

The world is in its present condition (and many suspect that this state is much worse than before, even if "before" may mean only in our own individual memory) because of ideas. Three of those ideas can be credited to three historical figures: Rousseau, Marx, and Freud.

Marx came to the conclusion that human economic activities could be stimulated and administered by instincts other than that of acquiring of property. The result of his idea is the most ruthless political and social system ever known to man, one which extorts production and assures distribution of goods with the help of the police.

Freud, as his countless interpreters would lead us to believe, declared that all of the world's ills originated within man's inner chambers of consciousness, and that paramount importance rests not in what we think and feel is right or wrong, but in what we desire or abhor, particularly when those feelings are evoked by those related to us by blood or bed. Thus, Freudians maintain, in order to make life better, we should concentrate on this aspect of our being.

Finally, what we today call liberal ideas about freedom, authority, human nature, goodness, human rights, and civil duties have come to us wrapped in a package from Rousseau, who proclaimed that society is the source of our fate. He thus advised social alterations—now the object of something called social engineering—which he thought would eventually solve all problems related to destiny. At the same time, he extolled the release of natural impulses as being the purest fountain of humanity. He was never able, however, to explain why his social manipulation did not interfere with God-given naturalness. Freud came to his rescue by claiming that simply getting those impulses into the open would make everything easier and more propitious for both man and society. Therefore, if we page through *Hustler* magazine, or if we hear someone burp at the dinner table, and both *Hustler* and burping are extolled as progress and liberation, then we are

witnessing the ultimate triumph of Rousseau's ideas.

The contemporary American has little trouble in dealing with the first two conditioners of his mind and culture. Marxism, as realized in the so-called socialist societies and economies, has

A Prudent Progressive



Leopold Tyrmand

proven to be such a failure that it cannot be reasonably accepted as either an idea or a proposition: a vacation trip to the Soviet Union or Cuba suffices to nullify any dialectical dilemma. The Freudian legacy has drowned in the infinite sea of triteness and caricature: at a time when learned psychotherapists announce on TV talk shows that some people are criminals because they are moved by more violent propensities than other people, and proclaim such finding as *their* epochal discovery, any serious dialogue between "advanced" psychology and modern intelligence is destined to stop. A strong suspicion lingers that after tons of books, endless university courses, and suffocating loads of psychoanalytical revelations, mankind

knows nothing more or better than it had known before the psychoanalysts, who hawk arrogance as compassion, began to hover over Western couches covered by prostrated bodies. Some new vocables have been added to the intellectual slang of the epoch—which is about all that mankind has gained from its recent era of idolizing psychological banality.

The liberal post-Rousseauism is a more complex and difficult-to-deal-with legacy. Our common sense of freedom and equality is contaminated by it. Our notions of love, propriety, rectitude, and decency still suffer more from its perennially immature obfuscations than from any other cultural or social attempts to define our lives and our moral norms. We all feel that "free" impulses, unleashed by liberal, post-Rousseauesque principles of naturalness have transformed our social habitat into a lethal jungle which now requires some emergency measures in order to merely preserve a valid definition of social bond and legal equilibrium. Even if we do not know it for sure, we all feel oppressed by an intimation that a catastrophe looms on the horizon, unavoidable if we do not revise some rudiments of our thinking—those rudiments proclaimed as non-negotiable by Rousseau's spiritual heirs. It seems that the generation which now enters the American political scene has no choice but to reconsider several truths about Western civilization which heretofore were thought to have been cozily stored away in the attic. □

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