

Reconstruction of a conversation between HF and GR  
Henry Flynt

draft 1, June 28, 1980

HF: Even the small number of people whom we consider to be exceptionally aware are helpless, incompetent, and defeated relative to what we want. They would say that scientific technology is dehumanizing; but they never dreamed that anyone would challenge scientific technology intellectually, or would try to reconstitute the technological modality. They accept the traditional limitation of philosophy to the task of providing passive interpretations of the status quo. [The most that some hope for is to attain private internal pleasure by mind games or meditation exercises; they consider everybody but themselves to be philistines, and they never wanted to make a difference to the philistines or to influence the philistines in the first place.] The exceptionally aware people know that their world is painful, that most of the time they have to do things which are corrosive to themselves. But they do not imagine that they can counteract this situation. They can only (as it were) lie in the ditch and wait for intellectual fashion in the world around them to change and to bring forth a social movement which will rescue them.

GR: What has happened to these people in their lives, in their childhood, to make them defeated? What has happened to cause them to give up on the task we are attempting? Why are we different from them or vice versa? How can they see the latest Village Voice and not sense that "hip public discourse" has become dangerously cynical, dangerously bankrupt?

HF: The situation itself may be one in which your questions do not make sense. What if the situation is not so much that the aware people are abnormally impaired, but that we have qualities which nobody can routinely be expected to have? In the vernacular, you seem to be asking "Why isn't everybody a genius?" --and that question is confused in regard to which expectations are routine. It is like asking "Why don't miracles happen all the time?" It doesn't make sense to ask "Why don't miracles happen all the time?" when it is amazing that a miracle happens even once. It doesn't make sense to ask for the efficient causes of the inability of the majority of people to work miracles. Efficient causation may not even be the appropriate mode of explanation. The "best" mode of explanation may be one in which you and I are "miraculous" junctures at which the future invades the present and redirects the present. ("The future causing the past") This is the way matters may look after the present episodes are played out.

HF: In addition to being themselves defeated, some of the "more aware" people resent us and what we are doing. They say that we are no better than paranoids; that we are egomaniacs; that we are arrogant and are trying to play God. They say that we should be humble before the status quo. [We should not try to make a difference to other people.] We should (as it were) lie in the ditch and wait for the rest of the world to change and thereby rescue us. We should not pursue the rescue of ourselves without a license, without validation as great thinkers by the intellectual establishment.

There is also an overlap between the helplessness of some of the "more aware" people and their resentment of us. The positive, programmatic content of our discussion goes right by their ears, as it were. They aren't even aware of our program, perhaps because they are certain it is impossible. They charge that our discourse is no more than bird-squawking. All the more, then, do they resent that we meet and talk for hours and think that we know what we are doing. They charge that we are a bunch of paranoids.

GR: If they call us megalomaniacs because we sense that the status quo is dangerously bankrupt, and because we propose to rescue ourselves without a license, they are displaying a profound contempt for themselves. They are slaves priding themselves on their enslavement. I do not consider myself a genius performing miracles. [What follows is expressed as an apologia for "megalomania," offered to the aware people.] I have repeatedly experienced pain, and inability to continue living in the same way, because the roles and indoctrination imposed on me produce conflict within themselves and do not fit me (are not conformable with me). I am not a machine; I cannot continue living in the same way when imposed roles and indoctrination lacerate my morale. These experiences have compelled me to acknowledge my own consciousness; and to acknowledge that there is a potential of who I am which is being stifled from without (that I have an individuality or possibilities which are thus being stifled). The incompatibility between the roles and indoctrination, and the potential of who I am, is so great that the foremost issue in my life becomes the issue of how it is possible to go on living. When this distinct potential of what I am is thus evoked, I affirm it; I do not crush it. I respect my consciousness. Thus I cannot mindlessly submit to corrosive imposed roles and indoctrination. I don't concede that I'm incapable of rescuing myself. I have to create the culture, not concede that the culture creates me.

I reject the charge that this self-assertion is megalomania and an attempt to play God. I reject the notion that I am a genius working miracles. My definition of being "human" is to have respect for the potential of what you are, as evoked in conflict with roles and indoctrination imposed on you; and to seek to create the culture. If you are telling me that it is an impossibility for most people to respect their own consciousness--and to resist lacerating roles and indoctrination imposed from without--then you are telling me that most people on this earth are subhuman. You are telling me that it is incredible that human existence would occur even once. I do think that the people who are calling me a megalomaniac should be able to do as I do. I haven't given up in advance on rescuing myself: why should everybody else give up? I do not consider it reasonable that people should have to lie helpless until the world changes and rescues them. I do not consider it reasonable that this self-assertion should be impossible for all but two or three geniuses. What you call megalomania and playing God is something I ask from all of you. If you do not shoulder this burden, you are less than human.

HF: You have brought out a confrontation of incomparable standpoints as between us and the ineffectual "aware" people. They say this self-assertion is impossible; you expect it from everyone. Each standpoint is plausible to itself. Neither can justify itself to the other.

HF: an interpretation of GR's statement

Some of the "more aware" people are waiting until the world rescues them or else they die--whichever happens first. Their actions manifest the attitude that they are entirely made by the culture. One is supposed to wait until a new culture is handed to oneself; then one is supposed to accept it. One is supposed to wait until fashion does the work, until the Village Voice tells one in the front-page article what the new culture is. These "aware" people call us egomaniacs because we are making a new culture without a license from the intellectual authorities. What does it mean when the "aware" people abdicate responsibility to this degree?

Also there is an entire generation of new intellectual publicists associated with the phenomenon of fake sophistication: from Barthes, Derrida, and Deleuze to Roszak and Toffler to the Village Voice and CoEvolution. The new publicist thrives in an environment in which all of the ideas under consideration are known to be fads. If we would say to a new publicist "Let's be serious," he would say "What for?" He enjoys himself most when he deals in ideas which he knows are idiotic and will be forgotten tomorrow. What gives him pleasure is consciously to play with trash. What does it say about a society when its visible intellegentsia is willfully playing with trash? What does it say about a society when its visible intellectual activity is carried on by people who are bopping from one hoax to another and who tell you that they are doing so? The audience for the new publicists believes that what it wants and deserves, in matters of life and death, is to be hustled. Somehow these people have foregone the most important aspect of their humanness; they have foregone all respect for their consciousness.

It has been said that people are forced by society to abdicate responsibility and to disrespect their consciousness. But this explanation is not sufficient. GR was regimented; but the effect of the regimentation was not coherent. Perhaps the regimentation was meant to produce a satisfied mediocrity. But what it actually did was to thrust GR into new dilemmas. The regimentation thus produced a malcontent. In other words, it evoked a divergence between the norms being imposed and a self which did not fit those norms. When GR's sense of self was thus evoked, his response was to affirm that sense of self--to respect his own consciousness.

How can anyone exist without having the experience of a divergence between the regimentation and one's sense of self? How can anyone exist without having the experience which made GR a malcontent and a "megalomaniac"? Are the "aware" people totally comfortable in the roles and indoctrination which have been imposed on them? No. Does the regimentation evoke in the aware people a sense of self, a sense of the "potential of who I am" which does not fit the roles and the indoctrination? Yes, perhaps. After all, the visible cultural processes are reaching such a level of cynicism about themselves --such an acknowledgment of bankruptcy--that it is unlikely that anyone could experience a perfect compatibility between indoctrination and self. (Again, what is happening with the audience for the new intellectual publicists?\*) Why, then, do the "aware" people not affirm and respect that sense of self? Why do they pride themselves on their enslavement?

\*They are throwing themselves away.

The awakening to which GR refers may be expressed in another way. How is morale possible? How is morale sustained? That is what GR means by asking how it is possible to live. To say that you are alive means that you are possibility, you are no thing, your self is pending—yet at the same time that you are in a milieu of imposed roles and indoctrination. Your morale is the relation between your sense of self and the behavior which the milieu expects from you. How does your morale emerge and evolve? How are you convinced that it is worthwhile to arise in the morning? How are the "hip" people convinced to conform every day to their roles as professionals and official paid publicists? GR is addressing people directly in respect to what it means to be alive—directly in respect to how morale is possible. That is the juncture at which one is human, the juncture at which living takes place.

To exist as a human being means also that one's consciousness as possibility unfolds in the milieu of a history and a culture. The proposal may be made to limit our attention to consciousness as pure possibility and to disregard culture and history. But such an approach would be like a picture with a foreground and no background. To live is not a choice between consciousness as pure possibility or being made by culture and history; it is the relationship between them. There is no life without this relationship.

These remarks are supported by our recent observations concerning the capacity of non-theoretical vehicles to transmit cultural values: psychedelic drugs, sex, "beat music," etc. The way in which these "visceral experiences" are apprehended by a given individual is overwhelmingly determined by that individual's relation to the social psychology of the time. Realms of experience which are supposedly autonomous are in fact apprehended in terms of the prevailing social psychology—in terms engendered by the interpersonal economic relationships, the technological modality, the prevailing ideology, etc. Given that the social psychology of the time is so much more compelling than supposedly autonomous realms of experience, it is out of the question to rescue oneself independently of the condition of other people. A process which genuinely rescues oneself or improves oneself must eventually get involved with the condition of other people, because other people determine the extent to which vehicles that ennoble oneself can be implemented.

Thus, it is necessary to discover how culture functions in order to master its influence on oneself and in order to become a culture-maker. The culture has a dimension supplied by my acquiescence and collaboration; if I withdraw that acquiescence and collaboration, I affect the culture differently.

Yet the "aware" people assume that they are entirely made by the culture. They assume that the culture has completely foreclosed and delimited their possibilities—so that we are egomaniacs when we try to make culture (without official accreditation).

GR: Supplementary generalities

Man's humanity is possibility rooted in a concrete situation. We apprehend this possibility in the flow of time. The center of consciousness is empty; it contains no thing. It is pure consciousness as possibility. The vehicle of that experience is time as it is humanly felt, as possibility in the future and its memory in the past. But further, consciousness as possibility (no-thingness) is in a complete cultural-historical situation. How is human life possible? All human life is Man and his circumstances: the relation between history-culture (the shared ontology) and human consciousness as possibility. Being is the medium in which this relation exists. "Reality" is the relation between consciousness as possibility, and the cultural-historical process.

To be human is to be no thing: my self is not a thing. In regard to the controversies over subject/object estrangement, "objectivists" want to conceive of consciousness as a thing which is out there, and "subjectivists" want to conceive of consciousness as a thing which is in here--whereas it is no thing at all. Western philosophy unfolds on an incorrect level, conceiving of ourselves as things. To be human, you must understand that your self is not a thing. You must potentiate that understanding by respecting your consciousness. I affirm the potential of who I am, my sense of self. Or better, in place of my ego, let us speak of the evolution of potentiality, the possibility of possibility. I further understand that I can act and that my being is involved and defined in my action. Action is what it means to be human.

When you give up the imposed roles and indoctrination, then it becomes impossible to live in the old way; and the rest of your life is spent answering the question "How is human life possible?" Your life has become an issue in your life. Respect for my own consciousness means not categorizing my consciousness in accord with imposed indoctrination. Given the emergence of the potential of who I am in contradistinction to corroding regimentation, I must respect my consciousness if I am to undo the regimentation. I propose to discover why and how I am being regimented, and how I can prevent it by becoming a culture-maker. It is this undertaking, this seriousness about gaining comprehension of what is happening in my milieu, which is called arrogance and megalomania. I am not willing to disavow the potential of who I am. I do not disavow the product of my consciousness, or deny its legitimacy. What is more, I do not have to justify it by defining myself in categorizations supplied by the prevailing or imposed indoctrination. I theoretically have an existence independent of the culture. The culture doesn't make me; I make the culture. My life is the interrelation between me as consciousness and the culture. If being human is being possible, then self-respect involves letting myself be possible, not curtailing possibilities as happens when you accept a categorization in which the culture places you. The way I understand myself necessarily defines the world that I live in also.