B.F. Skinner's Psychology and Revolutionary Politics: The Problem of Authoritarian Tendencies in Revolutionary Movements

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The corruption of leadership in their exercise of power has been an endemic problem for revolutionary movements. As Ralph Miliband has observed: "The exercise of socialist power remains the Achilles heel of Marxism."1 When Lord Acton made his famous observation that power tends to corrupt he was merely classifying the exercise of power in terms of its reinforcing consequences—to be one of the powerful means deferring, privilege, feelings of superiority. Anarchists have always understood this point. Bakunin, criticizing the Marxists, wrote:

Political power means domination...If a government composed exclusively of workers were elected tomorrow by universal suffrage, these same workers, who are today the most dedicated democrats and socialists, would tomorrow become the most dedicated autocrats...2

Yet anarchists, the most consistent critics of the authoritarian potentialities of Marxism in practice, have been corrupted when they had a rare opportunity to actually rule as in Spain during the Civil War (1936-1939). Of those anarchist militants who chose to accept posts in the Republican government Vernon Richards noted that they began to manifest "caution, fear of the uncontrolled masses, remoteness from the aspirations of the masses, and a messianic feeling that all wisdom and initiative flow from above."3 Like Marxists they placed too much emphasis on the "consciousness" of the militant minority as the best protection against the corrupting tendencies of power. History has shown that it is a dangerous illusion to do so. In American Presidential politics an ignorance of the effect on behavior of the environment of exercising enormous power is positively encouraged in the film-flam of campaigns in which the electorate is repeatedly told to vote for the "right" man, that to do so will be their salvation from corrupt politicians (who will be turned out as the saying goes). Disappointment is not long in coming. The revolution is "betrayed" or the reform candidate "sells out" as if the individual characteristics of this or that leader were the primary cause of revolutions that degenerate into a bureaucratic statism and campaign promises that aren't delivered.

It is time to look elsewhere. Like Lord Acton, B.F. Skinner tells us to look for the cause of corruption not in the personal characteristics of individuals but in the environmental consequences of exercising power. He writes, "To prevent the misuse of controlling power...we must not look to the controller himself but at the contingencies under which he engages in control," and, "It is not the benevolence of the controller but the contingencies under which he controls benevolently which must be examined."4 Further:

In the past, individuals have emerged to seize power and to use it to advance their own interests. They have done so because the culture has permitted them (indeed, induced them) to do so. In a different culture, power will be used in a different way. What way is a question to be answered by looking at the contingencies.5

But what are these "contingencies"? Simply, they are the behavioral pay-offs traditionally associated (that go with) the exercise of political leadership already mentioned, eg., adulation by the masses, the unchecked authority to make decisions which drastically affect the lives of millions, and so forth. But isn't this a commonplace? In theory, perhaps yes, but in the practice of politics, no, and it is practices that we are concerned with here. Need it be repeated that in the practice of politics the old mistake of minimizing or ignoring the contingencies goes on. Cults of personality are erected on the one hand; good, honest, moral, etc. candidates replace bad, corrupt, immoral hacks, and then in turn are corrupted, and so it goes. It is time to break the circle.

First, revolutionaries can no longer ignore the potentialities of a technology of behavioral control. Let us begin by considering the following dialogue in Skinner's fictional utopia, Walden Two:

"Mr. Castle", said Frazier very earnestly, "Let me ask you a question. I warn you, it will be the most terrifying question of your life. What would you do then?" (original emphasis)6

Frazier answers: "The fact is, we not only can control human behavior, we must. But who's to do it, and what is to be done?"7 One answer to that question is already being realized in the United States. Various techniques of behavioral control grouped under the rubric of "behavior modification" are being developed by experimental psychologists and used to efficiently change behavior in mental hospitals, prisons, and ordinary classrooms.8 What kinds of behavior? For whose benefit? Who's to do it, and what is to be done? Either it will continue to be used shape behaviors which are supportive of the present system, or this technology can be incorporated into a revolutionary program whose purpose will be the maximization of human potential. The use to which this technology is put will be resolved by political power.

Secondly, the Skinnerian focus on the contingencies of controlling points a way out of the problem of the abuse of revolutionary authority and the apparently "inevitable" corruption of revolutionary leadership. The problem is a critical one because one of the most effective arguments advanced by anti-revolutionary thinkers is to cite the so-called "lessons of history" as proving once and for all time that after the seizure of power comes the revolutionary dictatorship more inhumane than the regime it replaced. This paper will try to show that corruption is not inevitable if the principles developed by Skinner are properly understood.
and incorporated into revolutionary practice.

The science of behavior developed by Skinner and the technique—operant conditioning—associated with it are widely misunderstood. Operant conditioning and the principles derived from its use come from the extensive study of animal behavior in a controlled that is experimental environment. Within a controlled experimental space, the precise effects of the environment upon behavior can be noted. Picture an organism operating in its environment. Certain behaviors will be appropriate to that environment, that is, they will have reinforcing consequences; behavior which is inappropriate, on the other hand, will have neutral or punishing consequences. The key principle derived: "Behavior is shaped and maintained by its consequences."8 Having touched a hot stove and been burnt as a consequence we are less likely to do so in the future, that is, the frequency of a behavior being repeated is a function of the environmental event which follows it.

Looking at political participation, political scientists have generalized that the probability that a citizen will vote is positively associated with a citizen's degree of political efficacy. It has also been found that the degree of political efficacy (for example, the belief that government pays attention to people like me) is associated with social class.9 Not surprisingly the upper class has a high sense of efficacy; the lower classes, a poor sense of efficacy. Why is this so? Is it because the lower class individual has a poor sense of "self" or some other personal attribute associated with the lower class, eg., lazy, shiftless, irresponsible, lacks individual initiative. The analysis suggested by Skinner tells us to focus on the environmental events which follow. For the lower class individual the act of voting is not likely to have any reinforcing consequences. For the upper classes, however, the connection between participation and consequent benefit is immediate and direct, eg., a tax-supported government loan to bail out my failing corporation, a little military muscle to protect those investments abroad, appointment as ambassador, an oil depletion allowance, ad nauseam, rather than being deferred or non-existent, eg., an inadequate increase in welfare, free medical care, and so forth.

When we talk of voting we are talking about operant, as opposed to respondent, behavior. Classical or Pavlovian conditioning concerns only the latter (although in fact they are often confused in critiques of Skinner). A respondent is inherent within the organism at birth. Respondents (eg., salivation) are elicited by conditioned and unconditioned stimuli which precede them, and upon the occurrence of the stimulus, the respondent will automatically occur if the organism is physically capable of doing so. The stimulus-response model of behavior cannot account for much of the behavior of higher animals and man where for most behavior there is no apparent eliciting stimulus. Most behavior of man is operant, or "learned" behavior, such as voting. In psychological terminology operants are said to be emitted by the organism, the probability of their reappearance being a function of the environmental events which follow.10

Obviously most human behavior is not emitted in a straightforward manner; that is, we do not one day emit the behavior of stuffing a piece of paper in a box, throwing a touchdown pass, or reading Hegel. We acquire these behaviors by a process called shaping by successive approximation, or simply shaping. One begins with the individual's given repertoire of behavior and then through a process of selective reinforcement of approximations of the target behavior, the individual is moved, shaped toward the behavior desired. For example, let us look again at the behavior—voting. Within each individual's repertoire is the capacity to learn, arms and hands to show, stuff boxes, and pull levers. First we may have been told that it is "good" (reinforcing) to vote. We practice this desirable behavior in a series of practice rituals that are approximations of exercising our "citizen duty", eg. decisions (usually trivial) are decided by a show of hands, the more complex charade of electing student body officers (where politics becomes a game—participation without power), and depending upon our social class position we are taught our "appropriate" political roles for the many, to be a passive spectator, a consumer; for the few, to run for office, be "civic-minded", and get used to mouthing banalities—noblesse oblige.11 All summing up to the perception that voting is the sin qua non of "democracy" (whether there is real choice among candidates or the act means participation in the important decisions are not usually part of this happy picture).

Operants like voting occur in an environment in which stimuli preceding and accompanying stimuli which increase the probability that an operant will be emitted are called discriminative stimuli. These are said to "set the occasion" for the emission of the operant, they increase the probability, but do not invariably cause (elicit) the behavior. For example, we are not likely to vote when there is no election day. Further, as the day approaches we are confronted with a complex of discriminative stimuli, eg., campaign advertisements, coverage in the newspapers, moral suasion that one should vote, and so forth, all of which should increase the probability of voting, but do not cause it. Remember, behavior is a function of its consequences. If voting does not have reinforcing consequences then subsequent discriminative stimuli will not be effective in setting the occasion for the behavior in the future. In that case we may be labelled apathetic, as if our non-participation were a symptom of a personal failing rather than the environment that surrounds us, which often informs us, especially if we are lower class, "why bother?"

In sum, this digression has tried to show how Skinnerian psychology accounts for behavior. Most of what we would call human behavior is learned or operant behavior. A given behavior is maintained or changed by its consequences. In order to change behavior (and genuine revolutions do promise radical changes in the way people act), attention must be paid to the environment events which follow and accompany whether the behavior is a child's temper tantrum, racism, male chauvinism, giving orders, or passively submitting to the orders given.

We are here concerned with a specific behavior of fundamental importance in the revolutionary process. How may revolutionary authority be exercised without being corrupted? Our answer (which will be developed below) is to look at the consequences, or technically, the contingencies of reinforcement. Traditionally, political life has involved a rather rigid division of labor between leaders and led, each subject to separate contingencies of reinforcement, which shape and maintain behaviors of dominance and passivity. So in order to prevent or minimize the probability of corruption of leadership we might begin by consciously breaking down that division of labor which means bringing the masses into effective participation in political life, and secondly, as closely as possible, making leaders subject to the same contingencies as the led, in a word, no special behavioral pay-offs for those fated to lead.
Lenin was very concerned about the corruption of revolutionary leadership inherent in the necessary division of labor between the militant minority and the mass during the extended period of revolutionary transition. He suggested in The State and Revolution that Lenin envisioned the Soviet political system modeled after the Paris Commune which had institutionalized specific means of counter-control by the masses through provision of instant recall of officials by majority vote, universal suffrage, abolition of the professional army and its replacement by popular militia, and the leveling of officials' salaries to that of ordinary workmen's wages. Lenin argued that mass participation in the affairs of government was necessary so that these functions can (and must) be stripped of every shadow of privilege, of every semblance of 'official grandeur'.

Lenin saw that effective counter-control meant at bottom "bringing consequences to bear" on the behavior of the revolutionary leadership. He wrote: The Commune substitutes for the venal and rotten parliamentaryism of bourgeois society institutions in which freedom of opinion and discussion does not degenerate into deception, for the parliamentarians themselves have to work, have to execute their own laws, have themselves to test the results achieved in reality and account directly to their constituents. Representative institutions remain, but there is no parliamentarism as a special system, as a division of labor between the legislative and executive, as a privileged position for the deputies.

The State and Revolution has been described as a manifestation of a brief so-called 'anarchist' phase in Lenin's thought. This would be a simplification because while the suggestions made above were probably in accord with what anarchists themselves might propose Lenin in the same work clearly parted with the anarchists in his insistence that revolutionary change was a process that would continue long after the actual seizure of power. This insistence was grounded not in some Machiavellian "will to power" but in Lenin's understanding of human behavior itself, an understanding in accord with Skinner's paradigm. Lenin observed in The State and Revolution and throughout his writings that behavior of the masses would not necessarily be congruent with, support, the revolutionary institutions which would be created. Lenin argued that a people reared in despotism will not suddenly change their behavior toward authority because the new regime wants to represent their interest. Behavior which would support revolutionary institutions must be learned; it is contingent upon the degree to which the desired behavior is in fact reinforced by new institutional arrangements. And learning is a process of gradually acquiring new behavior. It is nothing more, and can be nothing more, than a program of shaping. Lenin observed in December, 1917:

The workers and peasants are still 'timid', they have not yet become accustomed to the idea that they are now the ruling class... The revolution could not at a stroke instill these qualities in millions and millions of people. (original emphasis)

Note the phrase that the people must become accustomed.' This is Lenin's key behavioral insight. People must be socialized, must be shaped, so that "the old, absurd, savage, despicable and disgusting prejudice" that only the wealthy and well-educated are fit to rule will no longer govern their behavior. Rather they will gradually see their own competence to rule themselves because they will have learned to rule so that "all will govern in turn and will soon become accustomed to no one governing." (emphasis added)

Shaping is necessarily a gradual and carefully planned process so that people will eventually "cast off the old ways and habituated routine." Thus the seizure of power only sets the occasion for revolutionary change. Lenin writes:

We are not utopians, we do not 'dream' of dispensing at once with all administration, with all subordination. These anarchist dreams... serve only to postpone the socialist revolution till people are different. No, we want the socialist revolution with people as they are now, with people who cannot dispense with subordination, control... (original emphasis)

The expression, 'the state withers away' is very well chosen, for it indicates both the gradual and spontaneous nature of the process. Only habit can and undoubtedly will, have such an effect, for we see around us millions of occasions how readily people become accustomed to observing the necessary rules of social intercourse when there is no exploitation, when there is nothing that arouses indignation, evokes protest and revolt, and creates the need for suppression. (original emphasis)

With regard to specific policies Lenin's attitude toward the peasant is instructive of his thinking. In 1919 he argued that the peasants must be shown in fact that collective forms of cultivation were superior and that this could only be accomplished by persuasion and actual demonstration. Further, that collectivization must be a gradual process, because it was as he would say later "the simplest, the easiest, and most acceptable to the peasant." (original emphasis)

It remained for the Chinese Communists to carry out such recommendations in practice. In 1955, Mao Tse-Tung echoed Lenin when he instructed that:

In working with the peasants, we must start from their needs, not from our wishes, however good. It sometimes happens that the masses objectively need some reform, but are not yet subjectively awakened to it and willing or determined to bring it into effect; in that case, we should wait patiently and introduce the reform only when through our work most of the masses have been awakened to the need and are willing and determined to carry it out... .

Standing in stark contrast to such recommendations was the subsequent development of Soviet practices. Stalinism, with its emphasis on force, coercion, and unequal material incentives to effect rapid social change without regard to the social cost was the antithesis of what Lenin envisioned as a rational plan for socialist development.

Perhaps the bureaucratic despotism that developed was entirely predictable and somehow inevitable given the external pressures on the regime which had to fight a long a costly civil war surrounded by hostile capitalist powers. The very existence of the regime was in doubt and necessitated expedients, often brutal and authoritarian. Then, finally secure in its power, the Soviet regime faced tremendous problems of reconstruction and the backwardness of Russian culture (Lenin's phrase) which seemed to require heavy reliance on the capacities of the competent few. But we must emphasize the "perhaps" in regard to these external factors. For even if these factors were entirely absent Lenin would still be confronted with the corruption of revolutionary
authority and its potential degeneration into a bureaucratic state and its attendant "new class" of Communist satraps.

Returning to The State and Revolution one is struck by the failure to mention much less consider what role the revolutionary movement, the Leninist vanguard, will play in the process. This is a serious omission given the central role that Lenin envisioned for the militant minority as the "general staff" of the revolution. It is the militant minority which must initiate policy (even one that envision the gradual disappearance of centralized authority). As subsequent events unfolded the Bolsheviks felt compelled to allow organs of popular control to wither, never to be revived. Forgetting that expedients tend to become accepted practices (since expedients are in fact environmental contingencies, the effect of which must be accounted for) the regime increasingly relied on traditional methods of governing, decision by bureaucratic ukase and an accompanying ideology of command and obedience. The effect upon social life was devastating. Roy Medvedev writes: "Some Communists, finding themselves in power, began to abuse their position and display very uncommunist traits: conceit, scorn for the workers' interests, the bureaucratic syndrome. They turned into office holders..."22 Precisely. How could they have behaved otherwise?

Lenin's response to this unwelcome growth of bureaucracy was uncharacteristically conservative. Moshe Levin has observed that Lenin in this "last struggle" approached the problem "more like a chief executive of a strictly 'elitist' turn of mind."23 Rather than return to the innovative proposals outlined in The State and Revolution which might take away the "semblance of grandeur" from governing through bringing the people into effective participation he, in Levin's analysis, limited his response to "organizational methods". His thought seemed now to be a captive of the very machine he had created so that he was unable to look outside its assumptions for a solution. Seeing the regime lacked wide popular support and also that the culture was "backward" Lenin placed dependence on fighting bureaucratic tendencies on the "quality of men" within the elite and advocacy of certain structural palliatives, in the latter case, captured by the very tendencies he wished to combat.24 Bureaucracy was a symptom of the fundamental problem. The militant minority has "become accustomed to" ruling and expecting the traditional privileges that go with being "different" than other men. This Lenin failed to grasp or at least had forgotten. It was for the masses to acquire new habits. But they had turned out to be more backward than Lenin imagined, therefore... Let us be blunt. While Lenin had hit upon the basis of man's behavior and how to change it in line with what Skinner has postulated he failed to fully appreciate the implications of that paradigm. Specifically he seemed to manifest the all-too-common and pernicious trait of intellectuals who develop grand social theories which apply to "others" but not the theorist. For if the masses must become accustomed to, must acquire new habits, and these are a function of environmental contingencies must not the militant minority also be subject to the same principles and structure the social world accordingly? The answer seems to be yes. To say so is not to serve as yet another critique of Leninism or to speculate over "what might have been" had Lenin lived. Rather it should be reiterated in line with our analysis here that Bakunin's prediction that a government of workers (workers transformed into "officials") tends to transform them into the "most dedicated autocrats" has been borne out in practice. Indeed they will be induced to so behave. Skinner would say that the process of turning into office holders even provisionally and temporarily can only have one result. Under the evolving division of labor between elite and mass each is subject to different contingencies of reinforcement. The former as "leaders" will tend to develop behaviors and interests particular to their social role, interests which will tend to be antagonistic to those of the remainder of society; this will especially be the case when too much reliance is placed on "the human qualities of the revolutionaries" and not on the institutionalization of effective means of counter-control by the non-elite. Effective counter-control must be more than simply organizational restructuring at the top. It must be in addition a commitment on the part of the revolutionary elite to bring the masses into full participation in politics as Lenin had envisioned in The State and Revolution not only because it is desirable from an ideological point of view, but equally important, bringing the masses into participation is a learning experience (technically, the acquisition of a new behavioral repertoire) and will as the masses "become accustomed" to their new social role serve as an effective device of counter-control.

What is required? Not a condemnation of organization qua organization or planning. More planning, more organization, not less, is required, if the corruption of revolutionary authority is to be prevented. Planning, organization which explicitly pays attention to the effect of the environment upon the behavior of all, elite and mass, militant and citizen, without exception. Fortunately revolutionary thought and practice is moving in that direction in both East and West with the renewed interest in systems of self-management.25 To be sure, Daniel Guerin, observed:

Self-management meets with all kinds of difficulties and contradictions, yet, even now, it appears in practice to have the merit of enabling the masses to pass through an apprenticeship in direct democracy acting from the bottom upward; the merit of developing, encouraging, and stimulating free initiative, of imbuing them with a sense of responsibility instead of perpetuating age-old habits of passivity, submission, and the inferiority complex left to them by past oppression, as is the case under state communism. This apprenticeship is something laborious, progresses rather slowly, loads society with extra burdens, and may, possibly, be carried out only at the cost of some 'disorder'.26

Yes, institutionalization of self-management involves "difficulties", but the failure to take this necessary step, to bring the masses into participation in political life will as Rosa Luxemburg has said stop up "the very living source from which alone can come the correction of all innate shortcomings of social institutions."27

Skinner has merely posited that a functioning democracy means a process of "bringing effective consequences to bear" on the behavior of controllers, but does not discuss the means by which it could be accomplished. Self-management is a start. It will serve to bring effective consequences to bear in two ways. First, self-management as a system of councils, which are open to all regardless of their level of political consciousness, will serve as agencies of mediation between the militant minority and the masses, given the probability of one-party rule during the transition period. Stojanovic writes:

A social system which favors the highly moral personality can be created only by an organization of people who are, to a certain extent, highly moral. It is always a minority that initiates the struggle and
pioneers in the attempt to realize a humanistic-ethical program. Thus we can put the problem of actual moral avant-gardism of the revolutionary organization at the center of Marxist ethical criticism. Unless this avant-gardism is subjected to a continual process of verification and re-verification, the organization will fall prey to ethical self-deception.28

Self-management will facilitate this process of “verification and re-verification”. Without mediation “any talk of socialist democracy is so much hot air.”29

Second, in line with the Skinnerism paradigm, self-management institutions are a means of shaping new behavior. Councils, for example, will serve as schools in which participation is a learning experience and will eventually become habit. Stojanovic’s reflection on the Yugoslav experience is especially instructive in this regard. He writes:

In order to neutralize man’s tendency to escape from democracy, it is not enough to put people in the process of decision-making and simply abandon them to their own devices. In Yugoslavia we have neglected both in theory and practice an educational program of preparation for qualified self-government... If people do not desire to participate, if they do not have democratic habits and are not educated to the task of self-government, then self-government will always remain more formal than real and effective.30

It is unclear what Stojanovic means precisely by education in self-government, but there is his recognition that democratic behavior is learned, if only gradually, and more organization, not less, is required if the process of learning is to be effective.

The specifics of self-management systems will to be sure be determined by the particular characteristics of the culture in which are instituted. Revolutionary, as Mao Tse-tung has said, must begin with people as they are, not as revolutionaries would wish them to be. What is clear is that the great experiment cannot be deferred, but must begin regardless of the participatory latent in this or that culture. Criticizing the policies of the Soviet government as it turned away from self-management experiment Rosa Luxemburg argued that, “Socialist democracy is not something which begins only in the promised land after the foundations of socialist economy are created; it does not come as some sort of Christmas present for the worthy people who, in the interim, have loyalty supported a handful of socialist dictators.”31 Indeed, agencies of self-management, of mass participation, in their capacity as learning vehicles should be set up not only after the seizure of power, but before as well, when the revolutionary movement is in opposition so as to begin the construction of a revolutionary culture and thus erode the hegemony of the dominant system of values. Gramsci in reviewing the contribution of the abortive council movement in Turin (1919) saw councils as “a magnificent school of political and administrative experience,” and continued, “The proletariat had to accomplish ‘two revolutions’—one destroying the bourgeois state, the other constructing a liberated social system... The Italian working class must therefore start to train itself as the future governing class... here and now.”32

Further, mass participation in formal self-management structures does not occur in isolation from social relations which characterize everyday life. Skinner would instruct us to pay particular attention to those environmental contingencies in everyday life which might reasonably reinforce or cripple participatory behavior in more formal political settings. For example, was not the participatory democracy which motivated the New Left subverted by the radicals’ practice of replicating the dominance-subordination syndrome of everyday life in their organizational activities, eg. male chauvinism, increasing dependence on movement “heavies” whose claim to leadership did not rest on consent, but upon their “personal qualities” as activists and ideologues? Or consider the relation between formal democracy and the contingencies of everyday life in the United States. Here we see a formal structure that does not reflect, in fact obscures, the essentially authoritarian relations between people. The workplace, the family, the schools, are all characterized by the criteria of discipline, obedience, and subordination to authority. Add to that a highly complex division of labor in which authority flows from the top down, eg., look at authority in the business corporation, all overlaid with gross inequalities in the distribution of rewards for different social roles and democracy becomes merely a facade, an empty shell. And, finally, failing to take account of everyday life and re-structuring social relations in accordance with self-management institutions will tend to subvert the operation of self-management in fact. It is precisely in the maintenance of the traditional industrial division of labor which cripples the operation of workers’ control in Yugoslavia according to a recent study by Howard Wachtel.33 Managers and other white collar personnel dominate the self-management bodies in which their preferences regularly prevail because “the hierarchy of power in the enterprise mirrors the hierarchy of work relations.”34

In conclusion, the interest in self-management represents a genuine advance in overcoming what has been called simply Stalinism in revolutionary movements. On the one hand self-management has the potential of bringing effective consequences to bear on the behavior of leaders. This potential can be realized only to the extent that self-management serves as a learning experience, preparing people for participation in the decisions that affect their lives, and to the extent that social relations in general encourage participatory behavior rather than passivity and subordination.

On the other hand, the research of B.F. Skinner and other experimental psychologists appears to give an empirical foundation and a strategy that suggests that self-management is a realistic, rather than utopian, alternative to the so-called representative systems now in use. Emirically, Skinner has shown that behavior is shaped and maintained by its consequences, and that to change, behavior, the consequences of which it is a function must be changed. And in terms of a strategy of action that seeks to instill and maintain participatory behavior attention must be paid to the totality of social relations which necessarily impinge on how authority is exercised, and that in order to change behavior one begins with people as they are, reinforcing behavior which “approximates” participatory behavior or has the potential of evolving into it through the process of shaping by successive approximation.

To integrate Skinner’s model of man into a scenario for revolutionary change does not mean we are obliged to accept the “values” that B.F. Skinner the man appears to represent. Indeed we should not. While this paper is not another critique of Skinner (indeed, there are more than enough already) certain aspects of Skinner’s “philosophy” which appear to be antithetical to revolutionary politics should be noted. His self-image as the completely objective social scientist leads him to habitually overestimate the role
of science and technology in determining the affairs of men and concomitantly to grossly underestimate the role of political power in determining the uses to which science and technology is put.35 His naiveté in this regard can be positively disquieting when we recall the army of social scientists who in the recent past were all too willing to supply their “expertise” to help maintain American hegemony in Southeast Asia.36 Nor should we be distracted from serious consideration of what he has to say by the rather dogmatic style in which he presses his arguments, best typified in his controversial essay Beyond Freedom and Dignity. Rather we should recognize that Skinner has made explicit what has often been practiced and grasped intuitively. Alex Comfort in his own critique of Skinner has put it this way: “Operant conditioning is no diabolical device invented by Skinner. It is the only mechanism by which many human behaviors have always been programmed. Whether it is a sufficient paradigm for all behaviors is beside the point: it is a useful one for some of those most socially important.” (Emphasis added)37

In the beginning Frazier asked: “Who’s to do it, and what is to be done” with an effective technology of behavior control? The choice for the future is rather simple. Either the present regime will use this technology (indeed, it is already being used) as a means to inculcate behaviors which will support the distribution of privilege, perhaps to develop a “fascism with a human face!”; or, a revolutionary movement can use it in not only building a new society once power has been seized, but also to build the political forms in the present period which will serve as models, will in fact be “building of the new society within the shell of the old.”38

A revolutionary movement which commits itself to building a self-management system will be able to rescue the humanistic core of socialism from the narrow confines of official communism and social democratic reformism. Revolutionaries must present a vision that the alternative worth fighting for is more than “the Volga-Don Canal plus the State.”39 We must agree with Stojanovic when he writes:

A political movement which does not strive to create real possibilities for the introduction of workers’ self-management is not a workers movement in the full sense of the word. The criterion for this should be the extent to which the movement takes advantage of all opportunities to achieve this goal, not only after it has come to power, but while it is in opposition as well.40

We are obliged to end this consideration of Skinner and revolutionary change on a rather subjective note. Skinner has insisted that human behavior has always been controlled by environmental contingencies. Some of these contingencies may not be fit subjects for social engineering, but increasingly the social environment is becoming subject to conscious manipulation by some to the benefit or detriment of the interest of the many. This paper has been written with the intention that revolutionaries should take seriously what Skinner has to say about behavior for he has stated in a concise way what we believe to be the primary cause of the authoritarian tendencies which have plagued revolutionary movements and continue to do so. Erections of “cults of personality”, the posturing of this or that revolutionary guru, the repressive, puritanical atmosphere often found within revolutionary movements are manifestations of inattention to the effect of environments on individual behavior which revolutionaries themselves have created. The gap between Lenin’s vision and the actual evolution of Soviet society should serve as a case in point. Nevertheless we have attempted to make a specific comparison between Lenin and Skinner because Lenin’s speculations about the origins of human behavior seem to parallel Skinner’s, and because Lenin combined within a single individual the scientific state of mind of a Skinner and a revolutionary vision that has made him more than simply a “technician” of revolutionary power.41

But even a revolutionary movement that uniﬁes the empiricism of operant conditioning with a bold revolutionary sweep is a combination that is in itself no ﬁrm guarantee against the corruption of revolutionary authority. The exercise of revolutionary power will always involve great “temptations” and a great responsibility thus devolves on the militant minority to initiate and sustain those social forms in which such temptations will be absent or at least minimized, and who must be at all times prepared to be “radically critical not only of the old world, but of their own oligarchic-statist impulses as well.”42

Footnotes

9. Don Bowen, Political Behavior in the American Electorate (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill, 1968), pp. 64-68.


13. ibid., p. 424. On this point, only consider the United States Government's poverty programs. One may suspect that these programs might reach minimal adequacy if the legislators themselves had to live on surplus commodities and suffer the indignities of the Food Stamp Program.


18. ibid., p. 462.


24. ibid, pp. 123-124.


34. ibid., p. 185.

35. Skinner has argued that Americans should "play from strength", that is, "The things we do best", which is science and technology, or, "Physical and biological technologies have alleviated pestilence and famine and many painful, dangerous, and exhausting features of daily life, and behavioral technology can begin to alleviate other kinds of ills..." Beyond Freedom and Dignity, op. cit., pp. 1, 204. Skinner assumes that such "technologies" are being used to alleviate human misery, but a quick glance at the condition of the peoples in the so-called underdeveloped countries or the poor in the United States makes such assumptions unwarranted. For example, scientists have developed low cost, highly nutritious foods, but these are not made available to the poor because there is no profit in it. See Nick Kotz, Let Them Eat Promises: The Politics of Hunger in America (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1971). See also Carl Rodgers and B.F. Skinner, "Some Issues Concerning the Control of Human Behavior", Science, 124 (November 30, 1956), pp. 1057-1066.

36. For general analysis of the subversion of science in the interests of American foreign policy see Noam Chomsky, American Power and the New Mandarins (New York: Vintage, 1969). Chomsky also criticizes the political implications of Skinner's thought directly, and dogmatically, in our view, in a later essay. See For Reasons of State (New York: Vintage, 1973), pp. 318-369. There is no necessary connection between a humanistic and progressive ethos and expertise as a behavioral scientist as Skinner seems to assume. See Jessica Medford, Kind and Usual Punishment (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), pp. 118-137. A particularly egregious example of the presumed ethics of behavioral scientists is provided in Lloyd Cotter's "Operant Conditioning in a Vietnamese Mental Hospital". Reprinted in Ulrich, Vol. 2, op. cit., pp. 100-105. Our point is that while operant conditioning can and is being used to shape and maintain behaviors which support the present system of privilege, the mere fact of such use does not imply that Skinner is a "fascist", or that somehow operant conditioning is a "fascist", or reactionary ideology.


38. The phrase is from the preamble of the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.). The Wobblies were early advocates of a self-management form of socialism, and as such their strengths and weaknesses deserve careful study today. An excellent history is provided by Melvyn Dubofsky, We Shall Be All (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969).


40. Ostojanovic, op. cit., p. 115.


42. Stojanovic, op. cit., p. 173.