

THE CLIMATE OF NIHILISM

Bernard Murchland

We've had the best of this country.

— an Ohio policeman

Everybody's bored. I mean there's this feeling that it's all over.

— a Harvard senior, class of '70

I have never been convinced of the Marxian belief that thought is the outcome of social conditions, particularly the modes of production and exchange. It seems to me that the opposite is more nearly true, that the social substance in any given age is primarily defined by its climate of ideas, its philosophical worldview, if you will. The structures of society derive their being as well as their significance from the prevailing philosophy: truth is always a function of a state of consciousness, of the way we view things.

Thus it can be argued convincingly that a conviction of nihilism characterizes the modern consciousness. The death of God has hollowed out a religious tradition; small armies of bored youths are making a mockery of the educational enterprise; existentialists grapple valiantly with the void, emerging from time to time with a message of meaning, only to lapse back once again into a kind of aboriginal chaos. The unblinking eye of hopelessness stares out from the very center of our social and political ferment.

Michael Novak, *The Experience of Nothingness*. Harper and Row, \$5.95.

Nihilism, as Nietzsche saw, is the state of affairs that obtains when "everything is permitted," when an awareness of absurdity replaces a sense of purpose and worth, when everything is of equal importance because in the end nothing matters anyway. Speech is interchangeable with silence; sense is not more important than nonsense; fact is indistinguishable from fiction. In sum, a nihilistic world is one without meaning or value.

"Nothing, nothing had the least importance!" exclaims the hero of Camus' *The Stranger*. The myths that support value had for him exploded in the harsh

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sunlight of contemporary experience. All cultural props were knocked away and a Promethean soul was bared to a hostile world. What James called the pit of insecurity beneath the surface of life opened and swallowed him into that dark night where all cows are black.

There are a number of recent books with important things to say about the relationship between nihilism and the socio-political order. One of them is Michael Novak's *The Experience of Nothingness*. What makes his treatment of this theme interesting is his view of nihilism as a point of departure for a vital, new social order. He speaks of it as "a vaccine against the lies upon which every civilization is built." It offers an alternative to the naive pragmatism of the American way of life and furnishes an antidote to our bland pursuit of happiness. An awareness of nothingness at the heart of all things, Novak argues, "leads not to passivity or a sense of defeat, but to calm ardor and revolutionary expectation." Courageous confrontation with terror, boredom, helplessness—with, in short, all that is negative in contemporary experience—clears the mind and arms the will with new resolution.

Novak locates the source of our experience of nothingness in the human drive to ask questions. Because everything can be questioned, nothing has any ultimacy; no definition of the real, the true or the good can make any final claim on us; alternate value patterns and meaning schemes can always be imagined. Novak seems to me correct in holding that the principal purpose of social institutions is to shape our sense of reality, to stabilize the myths which sustain our values. "The most solid and powerful institutions, though they may imprison us, impoverish us, or kill us, are fundamentally mythical structures designed to hold chaos and formlessness at bay." When they succeed, the experience of nothingness is precluded. But in a time of cultural crisis the drive to question intensifies and the grip of social institutions weakens; a flood of new experiences rushes in to make our lives both exhilarating and despairing.

From an ethical point of view the experience of nothingness enables us to live with a greater measure of honesty and courage. Novak asks the existential question: Granted I am alone, empty, without direction, guides, will or obligations, how shall I live? And he concludes, with Tillich and Camus, that the cour-

age to accept despair becomes the courage to be. From a political point of view, the experience of nothingness shows up the relativity of conventional institutional demands, its desacralizes the status quo. The governing myth of the American sense of reality for the past fifty years or so has been pragmatism—with its stress on the efficient, the analytic, the practical, on action and progress; in a word, power. Yet there is no proven relationship between such values as power and efficiency on the one hand and the integrity of the human person on the other. Pragmatism has been unable to shape a viable social order.

Other myths also have been operative in forming our prevailing sense of reality. Novak notes the myth of tradition (which held that the tried and tested was best, that the old knew best, that the wisdom accumulated in social institutions was unassailable), the rationalistic myth (which held that ethical conduct must be based on principles of reason, thus excluding feeling, the spontaneous, and creativity) and, finally, the humanistic myth (which fosters a sense of the uniqueness and sacredness of the human self). The experience of nothingness has brought all of these myths under critical fire today. No one of them is as powerful as it once was. The resultant crisis affects not only students or liberal professors but the vast majority of Middle Americans as well.

The Experience of Nothingness establishes a plausible thesis: the way we think determines how we shall act. "Politics issues from the end of a symbol. Who controls minds controls guns." From this point of view, the frantic, surrealist character of national politics today might be interpreted as a search for a creditable symbol, a meaningful philosophy. The search is likely to go on for some time. Philosophies, after all, aren't found; they well up from the experience of the people. They can never be created by press agents. Meanwhile, Novak urges us to ground our new sense of reality in an awareness of nothingness. This provides the "minimal necessary skepticism to survive as a man of integrity today. Without it, the machines, the myth-makers sink their hands into one's soul. . . . It is a powerful weapon against pragmatists, reformers, political machines, dictators, judges, and officials of every sort." This recommendation is unabashedly poetical (John of the Cross is in fact the chief authority quoted), for only the poet can live in the dark and grow his meanings there. This is a salubrious message for times such as ours and one, I think, that will find a growing audience.

Novak could have strengthened his argument had he researched the history of nihilism more extensively

and used less rhetoric. An expression like "the myth of nothingness" has a certain *prima facie* appeal but in fact calls for close, careful analysis. I should imagine, too, that many will be annoyed with Novak's somewhat questionable talent for pulling rabbits of hope from the hat of despair. But this doesn't bother me nearly as much as the way he has been seduced by what I call the modern myth of fluidity. This shows up most conspicuously in his treatment of the self.

For Novak we have many selves; we invent them in a quasi-magical way to accommodate the fresh flow of experiences. His basic thesis about nothingness I think leads him to a faulty assessment of the self. Here I would argue that the traditional humanisms were more correct in their view of a centered self as the source and guarantor of values. Such a self is not given, to be sure; but neither is it purely fluid. It construes its identity by organizing experience as a coherent and integral structure. When man's activity is directed toward humanly enriching ideals, he performs most adequately as a moral agent and comes upon an affirmative answer to the meaning of life. In the final analysis, the traditional humanisms held the good life to consist in man's ability to shape the materials of his experience in light of the possibilities of self-realization. The centered self is essentially what on this view underlies social systems and ideologies and serves as the ultimate point of moral reference.

It is, of course, fashionable today to speak of the self as an absence, a locus of insurmountable contradictions, a shifting universe of conflicting interests. The modern self is a plural entity that can be identified chiefly by the roles it plays, often enough with little regard for their contradictory character; it ventures forth on many roads of promised fulfillment and, like a camp follower, pledges fidelity to many suitors. This fluid, fragmented self I take to be at the very heart of our mythologies about wastelands and one-dimensionality. It is the basis of our current preoccupation with the alienation of man.

Novak, it seems to me, confuses the fluid, multiple self with creativity and other desirable virtues. This view is, to be sure, woven into the very fabric of the contemporary mind-set. Earl Roiv, writing in the *American Scholar*, speaks of the "apocalyptic imagination" in this connection. The proven centers of the past, he says, cannot contain the energies our age has released. The imagination must relocate the basis of moral action by redefining, or better, eliminating the self. The new images of identity are explosive, ephemeral and disconnected as in a Fellini movie. As Roiv puts it: "The apocalyptic ethic utters a challenging

command: 'Distrust thyself. Trust rather in thy congeries of selves. Look to the peripheries of thy being for that is where life exists.'"

This mentality, however, is by no means as contemporary as it is often thought to be. It goes back at least to the Renaissance bias of favoring the possible over the actual, the future over the past, processes over products, the fluid over the fixed. This is basically a Faustian attitude: infinite striving, the inability to rest at any point of completion, is taken to be a mark of what is divine or morally excellent in man. It is a bias that perverts many attempts to construct a "new reality." I have nothing against process or new realities. What I want to stress here is the danger of total openness to future possibilities. We can only indulge in this kind of indeterminacy at the price of never becoming anything at all. Adventuring randomly among alternate life styles is, in the final analysis,

adolescent and counter-productive. The modern celebration of peripheral being ends in enslavement to pointless change and the immediately given; it dooms us to perpetual reconstructions. Experience thus arranged *seriatim*, falsely assumes that authenticity obtains when life is impregnated with challenges and changes, when human resources are animated by a perpetual crisis of transition.

I would stress further that the reality of the centered self rather than the myth of nothingness is the key to political renewal. Nor does the latter lead in any necessary way to the former. Countless people in our society experience nothingness; there are few centered selves, few authentic personalities, few real people. I am surprised Novak doesn't see that his ideal of the self is no improvement over the pragmatic self he condemns. In fact they are very much alike. But perhaps we can argue about this some day.

SPIRITUALITY AND POLITICS

Literary and Cinematic Notes

James F. Schall

While in Florence recently, I came across an essay, "'Spirituel'—'Spiritualité'" (*Christus*, October, 1969) by my colleague, the French Jesuit Charles Bernard. These terms have a long and intricate history, yet, as Bernard suggested, there are many types of spirituality in the Christian world that are present by right and by necessity within the overarching structure of the same faith. On my return to Rome, I remarked to Bernard, à propos his essay, that I had the impression that spirituality was becoming an ever more important subject in the contemporary world. That is correct, he told me, for our current problems are at bottom spiritual ones out of which our public difficulties arise.

I too am more and more under the impression that our political life is becoming ever less "political" in content and more theological and spiritual, though in a highly confused and even dangerous sense. (Cf. J. Schall, "Caesar as God," *Commonweal*, February 6, 1970.) Thus I am less than enthusiastic, I must confess, over the religious quality and intelligence of

those secular movements which seem, at first sight, to be most obviously spiritual ones—the anti-war, anti-poverty, anti-pollution, and anti-population cults of recent years. It is not that I do not think there are real problems involved in these areas, but I sense, rightly or wrongly, that these contemporary ideologies are actually based upon a theology and a spirituality that somehow seem to have distinctly anti-human presuppositions.

Unfortunately, there is very little hard thinking about the intellectual origins and implications of these movements. Furthermore, if I understand them correctly, these movements are not conceived in the West as pragmatic "political" events with limited scope and value, but as moral and even mystical missions in which man's "holiness" and "wholeness" are somehow involved. I always find myself suspecting that I am really dealing with religion and not politics when I am in contact with these issues.

For this reason, then, I am inclined to believe that this "spiritualization" of public life, which at first sight might seem most attractive, is not modeled upon the wide varieties of "spiritualities" within Christendom, but rather on the classic "heresies," practically all of

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