Comment

On "Behaviorism Is Also a Humanisim," by John McLeish, in *CJE*, vol. 1, no. 4 (1976). Comment by C. C. Anderson, University of Alberta.

BEHAVIORISM IS ALIVE AND WELL IN THE NORTH AMERICAN CONTINENT

If only because ink is too precious to spill on the apparently endless altercation between proponents of behavioristic and cognitive representations of human responses, I shall assume that McLeish's (1976) preference for the Skinnerian variant of behaviorism is a correct scientific approach and confine my criticisms to an implicit assumption and an explicit assertion in his paper.

Is Behaviorism under Siege?

This is an assumption implicit in McLeish's (1976, p. 80) account and very explicit in a recent piece by Skinner (1975) himself who asks, "Why has it been so difficult to be scientific about human behavior?" (p. 42).

My answer takes the form of a paradox: it has been difficult because it has been easy. Throughout the recorded history of more complex societies, the rich and powerful have always benefited at the expense of commonplace people whom they have controlled by any handy devices, such as armed force and religion. The various industrial revolutions have made less salient this division into rich and poor. This has occurred through assimilation into the former category of enterprising and often unscrupulous men, increasingly with the technological training appropriate for advancement in an industrial society, and through the increasing complexity of an economic system in which huge corporations, designed to enlarge and secure their profits by fixing prices, began to emerge in every industry in the last three decades of the nineteenth century (Baran & Sweezy, 1966, pp. 15–20). Rude people label the latter state of business affairs "monopoly capitalism"; more refined tastes prefer Galbraith's (1975) euphemism, the "planning system." Regardless of the nomenclature selected, a state of intellectual confusion about class structure was created and still exists (Petras & Rhodes, 1976, pp. 40–41).

The "aversive" social and economic consequences of this business practice have been described elsewhere (Baran & Sweezy, 1966, p. 82) and continue

to plague us (Gonick, 1975; Sampson, 1976), but none of Skinner's (1976) "countercontrols," which are supposed to appear when "control is immediately aversive" (p. 214), has been effective or has lasted for long because the representatives of the ruling elite have controlled political parties, all sorts of media, and the management of diversionary fun and games.

The control of information – response probabilities, in the usage preferred by Skinner (1976, p. 158) – by way of political parties and the news media puts most people in a rat-like situation in which they have no degrees of freedom. Skinner's rats could have died of starvation; that they chose to press the lever and survive should surprise no one. Certainly human beings have an option not available to the starved rats; they may refuse to participate in the game. For example, in the 1976 United States presidential election, despite some frenetic attempts by the media to put life into the campaign, Carter was supported by 27% of the eligible voters, Ford by 26%, and 47% stayed at home (Barone, 1976, p. 37). However, selection of the third option is a futile gesture because it does not lessen the political and economic control exercised by the beneficiaries of the economic system whose representatives, installed in major institutions, are not about to divulge information concerning their privileged position to the public at large. The huge commercial television networks and local affiliates do not regard news as profitable because it attracts fewer advertising sponsors than entertainment programs (Epstein, 1974, pp. 56–57). Superficial information is provided in a dramatic form which suits the taste of an audience consisting of a disproportionately high percentage of children and of adults with fewer than the average years of formal schooling (ibid., pp. 4–5).

Other mass media pursue the same important functions of advertising and entertainment, serious information being slanted in favor of the established order. Anti-establishment news is usually ignored, buried beyond the purview of the masses; or, if it cannot be ignored – as is the case with the energy crisis – it will be written off as unimportant or temporary, or treated as the hysterical outburst of unqualified cranks. There is bias in the selection of news, photographs, and captions, and of words which support establishment priorities. The front page may carry a report about postmen striking for a few cents more an hour, with an editorial about the inflationary impact of such a demand. On the same front page there may be a less salient report, carried without comment, that a large pulp-and-paper firm has been awarded a windfall grant of several million dollars to build a plant on a site where the intention had always been to place it.

These points have been documented by Cirino (1971), who chooses a passage from Laski to describe the cumulative and restricting effect of these biases on the individual.

> The real power of the press (and radio and television) comes from the effect of its continuous repetition of an attitude reflected in facts which its readers have no power to check, or by its ability to surround those facts by an environment of suggestion which, often half-consciously, seeps its way into the mind of the reader and forms his premises for him without his even being aware that they are really prejudices to which he has scarcely given a moment of thought. (Quoted in Cirino, 1971, p. 135)

Accordingly, the vast majority of people are effectively in the position of Skinner's rat; their ignorance has left them vulnerable to manipulation by people with special skills, such as physicians who perform expensive but unnecessary operations, lawyers whose expensive stamp of approval is required for almost any conventional transaction, bankers who thrive on providing credit at interest rates much higher than those attached to savings accounts – and interest-free chequing accounts and other swindles perpetrated against everybody who is innocent about financial matters – and those involved in making and selling automobiles whose opportunities for relieving the average buyer of his money are so great that "he (the average man) has no choice at all" (Hapgood, 1975, p. 151). An innocent at home, he leaves it to the expert who tells him what is to be done at what cost and even how efficiently (ibid., p. 13). When he does not buy the gadgets, he still must pay to some extent for their advertising on "free" television and radio (ibid., p. 14).

If Skinner (1976) is correct, this "aversive control" (p. 214) would have resulted in such a "current threat to the species" (p. 220) that a counter-control – a revolution, a strike, a student protest (p. 209) – is so unrealistic that, like Bellamy, he must shelve the notion of a countercontrol, replacing it with the description of an idyllic future. "He will produce what he and others need most effectively and least aversively if incentive conditions are such that he works carefully and industriously and is reinforced by what he does" (p. 221).

Skinner's main problem is that he consistently ignores the impact on individuals of a powerful corporate economy. For example, his discussion of a culture as a "set of contingencies of reinforcement maintained by a group, possibly formulated in rules of law" (p. 223) is based on primitive cultures with simple economies tied to basic needs, the satisfaction of which helps their members to survive. "What is good for the individual is what promotes his well-being. What is good for a culture is what permits it to solve its problems" (p. 226).

However, what is good for a corporate economy may be inimical to cultures and may be good only for a certain privileged, hidden, and powerful group of people. "Among the industrialized . . . countries, the U.S. possesses one of the highest rates of unemployment and lowest degree of social services while providing the biggest subsidies to privately controlled research and development" (Petras & Rhodes, 1976, p. 25). Only a

few ineffective groups complain about this dangerous situation, that is, act, in Skinner's (1976) words, "to restrain those who . . . take more than their share of available goods, or who foul the world in which we live" (p. 219). Against this state of affairs the masses, still very ignorant, are not uniting (Petras & Rhodes, 1976, p. 40).

The Need for Fantasy

There is another problem which also explains the absence of any effective countercontrol. It is the need of most normal individuals for fantasies of every kind. Recognized by Freud (1957, p. 21) as a necessary source of gratification by means of which cultural and natural restrictions are made endurable, they are written off by Skinner (1976, p. 92) as remembered pictures of events. McLeish's (1976) response is to treat "self-actualization" as "an anarchist's dream, a fantasy if you will" (p. 80), and this is the second count against him. Admittedly it is true that "self-fulfilment" is consistent with anarchism (Wolff, 1970, p. 72) and that some anarchists like the late Paul Goodman made one with self-fulfilment theorists. Nevertheless, whereas anarchists have always favored action of some sort against the state, self-fulfilment theorists like Rogers (1970), seeing the solution to human problems in psychological terms, regard the therapist as the hope of the future.

The words "dream" and "fantasy" can readily be applied to Rogers (1970), who wrote the following during the late 1960s. "When material needs are largely satisfied, as they tend to be for many in this affluent society, individuals are turning to the psychological world, groping for a greater degree of authenticity and fulfillment" (p. 162). Accordingly, the "encounter group movement will be a growing counterforce to the dehumanization of our culture" (p. 161), and predictably the clientele to which this expensive therapy caters will be business men (p. 135). At the same time the idea drifts down to the mass of people through simplified versions supplied by popular writers, purveyors of advice, and commentators, who create the climate of opinion in terms of which commonplace people realize the boundaries of the possible.

In this way, self-fulfilment theorists, far from being "anarchistic," are the perfect counterpoint to an economic system in which mass discontent is to be released not through political action but by some inspection of the psyche. Toward achieving this goal a variety of psychic phenomena can be used – sports, UFOs, entertainers, new varieties of religion, even the Loch Ness Monster – but self-fulfilment theory is to be preferred because it appears to have a very American root in Dewey and Jefferson and their "thought clichés" (Barzun, 1961, pp. 51–54) such as "rights," "liberties," and "freedoms," which refer mainly to the fact that most people are free to buy, often on credit, the goods and services of a fantastically productive

economic system. "Freedoms" and "civil rights" are costly to implement in a court of law, and the probability that there will be solicitude for the "rights" of criminal defendants is low at the moment (Lewin, 1976, p. 92).

Behaviorism is alive and well in the North American continent; the trouble is that it is used by the representatives of a privileged set to advance their interests and to destroy opposition. The inhumane condition of the masses is alleviated by encouraging them to nourish their dream machines, the primary fuel for which is "potential" and self-fulfilment theories. These, or any functional equivalent such as religion, which was important in Freud's day, are the nostrums available to common men.

One last point: in his final coda, McLeish (1976, p. 81) argues that the Skinnerian teacher and a structured curriculum will do "the job." What job? Skinner (1976) is fairly modest in his conception of educational goals: in the best situation for the child, teachers will be part of a "natural and social environment in which he will make the most of his genetic endowment and in doing so most successfully pursue happiness" (p. 221). This is a far cry from the McLeish version which runs: "Teachers will improve human action by a revised structure of society based on a rational system of rewards and punishments" (p. 81).

The revised version presumes something that is clearly false; the rewards (punishment is surely not admissible to the Skinnerian pantheon of words) possessed by teachers are of less consequence to the youngster than those associated with athletes, entertainers, astronauts, winners of beauty contests, and the like (Coleman, 1961, p. 27). This may be news to McLeish, but it is commonly observed by those in touch with the solid world.

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