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Flies Trapped in Honey

by Thomas Fleming

Nineteen ninety-one was the year of revolutions, the greatest, perhaps, since 1848. Many who observed the events from safe seats on this side of the Atlantic must have recalled Churchill's great Fulton speech, in which he described the "Iron Curtain" that had "descended across the continent," cutting off "all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe," from Berlin to Belgrade. That curtain was lifted, not slowly and ponderously, but—from the perspective that even a year affords—almost all at once.

What is really going on, almost no one in the United States can know, so ignorant are we of the languages and histories of all of Europe, particularly the East. Even before the statues had toppled and the names of cities had changed, swarms of patent-medicine salesmen were arriving on every flight from America; social democrats from Harvard, urging the Russians to follow the example of Sweden at the very moment that the Swedes were realizing what a botch they had made of their country. The social democrats, however, had been beaten to the punch by professional free-enterprisers eager to sell ex-communists on the merits of state capitalism. What a competition: career bureaucrats and lapdog academics, slickers who had never earned an honest dollar in their lives, direct-mail con artists who had been living off what they could siphon from the pensions of retired Army officers and patriotic widows. The socialists and capitalists alike are spending their hard-earned alms on "fact-finding" tours of the Soviet Union or playing missionaries to the victims of communism. One friend of ours happened to travel in the wake of one of these tours and met with a group of Russian leaders who commented on the

famous apostle of democratic capitalism they had just met. "Over here we know the type well: they all work for the KGB."

With all the disinterested goodwill in the world, it is hard for Americans to understand what is going on in so apparently familiar a country as Germany. After reading reports, month after month, of rising anti-immigrant resentment all over Germany, the *New York Times* reluctantly did a story at the end of September. Thoughtful observers were predicting trouble several months earlier.

The same source has also reported another problem among the former East Germans: debt. As we described some time ago, the East Germans—reportedly fleeing from religious and political oppression—did not flock to the churches, universities, and newspaper offices of the West. They headed straight for the discount stores where they loaded up on stereo systems, VCRs, and big-screen TV sets, all bought on time. A year later, many of them are out of work and most of them are singing the first verse of a familiar American song, the overextended credit blues.

From news reports and conversations, I have picked up a few fragments of information that can be used to suggest the overall design of the puzzle I am trying to piece together: the first item on the agenda of the new Romanian government was, apparently, liberalizing abortion; Big Macs, jeans, rock music, and pornography are the products in greatest demand all over the former dominions of the Soviet empire; finally, it is pulp fiction à la Sidney Sheldon and Stephen King, and not the censored works of Solzhenitsyn, that are selling everywhere on the free market of the street. The repressed peoples of the East are not lusting after the

Common Law or a free press; neither individual dignity nor the principle of habeas corpus are the specters haunting Europe, but greed and self-indulgence. It is our vices—our depravities and addictions—that we are exporting, not the virtues of our way of life.

This is in fact the triumph of what we call democracy over what they called communism, though neither term has the slightest thing to do with the actual social and political systems of America and the Soviet Union. Their system was doomed to fail from the start, because it demanded sacrifices too great for mortal flesh to bear. Ideally, Marxist communism is a system of equality in which all distinctions of sex, wealth, class, and ethnicity disappear. People work in common for the common good and rear their children in common to enable their wives (if there really would be wives and not simply women) to serve the state to their highest productive capacity.

This is, as I have written in a 1988 book, politics against the grain of human nature. Even in the short run of a single generation, it could not succeed. Tell people they cannot work for themselves and set aside something for their children, and they will either find ways to cheat or else they will quit working altogether. The market was not something invented by Adam Smith; it is the automatic and inevitable tool devised by human nature to satisfy natural needs. All the jackboots, propaganda, and concentration camps in the world will never succeed in creating a New Soviet Man, except temporarily among a few teenage idealists. The rest of us are too lazy and too selfish to live in Utopia. At best, we might make weekend visits and return with glowing reports on universal literacy and constitutions outlawing the death penalty. “Human, all too human” Nietzsche found even the best (or worst) of us, for which we may thank the God who made us.

Over repression breeds dissent, but a religion that thrives on persecution may fall into decay as an establishment. (Consider only the case of the Church of England.) Lenin, Stalin, and Brezhnev controlled the press, attacked the churches, and outlawed rival political parties. The result was *samizdat* publication, clandestine piety, and the monumental work of Solzhenitsyn. During the same period in the United States, the press has been free (or at least up for grabs to the highest bidder), religion unfettered, and political parties of every type (except, for a brief period, revolutionary movements) tolerated, and the result is the narrowest spectrum of opinion that can be observed in any civilized country. The greatest political debates in the United States are the mutual recriminations of left liberals and center liberals over whether or not affirmative action policies really help minorities to achieve equality. A goal that would have been mocked and despised by most political philosophers and virtually every sensible person in Europe and the United States is now held aloft as the highest ideal, unchallenged by dissent. Since the 1930’s, there have been no American dissidents to criticize the fundamental assumptions of the regime. There is no American equivalent of *From Under the Rubble*. Why? Is it because our system is so perfect that it is immune to criticism or because our culture is so servile that no one with anything to risk has the courage to go into opposition?

Soviet communism had its Marx and Lenin, but for American social democracy there is no one ideologue, no one revolutionary who midwived and gave birth to the system. The political leaders responsible were many, but Wilson, Hoover, and the Roosevelts are the most important. As for the ideologues, their name is legion, from Locke to Rawls, but it is the Lockean tradition culminating in the prosaic figure of John Dewey that has slowly and inexorably created the ideological regime that has stolen the name “democracy.”

The features of that regime are so familiar that, like a man who unexpectedly catches sight of himself in a mirror, we are almost incapable of recognizing them. I can only list a few of them: first and foremost, the elevation of the state to a pagan divinity. Are there wrongs in the world—a man beating his wife, an employer insulting his hireling—then the state will redress them. Most of the alleged wrongs have something to do with inequality, of wealth, status, power, intelligence, opportunities, or even good looks. “Facism” may soon replace racism as the heresy of fashion, and ugly men will soon be demanding the right to plastic surgery and affirmative action in their pursuit of beautiful women.

There is no need to go on. We live this absurd comedy every day and can no longer laugh at Ionesco or shudder at Orwell. Modern society has already overtaken and surpassed their most bitter fantasies. The real question is why there is so little serious opposition, even from the right, particularly from the right.

The answer, in a nutshell, is that John Dewey, who couldn’t write a decent English sentence and whose knowledge of history and literature was a string of platitudes, was right on a fundamental point that escaped the brilliant and learned Marx. This vital point is expressed in the old proverb: you can catch more flies with honey than with gall (or vinegar).

To understand the essence of Deweyism—and most Deweyites either haven’t read him or think they disagree with him—it is necessary to strip away all his blather about participatory democracy, aesthetics, etc. He knew very little about most of the subjects he pontificated on, and he wouldn’t have known a town meeting from a department meeting; in fact, his arrogance and despotism forced him out of the University of Chicago. But for all his ignorance and naiveté—he apparently thought Trotsky really was innocent of the charges against him—Dewey and his followers have been convinced that it is the honeyed persuasion of propaganda that will change society, not official coercion. The ideal vehicles for this indoctrination process were, they realized, the public schools.

A Puritan Vermonter, Dewey lost his religious faith and ceased to attend the Congregational Church some time in his 30’s. He was, nonetheless, a deeply religious man who regarded himself as the prophet of the faith that would replace Christianity, that is democracy. Like the fabled Jesuits of every Protestant’s nightmare, Dewey knew it was important to start early. Children had to be weaned away from their parents’ particularities, their superstitions and prejudices, if a new and better human society was to be created.

Every political theory is a theory of human nature in disguise, and Dewey, while conceding the existence of

natural instincts, put himself solidly behind the views of Locke and Helvetius: human beings enter the world as malleable clay that is molded by custom and circumstance. Unlike Helvetius, Dewey realized that nature and custom were formidable obstacles. To overcome them would require a wholesale reformation of social institutions. This would be difficult, he argued, but far from impossible.

Dewey's argument boils down to this: if men are allowed to gratify their instincts on mere consumption and enjoyment, they will gladly accept state ownership or, at least, control of land, resources, and goods.

Take the case of property. Unlike the Bolsheviks who simply confiscated the land, shot the farmers who resisted, and starved the rest, Dewey recognized an instinct for possession. But since "consumption is the normal end of possession," he conceived of "a state of things in which the property impulse will get full satisfaction by holding goods as mine in just the degree in which they were visibly administered for a benefit in which a corporate community shared." Translated into English, Dewey's argument boils down to this: if men are allowed to gratify their instincts on mere consumption and enjoyment, they will gladly accept state ownership or, at least, control of land, resources, and goods. Let people enjoy their condo or apartment and they will not wonder about who really owns it: the bank that gave the mortgage or the government that stands behind the bank and is able to confiscate the property to build a highway or a baseball stadium for the "corporate community."

Property is only the smallest part of the picture, and Dewey himself never understood more than a fraction of what he and his co-revolutionaries were planning. Like most men who deny human nature, they worked by instinct, dimly understanding that the road to a man's heart is through his stomach—and his glands.

Imagine the sort of primitive state of nature in which the human species slowly formed its character. Like other animals, the primary needs are related to survival and procreation, and he who lives to have the most children, succeeds in passing on his particular qualities to successive generations. "Men wanted," the sign on every woman's cave would read, "Self-sacrificing saints, sexless nerds, pacifists, and milktoasts need not apply."

Winners in the competition for food and sex would have to have certain qualities. Intelligence, of course, good health and strength, but since men are rarely rational about the things that count toward their survival, they must rely on instincts. The *libido dominandi* is an essential trait, because it drives one man to seek dominion over another and ensures the winner greater access to what he wants. And what is it he wants? Food, for one thing, especially good red meat with lots of protein and fats. In the wild, you can't get enough of it, and it takes the prick of a particular hunger to send a man

off hunting game, when he might just as well dig up the tubers under his feet. Sweets and salt are also in short supply, and every human animal grows up craving steak and potato chips and candy.

With his belly full, the young savage's fancy turns to thoughts of love, although it is certainly "love not taken lightly." The winners in the genetic competition will not have been ethereal young men who liked to talk art and politics in what they imagine to be British accents. ("Men wanted: Manhattan conservatives need not apply.") An acute sensibility to feminine charm has always been a defining quality of the good man, even the good man who has been taught to confine his attentions to the mother of his children.

Of course, it is one thing to want women, another to get them, and even the most savage suitors had to face prospective fathers-in-law who were looking for the same kind of qualities that fathers-in-law always look for: they want a man who can provide for their little girl—and ensure the success of their own qualities in the great genetic lottery that produced human nature. A typical American teenager who divided his time between pigging out and making lewd remarks may be straight on the basics, but he would not have impressed daddy Magog.

Men still, even in this century of democracy and progress, come into this world as paleolithic savages, with the same appetites and inclinations as the sons of that African Eve who is supposed to be "our general mother." Try to suppress them, and our appetites will only find more devious channels and outlets toward their gratification. You cannot alter or suppress human nature, you can only warp its expression. The great success of American democracy is its ability to satisfy the most basic instincts of the human race, while at the same time virtually eliminating its highest qualities. We are the fly caught in honey that has hardened into amber.

Meals used to require the effort and talent of a hardworking woman. Who needs a balanced diet or even good-tasting food, when he can slop up Big Macs, salted and sugared french fries still dripping in grease, and wash them down with soft drinks invented to kill off diabetics? Oh, the good times when "A woman who could still cook, still would" may not be over, as Merle Haggard fears, for good, and there are still a few people who practice what they call "gourmet" cooking, but we are a long way from the childhood of Ezra Pound, who never put bad food in his mouth until he went to college.

For most men, sexual gratification used to mean marriage, a commitment to one (or at most two or three) women and the offspring they bore—for it was this commitment that daddy Magog stipulated as the price of his daughter. In a state of nature, Don Juan would either have to make himself chief or be killed by the first father or husband whose female property he damaged. But now, a young man of any quality can be assured of a steady supply of willing girls. Today, boys of twelve and thirteen years are besieged on the telephone by a dazzling assortment of Kimberleys, Heathers, and Taras. (I speak now as a father.) The situation hardly changes when they marry. Women have now sunk to the low, predatory level of men, and with both parties in a race to rack up the most extramarital points,

the high divorce rate in the Western nations is hardly surprising.

Of course, there is the loser, who “can’t get no girly action.” This is the “kind of man who reads *Playboy*” and checks out the X-rated films from the Family Video Store. To be fair, even some of the Don Juans are addicted to pornography. It helps to keep their interest up, even when the charms of Morgan or Tiffany grow stale. There is nothing unusual or unnatural in this. In the beginning, any successful male had to be constantly on the alert for the glimpse or scent of the attractive female who would make him “immortal with a kiss.” But pornography is the Big Mac of sex: it titillates and teases; it may even seem to satisfy for the moment. But the more you get, the sicker you become, and eventually you forget what real food or real women (with real names) are like.


This is the triumph of American democracy, to have created a line of succubi that haunt our waking dreams until we have lost our appetite for reality. Television, radio, movies, and electronic music might all be used, to a limited extent, for some good purpose, and I am not immune to their pleasures, even their vicious pleasures. But we don’t limit them. We never turn the damn things off. Now, the latest advertising gimmick is to put giant TV screens into health clubs and airports, alternating the soft-sell “entertainment” segments with hard-sell commercials. Ted Turner has even seduced schools into accepting his broadcasts, and the only complaints come typically from anticapitalist leftists. Poor Ezra Pound, stuck in his cage outside of Pisa, wrote some of the best verse of his later career, but transferred to the warm and dry St. Elizabeth’s loony bin, he turned out virtually nothing worth reading. Perhaps it had something to do with the television blasting outside his room.

Succubi, nightmares, simulacra. Even the lady of Shalott was “half sick of shadows.” We delight in them and would not trade them in for reality, even if we could. The schools, as Dewey knew, made sure of that. By teaching nothing of grammar, literature, history, or theology, American schools — public, private, and parochial — see to it that we grow up knowing nothing of the world. Instead, we are trapped within a towering prison of images and abstractions, and a man might spend his life butting with his head and never crack through the deadening wall of lies. We are like the villains of old, so hardened in our ways that we cannot recognize virtue or beauty when we see it. I think of the remarkable portrait of the “Innominato,” the unnamed robber baron of Manzoni’s masterpiece, *I Promessi Sposi*, but even his conscience was stirred at the sight of the helpless Lucia. Today, a girl might be assaulted and murdered beneath our noses, and which of us would interfere? So well have we learned our lessons.

Of all the 20th-century prophets who predicted doom for our botched civilization, it was Aldous Huxley, who saw most clearly. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* George Orwell looked at the surface symptoms of political repression and official propaganda that characterized Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, and extrapolated. The Soviets played Orwell’s game for seventy years, and it didn’t work. Huxley, on the other hand, looked closer to home in Britain and America and saw the future in California — a deracinated

culture based on hedonism, mood elevators, and compulsory consumption of useless articles that keep the world economy going. The control exerted by Huxley’s world-state over its people extends from genetically engineered babies raised in government nurseries and schooled in classes on “elementary sex and elementary class consciousness” to a lifetime of assigned duties, obligatory pleasures, ending in euthanasia for the public good. It is a happy-talking New World Order, where the greatest enemy of the regime would be a Shakespeare-reading savage, capable of love and hate.

The totalitarian states of the 30’s and 40’s were, as Huxley realized, too crude and negative in their methods: “The most important Manhattan projects of the future will be vast government-sponsored enquiries into what the politicians and the participating scientists will call ‘the problem of happiness’ — in other words, the problem of making people love their servitude.”

Huxley published *Brave New World* in 1932 and set the tale six centuries into the future. In 1946, in the foreword to a new edition, he revised his timetable: “Today it seems quite possible that the horrors may be upon us within a single century.” There were only two likely alternatives, he suggested, either “a number of national, militarized totalitarianisms” threatening to blow up the world or else “one supra-national totalitarianism, called into existence by the social chaos resulting from rapid technological progress . . . and developing under the need for efficiency and stability, into the welfare-tyranny of Utopia.” Forty-five years later, we know it is the latter scenario that will be played out, perhaps by the first years of the next millennium. In a similar vein, Pound told his mother, “the art of letters will come to an end before A.D. 2000.” If Pound and Huxley were both correct, as I believe they were, then we can take comfort in this reflection: come the millennium, there will be few people around capable of reading *Brave New World* or any other book produced by the lost civilization. 

Pets

by John Nixon, Jr.

The love they could not give to one another
They ultimately forced on quadrupeds —
Poor captive creatures, longing for the wild
But getting love and table scraps. In time,
The dog became a charming thespian.
If tail-wagging and licking hands did not
Denote affection, then what could? Just listen
To that adoring bark. Pure joy. But no
Amount of condescending milk poured out
In fractured saucers could persuade the cat
To view the thing as more than what it was:
Suave slavery. *You cannot love your own,*
The velvet gait declares. *I’ll not love you.*