The Fatal Assumptions of Social Therapy

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Since time immemorial men have believed in an inner spiritual core of the human personality. All primitive religions hold that man is inhabited by a spirit, however defined. The higher religions claim that man has a soul, that the spiritual nature is the true self, of which the body is a vessel. Since the seventeenth century these notions have been subjected to ever-increasing attacks. The critics of conventional morality include materialists of many different persuasions. However much they differ among themselves, they hold certain principles in common. The universe is explicable only in terms of matter and motion. All physical processes must be explained in material terms. Moral choices, based on Free Will, are illusory. Some materialists stress the role played by physical and chemical changes in the nervous system, genetic makeup: One’s hereditary endowment becomes one’s fate. Others emphasize the power of social conditioning through education or through the operation of the class struggle. To the materialist of either persuasion religion is an illusion, the product of an inferior genetic endowment, a psychological aberration, or the ideological superstructure of a particular social system.

Most modern materialists wish to improve or, indeed, to perfect mankind. They commonly look upon social actions as a form of social therapy. They differ in their respective methods, however. The genetic materialists seek to ameliorate humanity by selective breeding and by destroying those who are regarded as hereditarily impaired. The societal materialists seek a better world by some kind of social action, by revolutionary struggle, by eliminating those social classes that supposedly stand in the way of progress, or by manipulating man’s psyche according to a pattern considered socially desirable by the manipulator. The first variety, that is to say genetic materialism, is linked to totalitarianism of the Nazi variety. The second kind, societal materialism, mainly derives support from Marxist and quasi-Marxist movements. Both deny man’s ultimate power of moral choice. Both reject the traditional religions. Between them they have produced a degree of suffering and human degradation unparalleled in the history of humankind.

Hitler was the most influential of the genetic materialists. His doctrine assumed that the world’s most creative race consisted of blue-eyed, blond-haired Nordics, who formed the core of the German people. The Nordics incarnated the principle of light. The Jews, on the other hand, incarnated the principle of darkness. These two principles were alleged to be in a state of perpetual struggle. World War II represented simply the last battle between the two powers. In this final confrontation the Nordics must be strong, unyielding, and "hard," not merely against the enemy, but also against the mentally ill. Jews and the mentally impaired could not be converted or cured; they must be destroyed. Their elimination was envisaged as a form of social therapy, designed to prevent the "infection" of superior peoples by a tainted race.

The struggle against Jews (and other "inferior" races such as the Gypsies) logically went hand in hand with attempts to destroy the "shiftless" and the insane, Aryans though they might be. Because purges of such a kind were incompatible with Christianity, however interpreted, the Nazis, like the Communists, were determined to reduce, and ultimately to eliminate, the power of the churches, those harbingers of a decadent Judaic spirit.

Seen in retrospect, the Nazi interpretation of history has a lunatic quality. In its day, however, Nazism was eminently respectable in many intellectual circles. In 1933 Nazi physicians organized the New German Society of Psychotherapy, and soon afterwards Carl Gustav Jung, the celebrated Swiss psychiatrist, founder of analytical psychology, took over its presidency. Jung argued that "the well-known differences between Germanic and Jewish psychology should no longer be ignored"; that the Jews were cultural nomads, parasites on their "host nations"; and that the Jewish psyche was inferior to the Aryan soul, which was at once more barbarian and more creative than the Hebraic variety. Freud and his fellow Jews had no inkling of the true German folk soul. Nazism alone embodied the true spirit...
Given such assumptions among many of Germany's most distinguished intellectuals, terror was sure to follow. The Nazi murder campaign against the Jews is well known. Less widely publicized is the fact that the mass killings of Jews was preceded, and to some extent inspired, by the planned destruction of the mentally ill. The first gassings took place in December, 1939, or January, 1940, by the exhaust of internal combustion engines. Their victims were German lunatics, executed under a so-called euthanasia program. Nazi euthanasia experts likewise pioneered the means of disposal of victims, which were later used in concentration camps: Corpses were placed on conveyor belts and then entered a furnace, with the smoke from the crematorium chimneys visible for miles. Victims included both children and grown-ups, whose selection for murder was conducted on political as well as genetic principles. A concentration camp victim, a stoker by the name of Wolf Noack, born in Lodz, was thus adjudged to be incurable on the grounds that he was a "Germanophobe" and "a prominent Communist" as well as an "inveterate agitator." The physicians taking part in these murders were not necessarily sadists. One, Dr. Walter Schmidt, a leading official in the program and a conscientious man according to his own opinion, subjected his child patients to electric shocks, insulin shocks, "labor therapy," short-wave treatment, and other dubious forms of treatment. He killed his patients only when he could not cure them.

The technology of mass destruction was then transferred from the insane to the Jews. In the summer of 1941 the Nazi regime officially inaugurated its "final solution" for the Jews. Himmler consulted with the chief physician of the S.S., Dr. Ernst Grawitz, who advised the use of gas chambers, and this proposal was originally carried out with the help of euthanasia experts. The Nazi murder operations had no precedent in history in extent of destructiveness. The greatest part of European Jewry perished; so did many Gypsies who were exposed to the same form of "special treatment." Given Nazi assumptions of Jewish genetic inferiority, there were no attempts at "brainwashing" per se. Victims were subjected to a great variety of medical experiments, all of them incredibly brutal and more or less useless from the scientific standpoint. (Some prisoners were chilled; others were infected with a variety of fevers; still others were permanently sterilized, maimed by x-ray "treatment," or other forms of physical torture.) Concentration camp victims were collectively abased so as to make them more tractable and less apt to resist or, at its worst, to reduce camp inmates to a condition of helpless apathy.

Neither did the churches escape the Führer's wrath. Nazi ideologists differed somewhat on their assessment of Christianity. The purists believed that the faith of Jesus embodied a slave morality. Eclectics like Rosenberg considered Jesus to be an Aryan whose teachings had been corrupted by the Jews. Initially the Nazi propaganda regarding the churches was somewhat muted; after the beginning of the war, however, the anti-Christian orientation of the regime became more and more strident. Christianity, supposedly a superstition inimical to the common good, became one of Himmler's bêtes noires. The total number of clergymen sent to concentration camps has been placed at between 4,000 and 5,500. (The majority were of the so-called Confessional Church.) In addition the Nazis persecuted sectarians whose religion prevented them from serving in the armed forces. The most prominent of these were the Jehovah's Witnesses, who were subjected to savage brutalities to break their will and to induce them to serve in the army. Psychologically, however, the Nazis were never quite equal to the challenge offered by the Witnesses; Rudolph Höss, commandant of Auschwitz, even called upon his own S.S. men to emulate the Witnesses' "fanaticism" in defense of their chosen faith.

The Soviet Union under Stalin also practiced mass murder as a form of social therapy. Stalin liquidated millions on the grounds that they were class enemies, saboteurs, spies, religious "obscurantists," deviationists, enemies of the Party or the state—
the reasons given did not matter a great deal. Liquidations were disguised as a form of "reeducation." The wrath of the state was directed against entire social groups (such as independent farmers); the object of the liquidations was not merely punitive but prophylactic. The so-called kulaks, for instance, were killed, not because of any particular crimes laid at the door of individuals, but because of what they might do in the future.

Mass terror has since abated in the Soviet Union (although it continues in Communist countries, such as Cambodia, where killing has become a way of life). The Soviet state is now apt to rely on coercion of a more indirect kind. The Soviet state relies now upon psychiatry as a political weapon to a much greater extent than before. Opponents of the regime are liable to be committed to lunatic asylums; their number reportedly amounts to many thousands. According to Vladimir Bukovsky, a recent victim of political psychiatry, the system has many advantages from the rulers' standpoint. Mental patients have absolutely no rights. Protests made by a patient are easily discredited on the grounds that the protestor is mentally sick. Dissidents confined to asylums are caught up in an insoluble dilemma. Bukovsky notes: "If you recant, they say it proves that he was crazy. If you refuse to recant, and protest, they say that it proves he is crazy." The ordinary Soviet citizen will be less inclined to pay attention to the supposed ravings of a lunatic than to the protests of a political dissident. The Soviet Government, moreover, will appear in the light of benevolent parents, anxious to heal the sick, rather than as brutal tyrants. The ongoing campaigns against religion, especially against sectarians devoid of state recognition, can also be put in a better light. It is a form of social therapy, designed to rid the body politic of collective delusions, not straightforward persecution. In addition religious dissidents are subject to civil disabilities or imprisonment.

To recapitulate, Nazism and communism, despite their differences, have a surprising element in common. Both are based on philosophical assumptions that reduce or deny the freedom of moral choice. The Jews, according to Hitler, cannot choose to follow the path of virtue; as a race they are genetically programmed to do evil. Hence they have to be destroyed, not because they have transgressed against the law in any particular, but as a prophylactic measure. The kulaks, according to Stalin, were evil because of their class position; they had to be liquidated, not for any particular crimes they may or may not have committed, but to protect the Soviet state.

Both Nazism and communism depend on élites who profess to understand the hidden laws of history and can therefore guide the backward masses. Both look to a "New Heaven and New Earth," the Thousand-Year Reich, or the Classless Society. The pursuit of that end justifies every kind of atrocity. Both reject the traditional forms of religion wedded to beliefs in the immortality of the soul and the freedom of moral choice. Both use a wide armory of coercive measures, including psychiatric terror. Both have an explicitly "therapeutic" program for the societies under their respective sway. The Nazis strove for a truly "heavenly" Germany. The Soviets look to a society that will be cured finally of all its "internal contradictions."

It would be comforting to think that America, dedicated to constitutional rule, would be free of such ills. Our own society is indeed immeasurably superior in its ethical content to the dictatorships of Hitler or Stalin. Nevertheless the perils that have threatened Russia and Germany in the past have existed also within our own society, even if only in embryonic form. Americans have not liquidated entire races. (Even the Indian campaigns, however brutal, were waged against a real or supposed military opponent rather than against an assumed source of genetic pollution.) But America has produced its own forms of coercive social action. These are looked upon by their practitioners as a kind of social therapy, but in reality they may be social controls designed to keep poor people and deviants in their place. Eugenics, the drive for "mental health," and religious "deprogramming" have all been defended in the past as forms of social therapy. All three are subject to serious abuse.

The study of "eugenics," concerned with improving the inherited physical and mental characteristics of the race, became popular after World War I. Under the mantle of this supposed science Americans of reputedly
inferior genetic stock—drawn in fact from the ranks of the poor, especially the black poor—have in the past been subjected to a variety of brutal sanctions, including sterilization. Past academic orthodoxies, reflected in the magisterial language of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, approved of such measures to prevent "race deterioration," utilize humankind's "abundant opportunity for race improvement," provide "control of human material," and thereby advance racial evolution. (See the article on "Eugenics" in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 14th edition, 1926. Alexander, later Sir Alexander Carr-Saunders, author of this particular article, later became director of the London School of Economics and an internationally renowned expert on colonial education and demography.) The sterilization as well as segregation of the "mentally defective" became an acknowledged weapon in the struggle for racial betterment. By 1926 sterilization laws had been enacted in twenty-three out of forty-eight states of the USA; over six thousand operations had been performed, mostly on poor people, on the grounds that the victims of sterilization were genetically predestined to have "inferior" children.

The science of eugenics has since lost some of its former popularity. Eugenacists have shed some of their former confidence. The philosophical weaknesses inherent in genetic materialism are too evident, including the use of such question-begging terms as "shiftless," "asocial," or "inferior"—terms that disguise societal preferences in the fancy dress of a "scientific" terminology. Medical coercion, however, has been widely used in the realm of mental health. Its extent is not easy to document. The laws concerning the commitment of the allegedly insane are complex. By the middle of the last century Anglo-American statute law provided for a variety of procedures for the commitment of the mentally ill. The mandatory requirement of a jury trial, which had been incorporated in the statutes of many states in the last century, has been eliminated in all but two states.

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The very concept of "mental health," Szasz argues, is one that differs strikingly from the concept of physical health. In the case of a physical illness the patient experiences a deviation from the structural and functional integrity of his body, explicable in anatomical and physiological terms. "Mental illness," on the other hand, implies in fact a very different form of deviation, a divergence from the prevailing psycho-social and ethical norms. Yet the remedy is sought in terms of medical measures that are supposedly free from wide differences in ethical value. An Orthodox Catholic will consider Joan of Arc the recipient of a divine commission to save France. A traditional African village elder would have interpreted her mental state as a case of spirit-possession. A modern psychiatrist, on the other hand, might regard her as schizophrenic, or paranoid. None of these interpretations is "scientific" in the accepted sense. All three embody specific societal and ethical judgments. Behavior patterns that appear normal or even praiseworthy in one social setting become evidence of mental derangement in another.

To take another example, a traditional Shona villager living in Zimbabwe (Rhodesia) who practices traditional clan virtues at home would probably be regarded as mentally aberrant were he placed in the highly competitive, individualistic milieu of the American professional middle class. On the other hand, an ambitious American businessman placed among "backward" Shona tillers would probably be regarded as "sick" by his African neighbors.

In our own society, unlike that of the Shona, the "mentally sick" may be confined to asylums and subjected without their consent to a variety of treatments, including shock therapy or chemotherapy, that a patient might consider harmful or even counterproductive if he were consulted. The procedures for commitment differ widely but are based on the principle that the patient should constitute a danger to himself or to others, or that he is so sick that he cannot understand his condition. Unfortunately these criteria lack precision and embody concealed value judgments. Even if they are conscientiously applied—and they are sometimes used in a surprisingly cursory fashion—these criteria are not easily defined. Excessive leeway may be given to the administrative decisions of lawyers and psychiatrists. Commitment decisions, accordingly, may all too easily reflect the social values of a particular social stratum, that is to say, middle-class professionals. This can easily lead to anomalies. As Szasz points out, drunken drivers kill many more people than persons suffering from paranoid delusions. Yet people labeled paranoid are readily committed, whereas drunken drivers are not. The distinction made between the two rests on societal preferences, not on objective danger they pose to their environment.

Again, the "mentally sick" stand in a peculiar category that sharply distinguishes them from other patients. Unlike other sick people, mental patients may be treated without their own consent. Alone among sick people they suffer from disabilities whose diagnosis and prognosis lack the rigorous standards accepted for diseases such as malaria or tuberculosis. Hence the practice of committing patients to mental hospitals without their consent obviously may lead to abuses. (The burden of proving "sanity" is on the patient.) The abuse of false commitment is apt to fall on the elderly and on the poor, so that commitment may operate as a form of social constraint. According to the *New York Times* (July 27, 1960), an elderly registered nurse was held for four years in a county mental health institution, having been admitted while suffering from a severe attack of asthma. The patient was soon adjudged entirely sane by the medical center staff. But she continued to be held because she had no relatives and because the officials feared she would

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become a public charge. While a patient at the hospital she continued to perform without pay the duties of a registered nurse.

Compulsory commitment without the patient’s consent can also be used as a political weapon. After World War II, for instance, Ezra Pound, having been accused of treason, was declared insane and incarcerated for thirteen years in a mental hospital instead of being allowed to stand trial for his offense. General Edwin Walker, a militant segregationist, was involuntarily hospitalized to determine his sanity. I happen to believe that Walker was a fanatic and Pound was a traitor, but even fanatics and traitors should be entitled to due process rather than ordeal by therapy.

There are other forms of social manipulation using psychological tools. Whereas psychiatric commitment may serve as a concealed form of social manipulation, "deprogramming"—now happily less common than in the past—has become an overt means of controlling the ideological deviant. A new industry has grown up whereby "deprogrammers" kidnap members of dissident sects such as the Hare Krishna movement, the Unification Church, or the Children of God. American deprogrammers do not use the brutal methods that regimes have used against, say, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, but their methods can still be harsh enough.

Adult believers, men and women who have attained the legal age of majority, are kidnapped on their parents' behalf in return for substantial fees. The victims are then subjected to insults, sleep deprivation, personal humiliation, extended lectures, even physical violence, until they recant their beliefs. Deprogrammers defend their activities on the grounds that young Americans should be protected against weird "cults" that exploit the believers' credulity for political or financial reasons.

As much as one opposes some or all of these movements, under the U.S. Constitution adult believers have freedom of choice. The deprogrammers and their defenders have not so far proposed the criteria that distinguish an illegitimate "cult" from legitimate religion whose exercise is guaranteed by the Bill of Rights. As a matter of fact, deprogramming has recently been extended to members of more traditional movements. For instance, the Reverend Walter Robert Taylor, a monk of the Old Catholic Church, was said to have been abducted from an Oklahoma City monastery, "deprogrammed," and placed under the temporary guardianship of his father through a court order. The order was later declared invalid. Debby Dudgeon, a twenty-three-year-old woman, said she had been taken from a Roman Catholic community in Orangeville, Ontario, and subjected to fourteen hours of deprogramming by a team.

The courts and public opinion have, until now, been fairly lenient toward deprogrammers. It would seem that deprogramming does not constitute a significant problem in numerical terms. Deprogrammers operate on behalf of persons closely related to the deprogrammer's victim. Hence "deprogramming," some argue, can be justly regarded as a family matter. But these arguments ignore the power of precedent, the possibility that deprogramming might be extended, and the inherent threat to religious liberty. The depogrammers assume, like totalitarians of other stripes, that their victims are incapable of making rational choices of a moral kind, based on Free Will decisions.

In sum the deprogrammers share certain fundamental assumptions with other movements that interpret human nature in an essentially manipulative manner. Here again a self-chosen elite assumes the task of creating a "New Man." The power of the state, or the power delegated by the state, is to be used for "therapeutic" objects. (Even the Jews were not officially liquidated but were exposed to "special treatment," Sonderbehandlung.) The confusion between the sick, the social deviants, and the criminals is both unfortunate and dangerous. As Samuel Butler put it a century ago, if we treat criminals as sick people, we shall end up by treating the sick as criminals.

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