

A TRIBUTE TO THEODORE ROSZAK. THE MAKING OF A COUNTERCULTURE

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ABSTRACT. *A Tribute to Theodore Roszak. The Making of a Counterculture.* The American professor Theodore Roszak (1933 – 2011) is generally credited with the invention of the term “counterculture”, although his seminal book from 1969, *The Making of a Counter Culture* spells the two words separately. To us, today it seems to be the work of a rather cautious, but pioneering sociologist, who acknowledges indeed the legitimacy of the student revolts of the Sixties but at the same time tries to distance himself from their heat with the cool objectivity of the academic observer.

Keywords: *counterculture, the Sixties, Theodore Roszak.*

REZUMAT. *Omagiu lui Theodore Roszak. Facerea unei contraculturi.* Profesorul American Theodore Roszak (1933 – 2011) este îndeobște creditat cu inventarea cuvântului “contracultură”, deși cartea sa de referință din 1969, *The Making of a Counter Culture (Facerea contraculturii)* ortografiază separat cele două cuvinte. Astăzi, cartea ne apare ca fiind opera de pionierat a unui sociolog mai degrabă circumspect, care admite, e drept, legitimitatea revoltelor studențești din anii 1960, dar se și distanțează de incandescența lor cu obiectivitatea rece a unui observator academic.

Cuvinte cheie: *contracultură, anii 1960, Theodore Roszak.*

Why a tribute to Theodore Roszak? It is probably because the former Californian sociology professor (1933 – 2011) enjoys an unmerited underdog status within the Sixties, which is far below his credentials. A few encyclopedias dedicated to the hippy culture mention his name, although everybody knows that he was the guy who had coined the term ‘counter culture’, written in two

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words, without a hyphen in his seminal book published in 1969, *The Making of a Counter Culture*. Roszak didn't enjoy the status of a giant lent to Marcuse, Allen Ginsberg, Norman Mailer, Kerouac or Dean Moriarty, the list being much-much longer. Witnesses of those times do not hesitate to mention that Roszak wasn't a hippy or a protester, and neither a fan of LSD or of other, more or less sacred mushrooms.

In order to grasp his status correctly, we must rely on a term taken from another field, hoping that it will not induce a fatal misunderstanding. Roszak was a "fellow traveler" within the Counterculture of the Sixties. He enjoyed the movement, its sense of "Dionysian frenzy" and freedom, but was reluctant to undress his professional suit-and-tie correctness in order to merge with the sit-ins or the promiscuous parties held in Haight-Ashbury. As you certainly know, the term "fellow traveler" ("poputchik" in Russian) was coined by Trotsky in order to label those intellectuals who were hesitant in taking over the ideals promoted by the revolution. But they liked them, didn't confront them.

Trotsky also said that in order to become a "fellow traveler", you must be a bright, very clever person. This means that your intelligence stays *between* reluctance and spontaneity, functioning as a cautious, but creative inhibition. Roszak was this type of man: too brilliant in order to surrender uncritically, he was caught between the existential and the cognitive halves of the Sixties. In the deepest realms of his heart he openly enjoyed the existential frenzy of the Counterculture, which he once called "barbaric". Counter culture – he said – means "*a culture so radically disaffiliated from the mainstream assumptions of our society that it scarcely looks to many as a culture at all, but takes on the alarming appearance of a barbaric intrusion. An image comes at once to mind: the invasion of centaurs that is recorded on the pediment of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia. Drunken and incensed, the centaurs burst in upon the civilized festivities that are in progress*" (42). On the other hand, he took over the role of the clever civilizer, calming down the "barbarians" with the brilliance of his mind, intellect and civilization. The quote above runs forward: "*But a stem Apollo, the guardian of the orthodox culture, steps forward to admonish the gate-crashers and drive them back.*"

A marginal myself, I instinctively love the marginalized and the dispossessed, and Roszak seemed to me an excellent case study in order to verify my own ambiguities. Actually they are not only mine, because they belong to my whole generation. Communism, censorship and Secret Police enslaved the Romanian society at the time of the Counterculture of the Sixties. I do not want to say that we hadn't at all remnants of it, even within our faculty, who had its own Joan Baez, who took us to the green in order to chant, to murmur folk songs and to dress ethnically, emptying of rural garments our

grandparents' dusty wardrobes and drawers. But, paradoxically enough, we had suffered a *détournement*, in Guy Debord's terms, being forced to have the *intellectual* perception of a phenomenon which was actually *existential*. We had ideas about what Counterculture must be, but we were not allowed to experience it existentially. The paradox repeated itself following the December 1989 anti-Communist revolution, when a few of us have decided to call back the Counterculture of the Sixties from the mists of the past, and transform it into a field of academic study. Again, the approach was an intellectual one: it was the work of our minds, not of our senses or of our body.

This is how I started to deepen myself into Theodore Roszak's works, because he seemed to be a relative of myself and of many of my intellectual pals: a highly clever diagnostician of the novelties of his epoch, who retreats within the protection of his more or less utopian cabinet in order to avoid contamination. He does so not because he is a coward, but because he is convinced that, if he wants to stay sincere with his own feelings, he has to go beyond the intellectual stereotypes and the intellectual certainties instilled to his personality by his intellectual formation.

In Theodore Roszak's peculiar perception, to understand "Counter Culture" is to understand something which goes *against* Theodore Roszak. It is as if life bursts into your office, smashing the door, the windows and your customary habits. Roszak identifies the kernel of the crisis in what he calls "reductive humanism", composed by strictly rational tasks and imperatives, piled up in schools and universities as a dead stock of presuppositions and stereotypes: "*It is quite impossible any longer to ignore the fact that our conception of intellect has been narrowed disastrously by the prevailing assumption, especially in the academies, that the life of the spirit is: (1) a lunatic fringe best left to artists and marginal visionaries; (2) an historical boneyard for antiquarian scholarship; (3) a highly specialized adjunct of professional anthropology; (4) an antiquated vocabulary still used by the clergy, but intelligently soft-pedaled by its more enlightened members*" (147). The truth is still valid today. Nothing has changed, especially in our swish will to be the narcissistic culprits of our academically adorned hypocrisy.

Going beyond the narrow borders of the already mentioned "reductive humanism", we shall find that it is actually the by-product of a wider manipulative field, which is technocracy. "*By the technocracy - Roszak says - , I mean that social form in which an industrial society reaches the peak of its organizational integration. It is the ideal men usually have in mind when they speak of modernizing, up-dating, rationalizing, planning*" (5). Technocracy is owned by the State, it is offered by the State to its people as an ideal of social accomplishment and personal wellbeing. As Marcuse has already stated, it is a

cunning gift, because it is the basis of the so-called “repressive desublimation”, a phrase loved and cherished by Roszak. The main idea is this: each State affirms that its goal is the perfectly rational and organized society. One must be insane to suspect or to say no to such a generous perspective. Neurotic individuals can challenge the goal, but everybody will say they do it because they are neurotic, because they have traumatic repressions. So the generous and all caring State jumps in to take over and integrate these repressions. Marcuse calls the procedure “new authoritarianism”, since “*technocracy does indeed seem capable of anabolizing every form of discontent into its system.*”

In the 7th chapter of his book, entitled *The Myth of Objective Consciousness*, Roszak traces the upper limits of this ration-centered hypnosis in what he calls to be the “programmed environment”. Its aim is to obtain a perfectly programmed individual within a perfectly programmed environment. He quotes both Lewis Mumford (*The Myth of the Machine*) and especially Jacques Ellul to make his idea to be understood: “*Technique requires predictability and, no less, exactness of prediction. It is necessary, then, that technique prevail over the human being. For technique, this is a matter of life and death. Technique must reduce man to a technical animal, the king of the slaves of technique. Human caprice crumbles before this necessity; there can be no human autonomy in the face of technical autonomy. The individual must be fashioned by techniques, either negatively (by the techniques of understanding man) or positively (by the adaptation of man to the technical framework), in order to wipe out the blots his personal determination introduces into the perfect design of the organization*” (2).

If we read these words correctly, we reach the conclusion that the perfect future of the perfectly organized human is post-humanism. It is a nice, perfectly logical premonition. When Roszak wrote his *Counter Culture*, it was a negative utopia. People shivered to get rid of it. Times have changed: nowadays we experience it wholeheartedly.

It is interesting that by denouncing our “*joyless, rapacious, and egomaniacal order of our technological society*” (137), and by asserting that the solution to the rationalized eschatology is the integration “*of the living power of myth, ritual and rite*” into our lives Roszak does not rely on Max Weber’s formula of the “re-enchantment” of the world, which is very similar to what the American author has in mind. Both Weber and Roszak target the deconstruction of the extreme rationalization inaugurated in the 18th century, and, nevertheless, the name of the German thinker appears only once in *The Making of the Counter Culture*, within a neutral list of sociologists dealing with technology. Similarly to Weber, Roszak’s idea relies on a sensitive re-conversion of the world: “*Yet, if there is to be an alternative to the technocracy,*

there must be an appeal from this reductive rationality which the objective consciousness dictates. This, so I have argued, is the primary project of our counter culture: to proclaim a new heaven and a new earth so vast, so marvelous that the inordinate claims of technical expertise must of necessity withdraw in the presence of such splendor to a subordinate and marginal status in the lives of men. To create and broadcast such a consciousness of life entails nothing less than the willingness to open ourselves to the visionary imagination on its own demanding terms.” (240).

Will it be, if we read it correctly, the replacement of Roszak’s professional God, which is Marx, with the Supreme Being resident in heaven? It might be so, when our author asserts that *“in contrast, the beauty of the magical vision is the beauty of the deeply sensed, sacramental presence” (252-253).*

Killing Marx proved to be a real challenge for Roszak, because his formation was that of an honest Marxist. The Counterculture urged him to read Marx critically, even to replace him with Freud and the imaginative tradition of the new culture, deeply permeated by psychoanalysis. Marx has given Roszak the scientific objectivity and rationality of his analytical, but outstanding mind, and it is as if Counterculture came from behind, in order to surprise him with a more imaginative understanding of science, life and society. Was he longing for it? Probably; but, fair enough, he does not kill his idol directly, but lends the privilege to H.B. Acton to do it: *“As H. B. Acton observes, the only «mental production» Marx seems to have excused from the derogatory category of ideology is religion, dreams, visions: such were the dark waters Freud fished to find his conception of human nature. But for all this occult matter Marx had little patience. Instead, he chose to spend dismal hours poring over the industrial statistics of the British Blue Books, where man has little occasion to appear in any role but homo economicus, homo faber. In contrast, Marcuse and Brown insist that we have more to learn of man from the fabulous images of Narcissus, Orpheus, Dionysius, Apollo, than from the hard data of getting and spending.” (91-92).*

Filtered by the expressionists, Marx gave Roszak the understanding of history as a confrontation – but not of social classes, but of generations. History moves forward by progressively structured generational gaps – and the Counterculture was precisely the gap Roszak was looking for to assert the idea. Because of the already mentioned “repressive desublimation” Roszak avoided to suggest a direct clash between the two generations in conflict – the adaptable, conformist generation of the elders and the insurgency of the youth –, by offering instead the old and verified solution of the *dissent*. Back in 1968 he edited a very challenging anthology dedicated to the Dissenters, entitled

*The Dissenting Academy*², with a juicy subtitle: *Essays criticizing the teaching of humanities in the American universities*. The classical dissenters of the 18th century were members of the Protestant religious sects (Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, Quakers) who refused to conform to the liturgy and rites of the Church of England. They did not confront *directly* the Church, but established a parallel educational and cultural system, whose significance was – according to H. George Hahn – “that it kept alive dissenting religion and gave to it an intellectual voice. It opened higher education to dissenters and promoted modern education by bringing «practical» subjects into the curriculum long before Oxford and Cambridge” (194), the two highly esteemed universities whose curricula and acceptance codes had been blocked by the Act of Uniformity (1662) and by the Clarendon Code (1661 – 1665).

Similarly, Roszak believed that the “Counter Culture” must be not a confrontational, but a dissenting culture, the idea being taken over by those who believe that the most important outcome of the Counterculture of the Sixties is the creation of the *subculture* network. Roszak quotes the Italian Nicola Chiaromonte, who said “that dissenters must detach themselves, must become resolute «heretics». They must detach themselves, without shouting or riots, indeed in silence and secrecy; not alone but in groups, in real «societies» that will create, as far as possible, a life that is independent and wise. It would be ... a non-rhetorical form of «total rejection»” (23)

Subcultures, Roszak asserted, are non-political forms of stepping aside from the mainstream: “The tribalized young gather in gay costume on a high hill in the public park to salute the midsummer sun in its rising and setting. They dance, they sing, they make love as each feels moved, without order or plan. Perhaps the folklore of the affair is pathetically ersatz at this point - but is the intention so foolish after all? There is the chance to express passion, to shout and stamp, to caress and play communally. All have equal access to the event; no one is misled or manipulated. Neither kingdom, nor power, nor glory is desperately at stake” (149).

It is so, he suggested, because in the near future the State will be replaced by the new kingdom of magic: “The truth of the matter is: no society, not even our severely secularized technocracy, can ever dispense with mystery and magical ritual. These are the very bonds of social life, the inarticulate assumptions and motivations that weave together the collective fabric of society and which require periodic collective affirmation.” (147).

We might therefore say that the Counterculture of the Sixties re-formatted Roszak, lending him some sort of illicit effervescence he hadn't

² *The Dissenting Academy. Essays criticizing the teaching of humanities in the American universities*. Edited by Theodore Roszak. Peter Lang, Oxford – Bern – Bruxelles – Frankfurt am Main – New York – Wien, 1968

experience during the years of his rational formation. He managed to keep the exuberance long after *The Making of a Counter Culture* became a respected reference book – but never a *best seller*. Roszak proved to be a privileged witness of his period, and when Timothy Leary said that “*the computer will be the LSD of the nineties*”, fueling a special addiction similar to what drugs have given a decade or so before, Roszak published two books dedicated to the newly emerged computer world: *From Satori to Silicon Valley* and *The Cult of Information: The Folklore of Computers and the True Art of Thinking*, both in 1986.

Let's select only two fruitful ideas from these books. The first one, developed in both of them, says that by turning onto the computers – an addiction Roszak continued to suspect, because computing is nothing more than technocracy on a higher level – our mind structure will change by leaping from *knowledge* to *information*. Information is presented as the “counter culture” of knowledge: a more or less “barbaric” intrusion into the logical syntax of the dialectic knowledge, equivalent to a hysterical network made up of shortcuts. While building up knowledge means to develop intricate layers and systems of thinking, information is necessarily a reduction. Paradoxically, but logically enough, Roszak suggests that the mind of the future will be based on reductions. It's a sado-masochistic self infliction: the will to freely use the knife against your own body, against your own complexity as a human being.

The second idea is related to the word we find in the subtitle of *The Cult of Information*, that is *folklore*. Have in mind, while reading it, the residual culture of postmodernism, but please do not forget Norbert Elias' seminal work *The Civilizing Process (Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation)*, published too early, in a year, 1939, which was not prepared to take it. The book will be really cheered later, within the 60s and the 70s. It's a profound and challenging description of a social system whose march forward is marked by the residual waste it leaves behind.

Norbert Elias' main idea relies on the demonstration that the “process of civilizing” generates several sets of cultural and psychological byproducts, called by the author “second nature”. They are related to violence, sexuality, bodily behavior, psychological habits and language, which are progressively censored by the mainstream civilization and culture, but are still functioning within them, as a residual waste bearing affective or symbolic values.

In contrast to the thoroughly organized cabinets of the rational modernity, the waste generated by it is piled up randomly, similar to what we do in our backyard storage closets. In Roszak's terms, and he was extremely flexible in imagining the process, the countercultural subcultures necessarily generate and fuel residual remnants within our existence. For instance, when analyzing the “*youthful renaissance of mythical religious interest*” within the Counterculture

STEFAN BORBÉLY

of the Sixties, he declares himself dissatisfied that “*the young reduce it in their ignorance to an esoteric collection of peer-group symbols and slogans, vaguely daring and ultimately trivial. Then, instead of culture, we get collage: a miscellaneous heaping together, as if one had simply ransacked The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics and the Celestia Arcana for exotic tidbits*” (147).

“Collage” is a creative term already used by Thomas Mann or Borges – not to mention the others. Postmodernists pile up seemingly incoherent items into very sophisticated fragmentary deconstructions. In *Apocalittici e integrati* (1964), Umberto Eco smilingly heralds the future mixture of high and low culture, by integrating the so-called “low” urban folklore into the crystal clear temple of the high-brow canon. There jumps the conclusion: if you want to understand the culture we are living in, please visit the dustbin. Your cabinet is too clean to have revelations.

This is why Roszak was happy while enjoying counterculture: it gave him the permission to visit the shadows and the marginalized.

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