

Books

The New Totalitarians by Roland Huntford

(Stein & Day; 354 pp.; \$10.00)

Dennis Hale

One of the least edifying but most persistent of the controversies which animate American life is the one about "freedom vs. planning," or Can Democracy Survive the Age of Controls? It is the one lecture topic equally comfortable at a Rotary Club luncheon and an ADA meeting, and that alone should suggest a certain fickleness about the issue itself. Freedom is menaced by a phantom as vaporous as freedom itself.

How could it be otherwise in a society in which freedom includes the freedom to think as well as the freedom not to think, the freedom to do good as well as evil, the freedom to succeed as well as fail? For most Americans freedom amounts to the average of these opposites: being left alone, especially by the political system, by the community, by one's fellows. That condition, however, requires controls, mechanisms designed to separate and keep apart things which might normally come together, and those controls require force for their maintenance.

Thus the paradox, and one reason for the fuzziness of the argument: Each freedom demands the controls that maintain it but denounces the controls supporting other freedoms. Standard Oil demands the elaborate set of controls that permit it to pollute the air, while resisting the controls that would allow me the freedom to breathe. I demand the controls that keep me breathing but resist the controls that allow enterprising real-estate speculators the freedom to build condominiums wherever they please. So some peo-

ple join the Rotary and others join ADA, and from these vantage points they hurl marshmallows at one another.

Lately the argument has been made—by Charles Reich, among others—that there can be no freedom at all within the framework of an industrial society, because an industrial society is so complex that no one can be left alone within its borders. Everyone must be planned for, accounted for, interfered with, joined in a hopeless web of relationships to millions of others. Industry demands efficiency, and efficiency is the bane of spontaneous independence, and independence—well, independence is the same thing as freedom. Isn't it?

Many people think so, and Roland Huntford, who is British, is one of them. He has written a book inspired by Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* in which he argues that the totalitarian paradise of Huxley's imagination has come to pass in Sweden. Huntford is saddened by the extent to which Sweden has sacrificed personal liberty in order to enjoy an efficient Welfare State.

"Well," he says, in sum "the Swedes eat well, but they are not free." To which his ADA counterpart would respond: "OK, so they're not free, but they don't starve. Come to America and see an unplanned society: Lots of freedom, but no pretty sight." And Huntford, who is an even-tempered man and no apologist for the Right, would probably only shake his head sadly and say, "I know, I know." And so say millions of Americans caught on the

same dilemma. "How can you be free and still have wage and price controls?"

Forget about the word "totalitarian" in the title. There is no coherent theory of totalitarianism worked out here, and on the evidence presented the Swedes are not governed by totalitarians. They are governed instead by housing-project liberals, social democrats of the sort one occasionally meets in America who believe that politics are a fairy tale invented by people who do not understand economics. Apparatchiks run everything, from the housing industry to the textbook publishers, from the labor unions to the major industries, from the church to the contraceptive companies. The few independent institutions are being firmly harassed into either state control or obsolescence. What the State does not own, it controls indirectly. Those not directly employed by the government find themselves under its indirect supervision through their membership in official "collectives," such as the Apothecaries' Society, the University Graduates' Central Organization, the House-Owners' Association, the Tenants' Association, and so forth, all of them run according to the strict hierarchic principles of Benito Mussolini and the Socialist Workers Party. Locals elect regions elect nationals. The national legislature is powerless, and all government business is conducted by an army of bureaucrats, who are in turn responsible only to the organizations behind the party in power—the Trade Union Confederation under a Social Democratic regime, the Employers' Confederation under the Conservatives.

It hardly matters, though, who runs the government. So conformist are the Swedes, Huntford says, that there is virtually no difference between the ostensible right and left of Swedish opinion. Whether Sweden is *actually* like this or not is hard to say. Huntford betrays from time to time a dislike for the Swedes so intense that his conclusions must probably be discounted by at least 25 per cent. His explanation of why

the Swedes prefer this kind of society—a national-character argument that goes back to the Middle Ages for an answer—is not very convincing. But this is still a useful book for what it says between the lines about that old controversy over freedom and planning.

Sweden has few of the characteristics usually thought necessary for the growth of tyranny. A small country with a low population density, it has no minorities to oppress; it is not menaced by foreign enemies; it is not poor and is without serious class conflict so far; it has no revanchist ambitions; and it has no internal violence of any consequence. It is, in fact, a small, quiet, civilized country.

What it does not have—and this is what matters—is a political life. For whatever reason, Sweden never developed a tradition of citizenship that included political participation, and it entered the twentieth century peculiarly ill-adapted to the strains of industrial life. Its only political tradition has been the civil service and the dutiful subject; its only political animal has been the bureaucrat, the state functionary, the official. No party leaders, no union chiefs, no revolutionaries, no charismatic leaders, no martyrs, no professional politicians. The way up the social ladder was via the civil service; the legislature was a dead end.

This is the situation Huntford describes, although he does not explain how it came about. But that is not important at the moment: The important point is that Sweden arrived at its present state of servitude gradually, with no bloodshed and none of the usual trappings of oppression. It is simply a very *orderly* place, where plans are made in quiet offices and carried out by earnest men and women who have only good in their hearts, and the Swedes are polite enough to let them work without interference. A very modern form of tyranny, and one Americans should pay attention to.

Here is an example of how things are managed in Sweden. Some years ago the Social Democratic government decided that it was better for

people to live in cities than in small towns. Small towns were provincial places, after all, where the level of culture was thought to be woefully low. So the government manufactured a housing crisis. Old homes in small towns, which could easily be renovated, were allowed to decay by the simple expedient of not giving their owners home-improvement loans. (The government runs the banks.) Then construction companies (ostensibly independent, but in fact tied directly to the lending policies of the banks) were given credit to build only in cities, and then only to build certain types of homes: housing projects, in fact. (Does this begin to sound familiar?) Hey presto! A major population shift was observed in the making, and the census takers were able to discern in the statistics a major preference for living in cities.

But then a strange thing happened. People began leaping from the roofs of these projects at an alarming rate. They also began to drink too much, get divorced more readily, and lose control of their children, who took to beating one another in the courtyards. So a study was commissioned, and it was found that people become disoriented in housing projects of a certain size and, like rats in a psych experiment, develop classic forms of antisocial behavior. (Familiar?) So the government started building smaller housing projects, entire towns of housing projects, four families to a house, with winding roads that pleased the eye, sculptured landscapes, community playgrounds and industries conveniently nearby. Little instant suburbs, created *ex nihilo*, run by the government as modern versions of the company town. It remains to be seen what forms of behavior will emerge from these new towns. It

is not likely that they will be any more political than the old forms. Which is, perhaps, the way it was intended.

It should be evident by now that there is a certain fundamental similarity between Sweden and the United States. The hand of government is often less visible here than in Sweden, but that is not, in most cases, an important difference. Or to put it another way, government's power is dealt out to various (equally hidden) private institutions, whose power in turn becomes visible only as a *fait accompli*. Suddenly where there was once a field there is a "town." But it is not quite a town, because it has no government, no organic political life of its own. It is that strange hybrid known as the "subdivision," which is in fact the American contribution to the science of "new towns." Sometimes these places are called "bedroom suburbs," an unconsciously apt description: for the citizens of these towns are asleep. And as in Sweden—and as in many other areas of American life—these places grew and became public fact without the slightest volition from ordinary citizens, whose movements to and fro across the landscape were planned years in advance of the moves themselves by men they will never meet or know.

Of course America is a planned society, which is why the planning controversy is so unsatisfying. We have, it is true, a different form of planning than is found in Sweden. Perhaps it is unique to America: a combination of public and private planning that is neither truly public (in that citizens rarely have any influence upon it) nor truly private (in that it directly affects public things). Nor is this American form of planning a tool of one faction of opinion only. As in Sweden it enjoys the enthusiastic (if not quite conscious) support of both conservatives and liberals. General Motors has its internal combustion engine. The City of New York has its Forest Hills Housing Development. We are called upon to suffer both gladly; we are seldom called upon to do

Coming Soon

RUBEM ALVES

"Christ Beyond Marxism"

anything more active than that.

The tyranny of the future (and not the distant future, either) will arise in the vacuum left by the destruction of public political life, a destruction that is proceeding apace in the United States, as it already has in Sweden, in the Soviet Union and in many other places as well. Its harbinger will be the destruction of political institutions and the growth, in their stead, of pseudo-institutions, transient assemblies of the temporarily committed, vicarious participation in the spectacle of political affairs by isolated millions of fragmented individuals.

The lesson of Huntford's book is that there is no remedy for this problem in *program*. All the panaceas struggling through Congress have already been tried in Sweden, and it is still a form of tyranny, albeit a well-fed one. If there is a menace to be read in Richard Nixon's victory at the polls, the desperation that produced it cannot be remedied by this or that program discovered by bright young men in a Senate office. The desperation comes from the conditions of political life itself, the prime condition being the shrinking of that life in the first place. It is well to remember the utter emptiness of a world without politics that comes through so forcefully in Orwell's *1984*:

It struck him that the truly characteristic thing about modern life was not its cruelty and insecurity, but simply its bareness, its dinginess, its listlessness. Life, if you looked about you, bore no resemblance not only to the lies that streamed out of the telescreens, but even to the ideals that the Party was trying to achieve. Great areas of it . . . were neutral and nonpolitical, a matter of slogging through dreary jobs, fighting for a place on the Tube, darning a worn-out sock, cadging a saccharine tablet, saving a cigarette end.

This is the life of millions of Americans—although, with affluence, they watch the telescreen more and darn socks less. Otherwise that description comes much too close for comfort.

The American Way of Violence

by Alphonso Pinkney

(Random House; 240 pp.; \$7.95)

Violence: The Crisis of American Confidence

edited by Hugh Davis Graham

(Johns Hopkins University Press; 180 pp.; \$8.50)

Paul M. Thompson

Talk to any American about social and political life and the discussion will come around to violence. In an affluent suburb, Vietnam or repression are the most frequent examples given; in the ghettos, violence by police and in prisons; in decaying ethnic wards, violence on the campuses and in the streets. Indeed, violence has become a masterword in our public life and a political institution in its own right. Educators and experts are given funds to study it; politicians exploit it as a salient issue; motion picture executives make it their stock in trade. And the lonely figures like Oswald, Ray, Sirhan and Bremer use it for their own tangled purposes, so much so that assassinations threaten to become, like presidential elections, a quadrennial feature of American politics.

According to Alphonso Pinkney this is not at all new; America had a violent past which has created a violent present which, in turn, will create a violent future. Of course Pinkney has no trouble finding the "evidence" to support his thesis; only a bit more effort and he might have written a book entitled "The Human Way of Violence," beginning with Cain and Abel. Violence has indeed always been with us, but that hardly accounts for the differences in its extent, in the means by which it is expressed, in our fascination with it or, most important, in the degree to which it is regarded as legitimate. Pinkney's "historical" method—however justified his anger

at American atrocities past and present—reflects more than poetic license in the selection of data.

For example, in discussing lynchings, Pinkney writes that

In 1964, while dragging the Mississippi River for the bodies of three Civil Rights workers who had disappeared and who were later discovered to have been murdered, the searchers discovered the mutilated bodies of two black men. *It was not known how they met death and there is every probability that they were lynched* [emphasis added].

Perhaps Pinkney knows more than appears in this paragraph. But a human being can be murdered or mutilated in a variety of ways (most of which Pinkney discusses in his book). The "probability" that the two victims were lynched is, as far as the reader can see, Pinkney's own invention, and the argument is only an instance (if one of the more defensible) of the author's assertion of causal relationships which are neither causal nor related.

Violence: The Crisis of American Confidence is quite a different book, reproducing the papers of twelve participants in a 1970 Johns Hopkins seminar on violence. It attempts, we are told, to gather "noted authorities on the origin and control of American violence" in the quest for definitive analysis. These "authorities" include David Brinkley and Herbert G. Klein, one of Mr. Nixon's spokesmen, which helps make