and rebellion subverts the rigid sensibility which, leftist or not, can only maintain rather than radicalize our daily institutions. I see it as a new insight, though still alien to the politically-minded, the trend in contemporary Western society that social and cultural rebellion precede rather than follow revolutionary political changes of institutional order.

The revolutionism which seeks organized external mass methods of power usually insists on subordinating social and cultural revolution to political activity. Instead of refusing power, that heightens it, and ends conserving the repressive character and authority of institutions. Revolution and reaction agree in condemning styles of refusal as romantic and utopian and deviationist. Mere politics thus becomes the new displacement of full humanness, generating a new terrorism and totalism of *le peuple* or the proletariat or a political organization or an historical process. Revolutionism is not nearly radical enough.

To turn false institutional order into more fully human proportions requires not so much force as deconversion from the reigning faiths. For as one painfully discovers in doing battle with our controlling organizations, faith, not just power, maintains these institutional mountains. Or, as my farmer grandfather used to put it, “Ta sell corn ya gotta raise corn an’ to raise corn ya gotta believe in corn.” With most of our traditional deities decrepit, our civilization passionately holds itself together with quite paltry convictions, such as a religiosity about bureaucratic technology. Especially from unadmitted faiths, deconversion cannot simply be reasonable but would seem to require, like conversion, radical experiences and traumatic breaks and imaginative disruptions of consciousness. Thus politics of gesture and fancy and defiance and shock might be more productive in breaking the faith than the usual organizing of the barricades and bureaucracies of dissent. Refusal in our society may need new oppositional styles.

The great unwritten work in contemporary social thought, which I am prefacing, may be “Humanizing Technological Organization” by the descendants of Ned Lud. The radical criticism, the dissident way, the comic resistance, the emphatic difference, the intransigent act, and all the other ways of refusal, must be put both against and inside our institutional orderings. Furthering rebellious life-styles, no matter how weirdly Joachimite they may be, constitutes radical change now. So does institutional subversion, such as that considerable folk lore and practice of “beating the bureaucracy” and “fighting the system.” They already exist – and in an expansive state – otherwise our institutions would be totally unbearable since patently not designed for passionate human fullness. Far more than revolutionary postures, the multiform ways of refusal and the continuing demythification and other negations may redeem the curse of labour by transforming its justice, decorrapt authority by removing its force, and humanize power by making it immediate and personal. To prefer libertarian rebellion to megalomaniac revolutionism also affirms the wonderful anarchy of the sexual and social and cultural “revolutions” actually going on around us. Only by way of rebellion comes contemporary community.

The favourite myth of those who would master others is that denial is bad – bad manners, bad policy, even bad psychology. Do they most fear its truth, its effectiveness or its pleasure? By a fraudulent calculus, they also conclude that a total order of human attrition comes out less destructive than a liberating negation. But the simple truth, discoverable here and now, is that a richer human life often comes from a joyous NO!

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