

## Escape from Freedom Round Table

Copyright 2006 Barry Cooper

When Tim Fuller suggested this panel on a number of thinkers who were more or less contemporaries of Eric Voegelin and whose major books appeared around the time of The New Science of Politics, the appeal was instantaneous. To be autobiographical, I had read Hoffer and Riesman, Whyte and Fromm when I was an undergraduate, and Peter Viereck in graduate school. I wondered what I would find when I looked at them again after an interval of several years filled with reading so much other material. I suggested that Vance Packard be added to the list, but my suggestion was wisely resisted.

What I would like to do is say a few words about Riesman's The Lonely Crowd and Eric Hoffer's True Believer and if time permits, Peter Viereck. I will leave Whyte and Fromm to my betters.

David Riesman was the son of a prominent Philadelphia physician and Professor of Medicine at Penn. Riesman studied pre-med at Harvard as a good other-directed doctor's son but then switched, in inner-directed rebellion, to law. He graduated near the top of his class, served on the law review, and clerked for Mr. Justice Brandeis. During the war he was an assistant DA under Thomas Dewey in New York and then a contract termination lawyer for Sperry Gyroscope. After the war he taught law at what became the SUNY Buffalo law school and, eventually, landed a job at Chicago teaching "social science." A few years later he was Henry Ford II Professor of Social Relations at Harvard. He had a good war, but becoming a respectable academic took some time. For this late conversion as well as for his celebrity – he once graced the cover of TIME – his academic colleagues, even at Harvard, never entirely forgave him. This is probably why, in a later book, Individualism Reconsidered, he regretted publicly that The Lonely Crowd was not more inaccessible.

Seymour Martin Lipset and Leo Lowenthal in the preface to their book of critical essays on Riesman, declared The Lonely Crowd to be "one of the most significant and successful sociological publications in our time." Apart from its alliterative value, a successful sociological publication is one with a big print run. The 1954 paperback version of The Lonely Crowd sold half a million copies. It is still in print and total sales are nearing a million and a half.

Perhaps more important for American intellectual life, it began "an onset of national self-analysis," said Eric Larrabee, editor of American Heritage magazine, that propelled him into prominence as a new social type, the intellectual celebrity or celebrity intellectual.

Probably the most "accessible" of the terms he introduced was the inner-directed/outer-directed typology already used, without any introduction, to describe young David. The third type, which he called tradition-directed, remains less well known, probably because there were so few instances in mid-twentieth century America. The approach Riesman took to the questions he explored was straightforward: America at war called forth warriors: Halsey, Nimitz, Marshall,

Eisenhower, Le May, MacArthur. What sort of people would flourish in an age of (more or less) peacetime organization that characterized the Cold War? This was William H. Whyte's question as well and it is no accident, as they say in the KGB, that one of the most interesting applications of Whyte's work was the 1960 book by David Granick, called The Red Executive: A Study of the Organization Man in Russian Industry.

The postwar/Cold War context wherein The Lonely Crowd was published was, I believe, the chief reason why Riesman, who had visited the USSR in the 1930s, became a strong anti-Communist. He was equally concerned about the effect of atomic weapons on American political life, as well as about the blast effects. That is, he had what may be called patriotic rather than pacifistic reservations about nuclear deterrence.

As to his concepts, the inner-directed live as they were taught by their parents. They tend to be confident and are often dogmatic. Some critics have called this type an American version of Heideggerian existence. The other-directed are flexible and accommodating; they want "to be loved rather than esteemed," Riesman said, and are sought after by big corporations. They do not seek to control or to lead (like warriors) but to relate. The exaggerated German version would be Nietzsche's last man. I mention the two German philosophers not because Riesman was influenced by them but to situate his social types in a wider theoretical context.

There are other accessible elements to Riesman's book; inter alia he discussed: the lack of confidence among adolescents, their parents' desire to remain forever young, a preference for anomie over adjustment, veto groups, the power elite, depersonalization, and national character – a subject matter to which we shall return. There are lots of insights into "parenting," the role of teachers in schools, grannies, consumerism, comic books, Tootle the outer-directed Engine (as distinct from the inner-directed Little Engine That Could), cookbooks, moralizers, and inside-dopesters. In his own words, he sought to analyze how the "social character" (a term he invented) of nineteenth century America , and of the war years, had been replaced by something else.

He connected the change in character to population trends and demography. An era of high population growth potential was associated with tradition-directed social character, as in India and China , and with primary economic products. Transitional population growth, as in late medieval and early modern Europe is associated with inner-directed social character and secondary or industrial production. And incipient population decline, as he saw as taking place in the twentieth-century USA , is associated with other-directed social character and a tertiary or service economy. The most fundamental reality, thus, was population changes or trends. Character types were a reflection of this underlying reality.

What are we to make of this?

The first thing to note is that, if other-direction is associated with incipient population decline, The Lonely Crowd is a "decline of America " book. It is at once part of a genre of "decline and fall" literature and it is parochial since the thesis seems to be focussed entirely on America . Despite the numerous references to exotic anthropological studies, one wonders what Riesman would say about the incipient demographic catastrophe that Japan and Russia are facing today and America is not.

Second, there seems to be nothing after demographic decline except, perhaps, extinction. That is, his social characters were not elements in a philosophy of history or even a theory of historical cycles. Despite the grandiose generalizations about China or Renaissance Europe, and how the historical appearance of the several character types is a reflection of population changes and modes of economic production, to use a term of Marx that fits comfortably with Riesman's notions, the postulate of a secular decline into oblivion is, to be blunt, incoherent.

It is as if Vico's barbarism of reflection was the end of history: no renovatio; no new mente eroica; not even a bottom of the barrel. This incoherence is probably why, in his 1960 "reconsiderations" Riesman repudiated any "population linkage" to his types of social character and their transitional predominance.

These three types and their association with demography are explicitly derived from Max Weber's "ideal types," but with not much attention paid to their status as conceptual entities. If they are not tied to real changes in population, as he first thought, are they perhaps no more than conceptual orphans cut off from any contact with reality?

Perhaps one can see the limitations of Riesman's typology of social characters by looking at the first thinker to discuss character on its own, which is to say, cut off from an understanding of the full amplitude of reality, namely Theophrastus.

As Bruno Snell in The Discovery of the Mind, ch. 11, and Voegelin in ch. 10 of Order and History III both note, a concern with characters, in both the everyday sense of colourful personalities and in the sense of a subject-matter for analysis, arose when the myth of the polis had faded into a kind of gracious urbanity, the symbolic expression of which was not philosophy but New Comedy. Menander, in contrast to Aristophanes, had no reason to oppose Socrates and what Socratic life stood for. As we see from Plautus and Terrence, his characters scarcely debated at all. They merely advanced their usually half-baked opinions in something like Karl Popper's open society – another book of the same era as The Lonely Crowd.

Likewise with Theophrastus: his "characters" are said to reflect human nature, not in the Aristotelian sense of zoon politikon and certainly not in the sense of actualizing a potential, but only in the sense of a variety of typical ways of life: the shrewd, the cowardly, the ambitious, the stupid, and so on. That is, Theophrastus, like Riesman, was concerned with variety in the absence of order or, to use an Aristotelian term, without a telos. Such characters are unquestionably comic as well as pitiable because there is no room for anything serious and so no room for irony either.

So far as Riesman is concerned, the closest one comes to anything approaching philosophy or even an Aristotelian spoudaios, who is some distance from the immortalizing philosopher, is the "autonomous" man who is capable of choosing liberty but who, nevertheless, may not actually do so. This may be one reason, as Riesman says, it is "difficult, as an empirical matter, to decide who is autonomous." And Riesman is not being ironic.

It is a long way from the world of Philadelphia gentry and Harvard to picking fruit in the Central Valley and longshoring in San Francisco. Eric Hoffer wrote The True Believer during two longshoremen's strikes, one in 1946 and a second in 1948. During the war Harry Bridges, head of

the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union , and a devout Stalinist, had prohibited strikes. Looking back Hoffer wrote: "I had seen the world like a dead horse with its belly ripped open. In the late 40s, the scholars tried to sew up that belly and forget the putrefaction inside. I couldn't forget." He was 49 when The True Believer was published in 1951 – and 65 when he first appeared on national TV, in 1967.

The book that made Hoffer famous in retrospect is a commonsensical analysis of a social phenomenon he called "mass movements," and especially the "activist, revivalist" phase. The title was taken from Islamic history and referred polemically to those who preferred purity to peace, "the man of fanatical faith who is ready to sacrifice his life for a holy cause." Such individuals are intolerant of dissent and act on the basis of singlehanded allegiance and hatred.

This is straightforward enough, but he has provided no critical analysis as, for example, Hannah Arendt did, to indicate what is distinctive about "masses" or how the masses may be contrasted with "mobs" or even crowds. The issue of the superfluousness of humanity, which was central to Arendt's understanding of how fanatics can devote themselves to an imaginary cause, or anything analogous is missing. As a result the "true believer" looks like a psychological type without much historical depth. On the other hand, that is also the great strength of the book. As it happened I was reading a biography of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi at the same time as The True Believer. A Jordanian military prosecutor, Muhammad Hijaz, could have been quoting Hoffer in his sketch of Zarqawi who was killed in Iraq early last summer: he

"was more of an ordinary delinquent at this time [the early 1990s] than an international terrorist; his reputation was that of a hoodlum with vague religious learning."

The central experience of the true believer, Eric Hoffer said, is "frustration," which is not a clinical condition so much as an attitude of having had one's life "spoiled or wasted." No doubt, a spoiled or wasted life is a terrible thing, even when it's the result of one's own bad choices – though that is seldom admitted anyhow. His point, however, is that for many people who have, in fact, wasted their lives, who see nothing behind themselves and nothing ahead except a wasteland of meaninglessness; for them joining a mass movement, at least for the time being, resolves that problem by keeping you sufficiently diverted so that you can pretend to resolve your own problems. This observation introduces the Pascalian category of the divertissement.

The notion of a mass movement as a diversion is reinforced by another of Hoffer's observations, that the sense of a wasted life is connected to the related experience of boredom. "When people are bored," he said, "it is primarily with their own selves that they are bored." As with a wasted life, the bored individual is more likely to say that the world is boring or that life is boring than he is to say that he is boring.

This is a remarkable insight on Hoffer's part, but he does not connect it by following the experiential path back to Pascal – though he quotes Pascal often enough. The problem for Pascal, we remember, is that he was frightened by his own lack of faith. To protect himself from the anxiety of his own ennui, he undertakes the divertissements. Hoffer seems oblivious to the entire

issue of the gods or God as being connected to the boredom of a wasted, because meaningless, life. He is, however, an acute observer of the symptoms and clearly understands that joining a mass movement to cure a self-inflicted boredom with meaninglessness is a divertissement that can do nothing but express the same disorder it was intended to hide or perhaps resolve.

As with Riesman, there are plenty of commonsensical observations on "misfits," on "new poor," on why the Jews who died at the hands of Nazis going meekly through a gate marked "Arbeit macht Frei" followed the same precept in practice in Palestine and turned themselves into a hard-working and free warrior people. He has little good to say about intellectuals – "men of words," he calls them – because their words undermine the order of society, which allows the fanatics and then the men of action, who could care less about words, to take over and complete the job of destruction. On occasion his desire for aphoristic impact overwhelms good sense and his prose becomes overwrought. Here is one example: "the acrid secretion of the frustrated mind, though composed chiefly of fear and ill will, acts yet as a marvelous slime to cement the embittered and disaffected into one compact whole."

All aphorisms draw attention to themselves because they are not considered arguments – a statement that is itself aphoristic, but that I would like to consider as well. Like the notion of a mass movement as a divertissement, an aphorism stands alone, more or less isolated. Here are a few: "One realizes now that the ghetto of the Middle Ages was for the Jews more a fortress than a prison." Israel in this respect is a new fortress. One thinks of the killers of 9/11 with this: "Dying and killing seem easy when they are part of a ritual, ceremonial, dramatic performance or game." Or again: "There is a need for some kind of make-believe in order to face death unflinchingly." But to consider only the last remark: it is true only for the non-philosopher, provided we take the term "some kind of make-believe" to refer in a vulgar way to the experiences of faith. This consideration may explain the obliviousness, noted earlier, with respect to the gods.

Peter Viereck, I would say by way of conclusion and because my time is up, combines the commonsensical sociology of Riesman with the concentrated language of Hoffer. His unadjusted, overadjusted, and maladjusted men (and, presumably, women) never grew famous the way Riesman's types did, though in some respects are more interesting. His poetry is more pleasing than Hoffer's toughness. I warmly recommend his meditation on what he called an ancient proverb, "New York ain't America" along with an ode "To a Sinister Potato." Here are two stanzas:

O vast earth-apple, waiting to be fresh,

Of all life's starters the most many-eyed,

What future purpose hatched you long ago

In Indiana or in Idaho ?

....

Some doom will strike (as all potatoes know)

When – once too often mashed in Idaho –  
From its cocoon the drabbest of earth's powers  
Rises and is a star,  
And shines.  
And lours.

I will save any additional remarks until I have heard from the others.