

by [Maxine Greene](#) — 1971

*Charles Reich's work may indeed be a prolegomenon, as Capouya put it, "to the argument it provokes." The argument is what remains significant, and the translation of it into rational terms. Here is where the weariness ends and where the inauguration of "the impulse of consciousness" may begin.*

When Charles A. Reich's *The Greening of America*\* first appeared as a long article in *The New Yorker*, it evoked a startled, enraptured response. The date was September, 1970; and many of its readers must have just been recovering from the sense of letdown following after the high excitement of the spring. The Cambodian invasion, the Kent State and Jackson State killings, and the rest had been horrifying; but the protest activity had jolted people out of their routine existence and made them feel vividly alive. It was almost as Camus had put it in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. ..." The trouble was that, although (as Camus went on) "everything begins with consciousness and nothing is worth anything except through it," there seemed to be nothing beginning in September. Then suddenly, in the midst of the doldrums, Reich's piece appeared with its talk of a "new consciousness" that promised to achieve a bloodless revolution. Was it any wonder that the weary ones heeded, telephoned each other ecstatically, ordered reprints, smiled?

It is difficult to believe that any of them read the article as if it were a sociological report, a serious venture into history, or simply another sympathetic account of the counter-culture. Perhaps because of the magazine in which it appeared (with all the reminders of E. B. White, James Thurber, George Wald, and even J. D. Salinger), perhaps because of the exquisite, teasing title, "The Greening..." in its first incarnation was absorbed, uncritically appreciated, as if it were a lyric poem by some minor undiscovered poet or one of the folk-rock ballads Reich himself likes so well. Reading it, savoring each clean, unfootnoted page, some undoubtedly felt as they had when listening to Pete Seeger lead the November Moratorium throngs in "All We're Asking is Give Peace a Chance." They *knew* better, of course; but it was so uplifting, so reassuring an experience to hear the great chorus below the Monument, to watch the innocent, smiling, loving faces—to feel that things were a'changing after all.

But Reich did more than this for his readers. A professor at the Yale Law School, a popular and competent classroom teacher, he clearly knew his audience. There were, therefore, gentle, repeated shocks of recognition for anyone who was reasonably well-read, like comforting taps on the wrist or squeezes of the hand. After all, to read intellectual or even semi-intellectual journals today is to accumulate an "apperceptive mass," a distinctively urban, urbane funding of knowledge. There are what Sartre calls "key-words" for many of us; also there are key-names, key-concepts, key-metaphors. Reich played upon all these, although without mentioning them explicitly. The first section (the most convincing section) dealing with the "anatomy of the corporate state," recalled the voices of Jacques Ellul, Lewis Mumford, Herbert Marcuse, and the many others who have written about the monolith of power, the ravages of self-generating

techniques. Also, it touched upon the numerous myths, fictions, metaphors by which literate Americans (consciously or unconsciously) tend to order their worlds: images like the machine in the garden, the valley of ashes, Kafka's Castle (or the torture instrument in "The Penal Colony"), Steinbeck's faceless tractor driver, the army camp in *Catch-22*. Feelings about "invisibility," "nobodyness," dehumanization, what Kierkegaard called "the Crowd": all these were addressed and brought, to one degree or another, into play. Reich's readers knew—indeed, we all know—that technology alone did not cause our expulsion from the Garden, that (for all its awesomeness and scale) technology is theoretically manageable by purposeful men, that *some* of its effects have been beneficent. They even knew that computers can be (as in *Space Odyssey 2001*) lobotomized when they threaten to take over; but Reich was not simply addressing himself to the evidence or what people knew. Few objected, therefore, at the beginning. They were largely "humanists"; they recognized only too well what was being said when demonologies of technique were framed. It was not surprising, then, and perhaps it was not wrong for reader after reader to feel somehow grateful, to mutter *sub voce*, "Of course; he's telling it like it is."

Much the same can be said about Reich's treatment of education, which is in some haunting fashion not too far removed from that developed by Charles Silberman in parts of *Crisis in the Classroom*. Linking the school to the phenomenon of meritocracy, Reich hit all the (by now familiar) stops: testing, tracking, indoctrination, vulgarization. Paul Goodman, Edgar Z. Friedenberg, John Holt, and the others are not mentioned by name; but they move like comforting presences behind a screen. "The school is a brutal machine for the destruction of the self, controlling it, heckling it, hassling it into a thousand busy tasks, a thousand noisy groups, never giving it a moment to establish a knowledge within." True? These are not, after all, testable propositions; they do not offer themselves for validation. Recognizable? Part of conventional wisdom? Of course. And what then?

The anatomization of the corporate state and its "dirty institutions" is, however, only one part of what is essentially a three-part book, if not three mini-books. The second section is the one that deals so seductively with Consciousness I, II, and III. Consciousness I refers to the myth of individualism, well suited (according to Reich) to "the 19th century society of small towns, face-to-face relations, and individual economic enterprise." The devoted reader could accept that easily enough, especially if Thomas Jefferson had been his archetypical American, and if his memories of Natty Bumppo, Thoreau, and Huckleberry Finn were sufficiently fresh. He might swallow hard when he realized that Barry Goldwater and assorted members of the "silent majority" still exemplified this consciousness; but (quoting from another culture hero to make the point) "so it goes."

Consciousness II, as Reich puts it, originated in early progressive days, culminated in the New Deal, and ended in the McNamara brand of social engineering and an increased domination by industrialism (not to speak of war, racism, and terrible excesses of power). This was much harder for readers to accept; because, at this point, Reich was chipping away at their cherished contemporary heroes—Franklin D. Roosevelt, for instance, and John F. Kennedy. Also, he was tapping some of the submerged guilt and anger occasioned by recent experiences in what John Aldridge had called "the country of the

young." But when Reich talked of "false consciousness," "role-constraint," "hypocrisy," and hollow men, the readers who stayed with him must surely have excluded themselves from the category. They might have agreed to be attacked by a black militant, to murmur "mea culpa" to Eldridge Cleaver or Bobby Scale or even the Soledad Brothers; but, responding to Reich, they were most likely to say "Those people in Scarsdale, maybe ..." or "The parents in *The Graduate* ... ," not the readers of Charles A. Reich, people who knew the key-words, the secret handshake, surely not they. After all, some explained eagerly, they had marched on Washington, had they not? In 1963, 1967, 1969? *They* knew "war is not healthy for children and other living things." *They* had never consciously manipulated, discriminated, withheld love. In fact (and this was the gift Professor Reich was proffering), they were candidates for liberation, for initiation into Consciousness III.

The description of Consciousness III was particularly appealing because it was presented, as it were, from the inside, by someone over 30 who had managed (almost gazelle-like) to leap the gap. "Consciousness III postulates the absolute worth of every human being—every self. Consciousness III does not believe in the antagonistic or competitive doctrine of life.... Consciousness III rejects the whole concept of excellence and comparative merit that is so central to Consciousness II. III refuses to evaluate people by general standards, it refuses to classify people, or analyze them." Associated (of course) with the younger generation, with "an entire culture, including music, clothes, and drugs," this mode of consciousness is a specific response to the depredations and the waste attributable to technology. Founded in a desire for liberation and authenticity, it signifies (in some respects) a return to the original American values—a return, in fact, by communes of young Adams and Eves to the Garden (only now a garden where organic foods grow, bell-bottomed jeans blow on the clotheslines, and the sweet smell of pot hangs in the air). Who but the uptight, the prurient, the censorious could possibly object? And when Reich reached his apotheosis, with the announcement that a "revolution by consciousness" lay ahead, an enormous feeling of relief must have crept over those appalled by bombings, frightened by jailings, worried about the chances they themselves ought to take to show they were in good faith. No need to thrash, he was telling them; no need to destroy the machine. The motive power of the corporate state "is supplied by a willing producer and a willing consumer. Thus the motivating power of the machine is found *within each of us*. More specifically, the motivating power is that portion of each individual's life in which he acts as a machine-part.... Revolution by consciousness can be accomplished when enough individuals change that part of their lives." The same can be said about the motivating power of the university, the high school, even the army in Vietnam. Reich's message counters feelings of powerlessness, feelings of weariness, by suggesting that it is up to the individual in the last analysis. What he needs to do is to *see* it differently; to change the lenses through which he looks out upon the world, to alter the fictions by which he makes sense.

For all the rather muted echoes of existential thought in this preoccupation with consciousness, Reich's approach tends to be more mod-Marxist than Sartrean or Camus-*esque*. "Consciousness, as we are using the term," he writes, "is not a set of opinions, information, or values, but a total configuration in any given individual, which makes up

his whole perception of reality, his whole world view." And then: "As a mass phenomenon, consciousness is formed by the underlying economic and social conditions." It refers ("as we are using the term") to the whole man, his head, his way of life. For the existentialist, in contrast, consciousness is never general, but always particular; moreover, it is always *^/-*consciousness and can never be thought of as a "mass phenomenon." This distinction, not obvious to the first enthusiasts, underlines the fact that Reich's categories, as he himself repeatedly admits, are fictions, *created* constructs; and it is fairly remarkable that they have been read literally by so many. Historians adapt constructs from the social scientists in their efforts to explain, to clarify, to make the inchoate events of the past in some manner meaningful; and they do so (if they are competent historians) with respect for the evidence and a desire for historical "truth." Reich *invented* his own constructs (the consciousness categories) for the sake of making the points he wished to make about America's fall and possible redemption. He would surely not defend his idiosyncratic approach to history before any audience of historians; but he might well defend it as a way of nudging people into new ways of seeing, feeling, expanding consciousness. As we view it, this is how *The Greening of America* ought to be encountered. The anger and the disappointment it aroused as the months passed after the publication of the book may well be due to a misconception. Works of art, Jonathan Miller once said, can be "wrongheaded but never wrong." The same may be true of Reich's work, since, in actual fact, it offers no information at all, no "truth."

Still, the story of the responses is interesting for its own sake. Many people were made aware that an intellectual Happening of moment had occurred when *The New York Times*, on various occasions through October and November, printed columns on its Op Ed page about the Gospel according to Reich. John Kenneth Galbraith, one of the shining exemplars of Consciousness II, rather surprisingly expressed his gratitude for Reich's use of *The New Industrial State*, said how impressed he was by the idea "that we can reduce the power of his corporate state... only by making it less important in our lives," and mildly chided the author for neglecting the possibilities in the political process, for being unfair to liberalism, and for neglecting to work out the economics of the Consciousness III life style.

George Kennan, not surprisingly, took a negative position, rejecting "ro-mantic-utopian moods, illusions and hysterias of one sort or another." Arguing *ad hominem* (as many others have done since), he called Reich a spokesman for "a condition of the spirit that has characterized the academic New Left" and said (not very kindly) that he was surprised to find that "teachers, whose function it normally is to give depth and balance to student opinion, (could) be swayed by similar enthusiasm." Finally, he said that most students, in any case, have settled down—"having got various things off their chests last spring"—to calmer, more thoughtful views of the world and that Reich was simply out-of-date. The enthusiasts did not mind that particularly; familiar with Kennan's conservatism with respect to the new generation, they even found that it confirmed what Reich had said. It was a different matter where Herbert Marcuse was concerned, however; and many people were far more appalled by his negative view than they were by Christopher Lehmann-Haupt's daily book review which called Reich the Norman

Vincent Peale of the counter-culture. This was because they had found (or thought they had found) so many Marcusean *aperçus* in *The Greening of America*, especially in the talk of "false consciousness" and manipulations and the Establishment. Marcuse focused on Reich's rather charming suggestion that nobody was in control at the seats of power: "There are very definite, identifiable persons, groups, classes, interests which do this controlling job, which direct the technical, economic, political machine for the society as a whole. They, not their machine, decided on life and death, war and peace—they set the priorities. They have all the power to defend it—and it is not the power of the machine but *over* the machine: human power, political power." And he called (humorlessly, some thought) for "preparation, organization, mobilization." At the end of his article, he bestowed a kiss of death, at least where New Left Reich-readers were concerned; he talked about "the false perspective, which transfigures social and political radicalism into moral rearmament. Notwithstanding its insights and critiques, *The Greening of America* is the Establishment version of the great rebellion." Tom Hayden and other revolutionaries agreed, even as more and more members of the bar and defenders of the system mocked Reich's treatment of power, his neglect of strategies, his "anarchy."

Now and then, a still hopeful voice would be raised, like that of Professor Arthur Naftalin, writing in the *Times*: "Suddenly we have an alternative to apathy and despair. Suddenly we discover that our sense of being awash in a sea of irrationality is widely shared. We begin to believe again in the possibility of effective political action." Stewart Alsop wrote in *Newsweek*, however, that, although the book had a certain political significance, its significance "lies chiefly in the fact that it turns out to be a bag of mush—but rather scary mush." *Time's* reviewer said: "His heart, clearly, is in the right place. The problem lies in the clearness of his head." Peter Marin, one of the most eloquent and thoughtful recent "spokesmen" for the new generation, wrote in the *Sunday Times Book Review* section: "Flawed by his unconvincing analysis of changes in consciousness and his loving but incomplete notions about the young, *The Greening of America* seems to me to be simplistic, misleading, presumptuous. Its neat insights obscure the truth."

Peter Caws, writing in *The New Republic*, complimented Reich for the "directness and lucidity" with which he handled history and economics but went on to say that his sensitivity was accompanied by "an extraordinarily simple-minded psychology, and the notoriety of the book rests on this." He lamented the "quasi-technical terminology," the patronizing tone in which Reich "offers, as it were, the helping hand of youth to poor II's secretly longing for freedom but afraid to take the plunge." Then, probably most acutely, Caws challenged the notion of consciousness being prior to structure and said that "the evidence points to a dialectical relation between them." Finally, "no general appeal to consciousness to transcend its social context has ever worked, or ever will work. This is not to disagree with Reich's view of Consciousness III, but it is to doubt the accuracy of any scenario that relies on it as an agent of change for the population at large or for the system under which it lives. In fact, consciousness, even as Reich defines it, and social and political change probably have less to do with one another than he thinks."

The most serious, the most literal critique was still to come. It appeared in the December *Commentary* as the second of three rather outraged discussions of "The Counter-Culture and Its Apologists." Roger Starr, of New York's Citizen's Housing and Planning Council, wrote it with all the incisiveness and irony a well-educated exponent of *Consciousness II* is capable of, and with all sorts of evidential material set forth to disprove what Reich had said. He challenged Reich's dating of America's "fall" from grace; included some interesting, probably irrelevant facts on the history of shipbuilding subsidies because Reich—*en passant*—had argued against the government's subsidies for the ways in which they differed from the local services presumably provided in 1776; challenged Reich's descriptions of the pre-industrial world, his notions about peanut butter, magazines, and cultural homogenization. "I see nothing miraculous, then," he concluded, "in the arrival on the American scene of a generation of young people without respect for rank and stature, exceedingly cheerful in their day-to-day affairs, free of long-held inhibitions about the use of drugs, rather contemptuous of those who should have been providing them with an opposition that would have made their youthful exuberance part of a process of maturation. I can see that they would believe that the acquisition of knowledge and technique is unnecessary, even moldy. And I can see that they would believe—having been brought up generally in the notion that restrictions on conduct are destructive of the self—that total liberation and psychic unity are the tools through which health is restored to the state." For Starr, the popularity of the book can be explained by the way in which Reich "absolves the elders from the nagging sense that they are guilty for having raised their children badly," and, at once, "absolves the young of any responsibility for certain of the consequences of their behavior." Strangely, for many (even for some of those who telephoned all their friends when the article appeared in *The New Yorker*) Starr has had the final word. There are some who have expressed the pain of guilt aroused by Starr's last sentence: "... a bit of the same sense of waste arises in me at the thought that new millions of young men and women—appalled by a war they do not want and a social order that desperately needs their schooled enthusiasm—lured by men my age, wearing beads, might be gambling down a trail that... leads nowhere." Where next, after all? Where to turn?

The most effective commentary, as we saw it, was one written for *The Nation*, under the title of "The Myth of Ecstatic Community," by (appropriately) the literary editor, Emile Capouya. Pointing to the significance of Reich's fundamental question (albeit "a question for rich people") which has to do with how we can master the machine, Capouya very properly suggested that "what we are called upon to judge is the imaginative adequacy" of the stories, the legends Reich is telling—"how well- or ill-adapted they are to our own sense of our troubles and to our longing to be better men." He called Reich's stories "parables for rich penitents, for that is what we are." Nevertheless, he could discern the problems implicit in a "myth of ecstatic communion" or the idea of what John Passmore calls a "New Mysticism" presumably inaugurating "Paradise Now." Capouya, too, saw as clearly as anyone Reich's neglect of nagging social problems, indeed his neglect of the poor. "The inoffensive anarchism of the well-to-do, with transcendental accents, is what Reich's social program comes to.... The dialogue of the affluent, perfectly legitimate in its premises, has to become something more if it aspires to be decent. Though it means

abandoning 'authenticity,' we must proceed in imagination from where we are to where most of the world is."

This, then, is the morning after. Charles Reich's work may indeed be a prolegomenon, as Capouya put it, "to the argument it provokes." The argument is what remains significant, and the translation of it into rational terms. *Here* is where the weariness ends and where the inauguration of "the impulse of consciousness" may begin.

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