

Parasites on the Body Social

By MAX LERNER, *author of "America as a Civilization."*

WYATT MARRS has hit on a striking theme for "**Man on Your Back**" (University of Oklahoma Press, \$3.95), and symbolized it by a striking title—the parasites who live on the body social. He has developed his theme with logic and force. I hope many will read him, since they will find familiar things (religion, women, war, marriage, smoking, politics) presented in an unfamiliar way. His frame of classification for parasites is also a useful one: the chronically dependent ones; the predatory ones, including the compulsive, the fraudulent, and the panders; and the entrenched ones (family, religious, political, economic).

Yet I fear it falls short of being the book of real importance it might have been. The reason is that any effort to discuss parasitism as Marrs does, by a single and simple standard of what is and is not "socially useful," is bound to end in a blind alley. Marrs claims that this criterion is "clear-cut and universally valid," yet when he tries to apply it the result is often blurred and even trite. He has pretty easy sailing with beggars, thieves, safe-crackers, pickpockets, fences, forgers, confidence men, quack medicine-men, charlatans, vendors of "obesity cures," pimps, drug addicts, alcoholics, racketeers, publishers of pornographic periodicals. Yet these do not present the real test of a theory of parasitism.

The harder cases are advertising, public relations, motivational research, corporate finance, stock speculation, and litigious law, and these are problems on which Marrs barely touches. It would, for example, be very valuable to have some criterion by which we could judge whether the men who work at these professions on Madison Avenue or in Wall Street or—for that matter—on the Main Streets all through our nation are "men on our back" or whether they are men of substance and social utility. C. Wright Mills in "The Power Elite" tends to dispose of their utility in a sharp and summary fashion. David Potter, however, in "People of Abundance" takes a far more favorable view of advertising, in the sense that it makes possible the movement of our machines and of our whole economy. Yet, by the same economic

criterion, some of the shadowy men whom I have listed before—the charlatans and vendors of pornography—also keep the economic machine going. Plainly the economic test in itself will not do. And, as I suggest, Marrs does not dare use it right down the line. He combines it with a vague moral test, by which the institution he is examining must be not only economically useful but "socially" useful as well.

From the moral standpoint there are some even harder nuts to crack. Marrs is quite ambiguous in his treatment of religion, for example. The most ruthless purely economic treatment of religion may be found in Thorstein Veblen's "Absentee Ownership," which contains a classic attack on the economic waste of churches, priests, ministers, and religious services. In dealing with the church historically, Marrs leans somewhat in this direction. He sees the Mayan temples, for example, and the burden they imposed on the people, as a clue to the disintegration of their civilization. Yet when he comes to modern times, he sees "little or no outright religiously entrenched non-usefulness," and sees the church today as freer of the "antisocial blight" than the family, the state, and the economic order. One gathers then that his real test is not economic or broadly social, but the test of whether the institution serves certain psychological needs, as the church does. But once you open this road, it stretches in every direction. The whore fills a psychological need, too, because men find some kind of release with her which they cannot find elsewhere; the whore in turn may love the pimp; the driven husband may have a masochistic need for the wife who uses him coldly for her purposes; the mentally sick woman might go to pieces without the charlatan healer, just as the devout Spanish peasant woman would be lost without the village priest. What a shambles this makes of the idea of a "clear-cut and universally valid" criterion for social parasitism.

There is also a curious streak of puritanism in Marrs. He speaks bitterly of the "parasitic wife" (incidentally, much of his analysis of the leisure-class wife seems like a footnote to Veblen's "Theory of the Leisure Class," though with less origi-

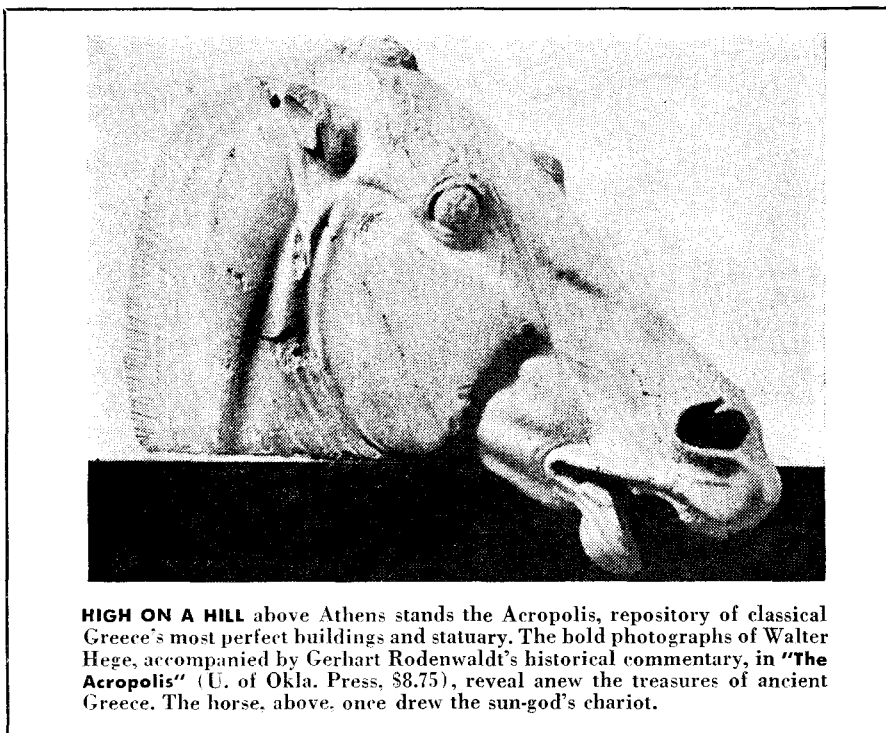


FLOWER FANCIERS will find an original treatment of familiar garden blooms in Buckner Hollingsworth's "**Flower Chronicles**" (Rutgers University Press, \$5), which traces the lore of flowers through history. The woodcut, above, pictures Nicholas Monardes, the first European to publish a description of the nasturtium. Below, doctors of the 1500s turn petals into cures.



nality and bite). But can we be certain that the wife who does not sweep the room well, but keeps her husband sexually fulfilled, is a parasite, while the Mrs. Craig, who continually polishes the furniture and has a cleanliness mania, is socially useful? Marrs seems to think that a mother must always instruct her daughter in child-care and house-keeping, and such a mother passes the test of social utility. But how about the cultures, in the Caribbean for example, where a daughter is primarily instructed in the arts of self-beautification and sex? Must she fail to pass the test? The confusion gets worse as Marrs goes on to discuss what is eugenic in marriage and what is dysgenic. As with many over-simple biological theorists, he uses the criterion of biological fitness. But fitness for what, and to survive what? In the society of our day a girl probably survives best if she has a good figure, wears clothes well, has a feel for the latest fashion, cultivates the art of cosmetics, and has a shrewd instinct for male psychology. She may later, of course, become a lady of charity, good works, and civic usefulness—especially if she marries an old husband and survives to inherit his fortune. It would be difficult to call her “dysgenic” by any except the most arbitrary standards.

The examples could be multiplied. One of the absurdities into which Marrs gets led by his simplistic stress on “the socially useful” is to prefer the drab uniform which the contemporary male wears, to the fashionable clothing of our women. If we follow such a criterion, then surely Chinese Communist society today is the one



HIGH ON A HILL above Athens stands the Acropolis, repository of classical Greece's most perfect buildings and statuary. The bold photographs of Walter Hege, accompanied by Gerhart Rodenwaldt's historical commentary, in *"The Acropolis"* (U. of Okla. Press, \$8.75), reveal anew the treasures of ancient Greece. The horse, above, once drew the sun-god's chariot.

that makes the most sense, where everyone—women as well as men—are reduced to the dreariest sort of uniform. By the same standard the most socially useful society would be an ant society.

And when he tries to apply the standard of “work” as a way of weeding out parasites from nonparasites, he again gets lost. Actually the American male today works harder—even at his socially questionable business—than perhaps any society of males in history. No wonder Marrs is baffled in his discussion of our economy, sounding at times like Henry George or Marx, and ending with platitudes

about the social functions of capital.

He dallies with the idea of calling the whole cigarette industry parasitic, but holds back. On liquor he is more generous, since he sees its relaxing function. But who can be the moral arbiter to decide the relative relaxing values of liquor, tobacco, narcotics, and sex? The fact is that the whole notion of social parasitism is an impossible one to treat with simplicity. All of us are at once exploiters and exploited, idlers and busy, useful and useless. Emerson was right when he said that “the world owes the world more than the world will ever be able to repay.” Even Marx, with all his genius, was a failure when he tried to do a critique of society by economic standards alone—the standard of surplus value.

There are two ways of doing the kind of job that Marrs has undertaken. One is to do it with a ruthless irony, as Veblen did, and not worry too much about whether you are just and balanced in your appraisals; or perhaps to do it as the French moralists did it, with irony and literary grace.

The second way is to do it by measuring the life-giving values of particular institutions inside the larger value pattern of the civilization. Such a larger pattern would include its life goals, its instruments for reaching them, its hedonisms, its gods and taboos, its faith and hope. Within such a pattern, and within the criticism of it, you might then try to evaluate particular types of activities and institutions. But you would have to make your ultimate standard of value explicit, and nothing as vague as “socially useful” could do the trick.

● **ONCE MARRIED**, the female of genus homo becomes more than a woman. She is a wife, with all the traditional rights, privileges, and prerogatives of wifehood fixed by affection, law, and well-established custom. One of the most fundamental of these rights is the right to a share of her husband's earnings. A woman's marriage carries with it a right to a livelihood if her husband is able to provide it. As a result of this entrenched position, where family controls are weak or custom sanctions it, the wife who is so inclined can easily become parasitic if the economic situation will permit.

● **THE MONOPOLY** of religious services and ministrations puts those who are authorized to perform these functions in a strategic position to draw on the substance of the population. This entrenched position makes a variable degree of parasitism possible if the incumbents are so inclined. Particularly is this so when it is widely believed that the services and ministrations performed are the only avenue of approach to a deity or are necessary to the prosperity and final salvation of the individual.

● **FROM MONARCH** or dictator to political ward heeler, the struggle to secure and maintain political position and favor is always present. The degree of entrenchment and the consequent opportunity for an unearned income depend entirely upon the individual's success in this grab for power.

—FROM “MAN ON YOUR BACK,” BY WYATT MARRS.

The Black and White Fallacy

By FRANK S. LOESCHER, *African-American Institute.*

THE resistance of many white Southerners to the Supreme Court's school decision and the hostility of many Northern whites to Negro insistence on equal rights in housing are disturbing signs of the national struggle over the American creed of equal opportunity. Only five years ago slow but steady progress seemed inevitable. Today some Northern whites are losing heart. It is no longer a matter of putting our beliefs into practice; our very beliefs are being shaken. Eisenhower's lack of leadership provides a scapegoat for the liberals. Crimes committed by Negroes provide rationalizations for the prejudices of conservatives.

Three recent university press books illuminate America's major domestic issue: **"Racial Discrimination and Private Education,"** by Arthur S. Miller (University of North Carolina Press, \$3.50); **"Separate and Unequal,"** by Louis R. Harlan (University of North Carolina Press, \$6); **"Racial Factors and Urban Law Enforcement,"** by William M. Kephart (University of Pennsylvania Press, \$5).

Arthur Miller analyzes the "legal problems inherent in any attempt of a private school to admit both Negroes and whites to its student body." He also points up the importance of nonlegal factors—the ratio of Negro to white in the student body, the handling of publicity, administrative means of evading legislation and the courts, social pressures from the community. He believes that private (including the denominational) schools might be a wedge and an example for public-school integration.

Harlan examines the impact of Northern philanthropy and Southern racial views on public education, and demonstrates the growth of inequality from 1901 to 1915. He quotes George S. Mitchell on school integration: it would be "so much easier if Negroes all over the South had good modern homes, instead of the slum shacks in which pervasively they still live; if Negroes on the land were owners or secure tenants with years of reputable standing in their part of the countryside; if in commercial and industrial employment there were genuine equality of opportunity; if everybody had a reasonable chance to find personal health."

Kephart studied the Philadelphia Police Department to help the administration in formulating policy for daily operations and police educational and training programs. He found need for (1) an "Inspector General" type of office to handle complaints from white and Negro personnel, (2) a "community relations" program at the district level to improve relations between the police and the Negro community, (3) the recruiting of some officers from civilian ranks, as is done by the armed forces and the FBI, (4) a program to improve communication between the Negro press and the police, (5) a police-training program in race relations. Philadelphia and a number of other large cities are experimenting with some of these sound recommendations.

Kephart believes the most impor-

tant problem facing the Philadelphia Negro community is not fair employment or educational opportunity but the "staggering amount of Negro crime." In 1955 Negroes composed 25 per cent of the population and accounted for 55 per cent of the arrests. He raises the fundamental question whether the Negro community should be held responsible for the disproportionate number of these arrests. Others, including *Time*, consider Negro crime a symptom of America's "failure in integration."

The three books deal with different aspects of a big problem, but all serve to emphasize the point that we must work simultaneously for equality and integration. We need leadership from the President on down. We particularly need leaders in our denominations who will see that race relations programs are established to educate the members of the various churches, leaders in our foundations who will see that adequate funds are available to organizations working for equal opportunity in our Southern states and Northern cities, leaders in our communities who will deal with crime as a total community problem.

16mm Films

"A TIME OUT OF WAR" (22 min.) a strikingly sensitive film based on a short story about three Civil War soldiers produced as a thesis project by Denis and Terry Sanders, winner of a 1954 Academy Award and recently released on 16mm; distributed by the Educ. Film Dept., University Extension, UCLA, Los Angeles 24, Calif.

"AN OCCURRENCE AT OWL CREEK BRIDGE" (17 min., color), an absorbing realistic rendition of Ambrose Bierce's Civil War story, well scripted and enacted, produced as a graduate student project; distributed by the Cinema Dept., University of Southern California, Los Angeles 7, Calif.

"THE CONSTITUTION AND EMPLOYMENT STANDARDS" (28 min.), an interesting and provocative re-creation of the case in which the Supreme Court sustained the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, filmed with the actual people involved and in the original locations; first of a series of six on the Constitution, produced by the Center for Mass Communication of the Columbia University Press; distributed by NET Film Service, Indiana University, Bloomington, Ind.

"THE COLOR OF A MAN" (10 min., color), a graduate student production illustrating the Melanin theory of skin

differences in men using an interesting combination of animation, reenactment, and documentary photography; written and directed by Robert Carl Cohen; distributed by the Educ. Film Dept., University Extension, UCLA, Los Angeles 24, Calif.

"COLOR LITHOGRAPHY, AN ART MEDIUM" (32 min., color), the step-by-step process of making a three-color print as shown by Professor Reginald H. Neal; clearly photographed, edited, and written; distributed by the Dept. of Film, Radio, and TV, University of Mississippi, University, Miss.

"BUNKER HILL" (18 min.), a moving documentary account of how the elderly residents of a Los Angeles neighborhood feel when their homes and dwellings are about to be torn down to make way for modern office buildings; produced by Kent Mackenzie as a graduate project; distributed by the Cinema Dept., University of Southern California, Los Angeles 7, Calif.

"THE WORLD OF MOSAIC" (28 min., color), a panoramic history of tile picture making, ending with a complete mosaic mural being made by Joseph Young; produced and photographed by Ernest Rose, written and directed by N. H. Cominos; distributed by the Educ. Film Dept., University Extension, UCLA, Los Angeles 24, Calif.

—CECILE STARR.