

Rochdale College

Power and Performance

Introduction

Rochdale College was a “free university” which, after its initial experimental year in five old houses on the fringes of the University of Toronto, was housed from 1968 to 1975 in an 18-storey high-rise on Bloor Street, Toronto’s Fifth Avenue. The building consisted of apartments, rooms and “ashrams” (“houses” for 12 students) on each floor with a total capacity for about 900 students. The building also included meeting rooms, offices, a dining hall, bookstore and workshops (Adelman, *Beds* 187-8). Though originally intended to house students attending Canada’s largest university, Rochdale became infamous throughout North America for its “other” inhabitants. To quote from the cover jacket of *Dream Tower: The Life and Legacy of Rochdale College* (1988), the College,

was reviled and cherished as the lowest form of hippie anarchy and the pinnacle of counter-cultural idealism. . . . Through its doors passed the teenage runaway, the U.S. draft dodger, the political visionary, the narcotics smuggler, the peace activist, the religious zealot, the free-love advocate, the motorcycle hoodlum and a host of others who presided over one of the most notorious and most celebrated landmarks in North America.

Both *Dream Tower* and Sharpe’s *Rochdale: The Runaway College* (1987) convey the variety, wildness, creativity and intensity of the project. Both books interview many of the participants and provide the flavour of the experiment in community living and education. The books draw almost identical conclusions: Rochdale, though inherently self-destructive, was a

noble experiment to test new approaches to education, creativity, and community,

Rochdale thrived as an artistic and intellectual hothouse. It became a protected environment where knowledge and experience were allowed to fuse in new and intriguing patterns to produce a bewildering, and sometimes even comical, array of hybrids. Its residents were constantly eager to gauge the strengths and weaknesses of society's time-tested values, while indulging in frequent excursions to uncharted realms of the mind, the body, the social and political fringe and the artistic frontier. (Mackowycz 42) Rochdale was experimental in its methods. Rochdale was radical in its results, an institution that truly fostered freedom: "by adopting an interactive form of self-government that truly tried to do the will of the people, Rochdale went on to one of its greatest triumphs as an institution—that of providing freedom" (Mackowycz 266).

Without detracting in the least from the artistic creativity that occurred in Rochdale, I will analyze the *political* philosophy of Rochdale to argue that the experiment was neither noble nor revolutionary. It was not the embodiment of freedom. Freedom is not to be confused with license. Rochdale was not the expression of the "will" of the people, but of their fantasies. Acting out fantasies belongs in circuses or carnivals to mirror and mock the theatre of politics. Unfortunately, acting out fantasies has since become the stuff of everyday life in the polis. In the eighties, acting out fantasies turned the world into one large circus. In the sixties and seventies, Rochdale was a circus or carnival enclosed in its own concrete tent.

This aspect of Rochdale did not go unnoticed by its participants or narrative historians. One Rochdalian likened her stay in Rochdale to "running away to the circus": "It spoiled me—it did! Life was so easy. It was fun. Nothing's been quite as good since. It was a real fantasyland" (Mackowycz 271). Sharpe specifically depicted the College as a festival of dreams to act out fantasies: "This double-faced effect, purgation and celebration, returns us to the Middle Ages, to the festivals when a Fool was made King and the social order was briefly overturned for the psychic health of the community" (275). However, Sharpe did go on to note that the role of a festival is essentially comic and conservative rather than revolutionary.

This essay is concerned with Rochdale as a circus, a place where melodramatic terror and broad farce are acted out in a situation that combines glitz and animal excrement, not a theatre where Aristotelian tragic drama is

applied to life in order to purge society of its excesses. Rochdale, as some preferred to call it, was a circus to act out the fundamental political contradictions of the society in which it was born.¹ Not only were the excesses not purged, Rochdale was but a minuscule sample of what was to come.²

Mentalités

This essay is also part of an intellectual development that does not restrict political analysis to the examination of political treaties, wars and legislation, but examines popular *fêtes*, carnivals and songs to grasp the underlying beliefs and ideologies informing the relatively elitist activity of politics itself. The examination of marginal sub-cultures can be more revealing in many ways than the analysis and explanation of the major decisions of our time, such as the decision of the United States Congress to support Bush in the Gulf War or the failure of the Meech Lake Accord in Canada. This type of exercise in historical analysis, in the tradition of the *mentalités* school, is often used to provide insights into the French Revolution.³

But while Sharpe and Mackowycz/Mietkiewicz present Rochdale as a collage, a fragment of history, an episodic moment of inconsistent goals and achievements, but ultimately as an expression of freedom, I will examine the episodic character of Rochdale—its inconsistencies, its sense of freedom as fruitlessness, its flower children who achieve no goals and leave no results but consider themselves creatures in a beautiful and ephemeral spring—as an expression of history over the long term of the modern era. The surrounding society conceived freedom as deliberate action fulfilling an explicit decision of an historical agent; that agent held clearly expressed goals and norms, as well as particular perceptions of the circumstances they faced and the consequences of their actions (Adelman “Rational Explanation”). Why did Rochdale define freedom as unboundaried, unfocussed and, paradoxically, passive? Why was there so little orientation to changing the society? Why did Rochdale, although it became a major media event, intervene so little in the public arena? Since Rochdale evolved out of the New Left, a New Left that initially defined freedom in positive terms as self-realization, self-direction and the pursuit of definite goals, how did that same New Left give birth to an inner directed institution where freedom was defined as “doing your own thing?”⁴

Rochdale was not a source of change creativity, but a witch’s brew of frogs’ toes and herbal poisons, pelicans’ livers and the fur of a bat, a realm of

horror that was part of the same magic concoction that would lead to the debilitation of North America. Rochdale was not simply a symbolic acting out of those who lacked power in opposition to those who held its reigns, but foreshadowed the corruption, drift, fraud and fantasy world that became the reigning consensus in the eighties when the baby-boomers who inhabited Rochdale became the money and power manipulators of the power elite.

As an expression of excess, the college was a symbolic rebellion that adumbrated the political and economic heritage of the eighties. Canada and the United States began the sixties as the richest societies in the world and in history. Galbraith's *The Affluent Society* (1958) promised a future of leisure where life could be a perpetual area of play and creativity, as opposed to discipline and hard work. Anyone in the sixties, it was believed, would have a job and, without too much effort, own a home. In the nineties we find the United States transformed from the largest creditor nation to the world's largest debtor. Unemployment increases. We are only now (hopefully and at long last) emerging from the longest recession since the Depression. Even with both spouses working, a majority of citizens find home ownership, without a capital contribution from their parents, to be an impossible dream. Though family earnings have tripled in absolute dollars but only increased 10% in real dollars, in fact "individual average wages fell about 14% in real terms during this period" (*New York Times*, Jan. 12, 1992, 4:1), the increase in purchasing power was only possible because of a second wage-earner in the family. Canada and the United States operate on enormous deficit financing while the infrastructure crumbles, subways remain unbuilt, and there is a pervasive sense that we are in decline. Canada's deficit each year is over thirty billion dollars and the Rae provincial government in Ontario began its term with a ten-billion-dollar deficiency.⁵ We have just finished an era of welfare capitalism with the greatest business scandals in history, an era characterized by fraudulent dealings on a massive scale: the Maxwell scandal in Great Britain, the Campeau junk bond fiasco in Canada and the United States, the American savings and loan scandals. I wrote the first draft of this essay on the anniversary of the Gulf War, ostensibly to be the Mother of All Battles, when a ruthless dictator performing as a clown sacrificed 100,000 of his own citizens in the largest battle since the Korean War in a tragic-farce of a ground war that lasted just three days. The excesses of Rochdale were a tragic farce at the

other end of the political spectrum. Rochdale was integral to the suicides of the youth, high on potent drugs that gave them the illusion of all space as private so that public space was erased as a meaningful category in which to place oneself. They lived and died there, eventually flying through the space that surrounded Rochdale as they jumped to their deaths off its roof or out of its windows.

We have just lived through a decade of gross excess, of unboundaried greed and corruption. President Reagan, a third-rate actor enjoying unprecedented popularity among the American people, governed in a somnolent state as crooks robbed the public treasury while its leaders raved against the evils of the welfare state. The American politicians spent unprecedented sums in an effort to create a Star Wars strategy that had much more to do with fantasy than any realistic prospect of providing an impermeable shield against Soviet missiles. The Rochdale circus has, I believe, something to say about the contradictions in values that melded with the public arena of politics that had become a total circus twenty-five years after Rochdale was started.

The Paradoxes and Contradictions of Rochdale

The most obvious paradox of Rochdale College was that it was housed in a high-rise that on the outside looked very much like many other high-rises built at that time. Originally constructed to house young students, it is now an apartment for senior citizens. Rochdale wore an exterior costume of normalcy, while the individuals within wore the various costumes of Hare Krishnas, Indian activists, peaceniks, druggies, hippies and sexual rebels characteristic of the period. A young woman in a leather jacket wandering through the lobby of Rochdale with nothing on beneath would be no surprise in the present era of Madonna where sexual excess and underwear worn as costumes on TV have become the norm, where Jordache can use a soft porn advertisement on television to promote its jeans and other consumer items, where a trial of a scion of one of the aristocratic families of America charged with date rape or a hearing to examine someone nominated to the Supreme Court of the United States allows children and teenagers to listen to detailed descriptions of sex acts and perversions. Ted Kennedy, the dissolute defender of the liberal vision of America, carrying the hangover of Chappaquiddick, was present at both events, a silent witness to the heritage of the sixties. In 1963, Jack Kennedy, now renowned as

an unsatiated womanizer, but then celebrated as a visionary and king of Camelot, was assassinated when his presidential car rode through Dallas. In 1968, Robert Kennedy was murdered just after winning the California Democratic primary in his run to succeed his brother. Rochdale College had just opened.

The physical schizophrenia of Rochdale extended into the pockets and financial underpinnings of the costuming of the enterprise. There were two aspects to those finances. One was the development of the building overwhelmingly using public debt.⁶ I had given a lecture on “Joyful Capital” at the Kennedy Institute at Harvard University in the sixties to describe the philosophical underpinnings of capitalist enterprise that could be used to create assets for ordinary people and not just the wealthy (Sharpe 24). I could not envision that the same techniques would be exploited by private capitalists, by the Boetskys and the Millikens, the junk bond dealers, bankers, brokers and financiers, using public not private capital to milk publicly guaranteed funds from savings and loan associations to accumulate enormous amounts of private capital in the eighties.

This entrepreneurship on the part of radicals was not unique to Rochdale. In Mark Kitchell’s film on Berkeley, Bobby Seale, now also a professor, describes how he and Huey Newton bought Mao’s *Little Red Book* for 50 cents a copy and resold it at \$2 to buy guns. This, however, was more traditional entrepreneurship for a radical cause. The radical educational program at Rochdale attempted to finance its experiments using rental monies intended to pay off the debt. The leadership assumed that, because Rochdale was an educational institute, it would not have to pay municipal taxes; the future tax refund would be used to replenish that spent income. Capital funds and rental monies were used to finance “educational” experiments. A tax refund was legally possible. Possibility became transformed into reality. But the radical experiment in “education” made Rochdale look less like an educational institution and more like a radical experiment in living, and, therefore, ineligible to receive such a rebate. That was the paradox of Rochdale.

That was the long-term problem. The short-term problem was Rochdale’s inability to manage its cash flow and current obligations. With the exception of those who lived off an income from drugs, 9.7% of the residents lived off welfare rather than from savings from summer and part-time work and student loans (Solursh 182). Tenants unable to pay, vacancies created by rapid

turnover and exasperation with the deteriorating living conditions resulted in an income shortage. Cash expenses that exceed income and policies doomed to depress income even further meant that the financial operations would never be able to pay the capital obligations. The same basic irresponsible activities became the foundation stone for the splurge and capital accumulation of the eighties.

The unreality on the material plane matched the fantasies on the intellectual level. This is important. For intellectuals help to create the symbols of an age.⁷ They are transmitters of meaning for the spectators who observe society on the cave wall of the television screen. If they are catalysts of change, they convey their message in conservative symbols so that the goals and norms they espouse have an appeal to the prejudices, values and symbolic forms that are the conventions of a broad public. If they are catalysts of resistance to change and adumbrators of entropy and dissolution, then they employ radical symbols that assault public sensibilities while they act out the contradictions beneath the camouflage of conformity of the general public. On the material level, radical intellectuals adumbrated an emerging consensus in which the costume of revolt metamorphosed into the capes of the Zorros, Batmen, and Spidermen, the do-gooders of capitalism who protected the banks from common criminals, while using the laws of society to rob the public treasury, who protected the “Free World” from the Evil Empire, and used the state to create welfare capitalists living off the public dole of defence contracts.

These intellectuals had not learned from history. The educational ideals espoused were the very opposite of the essence of education, namely the preservation, cultivation and transmission of the lessons of the past. We can learn from the past if we but take the time to study that past attentively. But Rochdalianians agreed with Henry Ford who reputedly said, “History is bunk.” Dennis Lee, who also quickly became very disillusioned, initially eulogized the “new” approach:

This new student doesn't really believe in anything before 1945 because of the combination of his own affluence and the total shambles that history has produced. He works intuitively, in fits and starts without much method. He moves sideways—not backwards and forwards like the rest of us. Sometimes he explodes and takes up 31 vantage points simultaneously. Often he is the most brilliant or most interesting mind about. (Lee qtd in Sharpe 21-2)

Intuition, not reason. Randomness rather than the systematic tools of a precise method. Self-indulgence rather than dedication to society. The superb

sculpture that Ed Apt created of the unknown student, mounted on the front terrace of Rochdale, the humanoid depressed anti-intellectual with his huge back and ass facing society and his chin on his chest as he gazes at his navel wondering why he was even born, was the very opposite of the muscle-bound Greek hero, The Thinker, who rests his chin on a clenched fist and gazes outward at the world.

The rejection of history did not begin with Rochdale or even Henry Ford. Descartes thought history was a tissue of gossip and travellers' tales and that he could begin anew from first principles. The New Left and the Rochdaliens belonged to an anti-historical tradition that runs through the early social reformers like Jane Addams, the pragmatists and the utilitarians⁸ who formulated an anti-traditional position critical of culture and history, a position which frequently became anti-intellectual. While the myth of the materially wealthy self-made man dominated the external world and nearly led to the election of the maverick, Ross Perot, as President of the United States, the image of an individual who created his own identity from scratch, an image which stressed not only independence but self-origin, dominated one sector of the intellectual world. But when youth as a whole designated themselves as the agents of change in history, each phalanx of the youth culture had to consume its predecessors to recreate themselves anew.⁹

The Marxist critics (Harrington, Roussopoulos, and others) agreed that the new radicals had forgotten history, but would argue that if they had learned to adapt Marx correctly to the changing circumstances, that is if they had become Cartesians in the guise of dialectical materialists, they would have avoided these mistakes.¹⁰ For the conservative critics, the problem was the reverse: it was the naive who did not recognize the emergence of a new version of Marxism that used liberal rhetoric as a disguise. For Collier and Horowitz, former editors of *Ramparts*, "The radical Left still cloaks itself in the liberal promise, and liberalism, as it has come to be defined, still accepts the Left as a political ally" (362). The Left, they argued, is resilient because it builds its political religion on the luminous promise of liberty, social justice and equality. But the romantic celebrants of the sixties, the New Left, and the Rochdaliens in particular, were neither the dupes of the liberals nor the Marxists, but anarchistic celebrants of doing their own thing—and what a glorious, momentary fit of ecstasy it was. For them, history was not a study of the past, but a moral fable to reinforce current con-

victions. It leaves us with precepts, not dilemmas. It is not something to puzzle through to unveil the source of problems reflected in the present. The New Left neither ignored the past nor created a visionary future, but sowed the seed for turning the past into the nightmare of the future because of their ignorance of that past, yet they were willing to use the symbols of the past to create mayhem and abuse everything that a symbol of the past represented.

The name “Rochdale” is a case in point. Rochdale is a small town in England where the co-operative movement is said to have started in 1844. This was a movement of hard-working people who, through pooling their savings and through democratic representative forms, attempted to gain some control over a small aspect of their economic lives in the heyday of exploitive industrial capitalism. Rochdale College was an experiment in living in the guise of an experiment in education, but not one rooted in pooling consumer power in democratic representative institutions to build a capital base that they themselves owned. Instead, Rochdale College used the existing capital of society to indulge in non-material consumerism to destroy a symbolic expression of that capital in the form of the Rochdale building itself in the guise of idealism and through a form of democracy that made a mockery of responsible and accountable leadership.

The late Northrop Frye once described the university to me as the source of authentic authority in society, a place for the accumulation and advancement of knowledge. But Rochdalian identified experiment with experience and looked for wisdom from a guru rather than knowledge from a teacher. “[E]xperience could be richer than study, the suspicion whispered; knowledge may not be wisdom. . . . Like mendicant monks, the members of the new order would sacrifice expertise for the possibility of wisdom” (Sharpe 17). Dennis Lee, the Rochdalian and I espoused a vision of education which denied expertise, celebrated the amateur rather than the professional and longed for the nineteenth-century Oxbridge vision while living in a concrete rather than an ivory tower. There was no need for prerequisites, planning or a syllabus.

The influence of ideas, the wilder the better, was virtuous. The irony was that ideas had no authority, only persons. And everyone was equal in authority to anyone else. Egalitarianism was applied to authority so that role authority, based, one would hope, on authentic authority to some

extent, was dismissed. Everyone was responsible for the environment, and hence no one was responsible. Rochdale severed the links that held the dualities of modernism together—the link between material influence and intellectual influence and their reciprocal and tense relationship, the link between authentic and formal role authority (Adelman, “Authority” 348-51).

Intellectual influence only operates when the educational system is grounded in a solid respect for the material and monetary basis of society. Authentic authority can only work when it is used to establish publicly recognizable authority roles. When intellectual influence is simply made the maidservant of the larger material world, on the one hand, or, alternatively, turns its back on the material reality of the world, the result is either a moral and intellectual void or material self-destruction. In the latter case, as in Rochdale, material responsibility is cast aside for a vision of a pure intellectual quest that drifts off into mysticism.¹¹

But just as the material system disintegrates and a respect for formal authority deteriorates because the system is empty of values and morally corrupt,¹² while asserting that pure intellectual pursuit is respected and everyone is a source of authentic authority, the result is that the participants in that system act out and adumbrate that corruption. The role of this pseudo-education as mirror becomes clear in Rochdale’s vision of intellectual experiment and its model of an authentic authority.

As Sharpe summarized (endnote 1), the model of the Rochdale experiment is not that of science in a university but of testing of a consumer product for its durability, to see how much wear and tear will destroy the item. The forces of destruction are externally imposed and speeded up. Rochdale internalized the process and viewed experiment as a process of *self*-destruction. The same mirroring affects the concept of authority. When authority is rooted in rule manipulation rather than authentic understanding and creativity, when formal authority figures serve to preserve a rule system, while abusing it themselves because they have mastered those rules, rather than ensuring that the rule system serves a clear and beneficial purpose, then rebellion may occur by those who, in their heart of hearts (the Rochdaliens), idealize authority, but do so in a context where there is no division of roles and responsibilities and no agreed rules that define that authority and determine how it is to be exercised and expressed. Instead, the mirror is used to reveal that the emperor has no clothes, that there is no authentic authority at all. For, when everyone is an authority, no one is.

This ironic mirroring of an empty and corrupt society in the making is most clearly seen in the concept of power. Rochdale emerged out of the New Left of the sixties, out of the nuclear disarmament movement, the Combined Universities Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CUCND) and the civil and social rights struggles that succeeded it, the Student Union for Peace Action. They were small “I” liberal reform movements that asked society to live up to its own principles of rights.¹³ The movement initially evoked the principle of governments operating on the basis of the consent of the governed and made equality of opportunity a central principle. But it went one very radical step further. Consent and equality, two very different democratic principles, were merged into a hybrid singular concept of participatory democracy (*démocratie directe* in French) as the byword of the late sixties.¹⁴ Consent of the governed came to mean the equal opportunity of any of the governed affected by a decision to participate in government, not in order to provide individuals with negative freedom, but for self-realization, the achievement of positive freedom.¹⁵ A private sense of positive freedom was superimposed on the public political sphere, the realm where the preservation of negative freedom was the hallmark of democracy. This was the taking populism, the antithesis of democracy, to its extreme logical conclusion.

No administrative or governing council in Rochdale College lasted long or worked. Instead of a civil culture as a democratic amalgam of participant and supporter, a compromise between traditional and modern values pushing for change, instead of compliance, trust, efficacy and cooperation, one detailed plan after another for operating the project came into being. And each was destroyed or allowed to disintegrate in turn. Bureaucracy was not used to allow the institution to function, but to allow people to participate in role playing, rather than playing a role, to extend private fantasy into the public realm so that the alienated could go outside their normal existences.¹⁶ Instead of rituals and rites being used to overcome debilitating isolation, any effort to create habitual practice was attacked and substituted by a new fantasy of cooperation. This corrupt synthesis, this inverted alchemical conversion of the gold and silver of the democratic ideal into the dross of lead and the dead weight of democracy without procedural rules meant that power went to those who could attend the most meetings and sit the longest through often meandering, irrelevant and unfocussed discussions.¹⁷ Power went to the few who had the most conviction, determination and the largest asses. Why? What did this development reflect about the events of the larger society?

Like influence (material and intellectual) and authority (authentic and formal), power also has two aspects. Power is creative energy. Power is also coercive force. In armaments, the West stockpiled, and still continues to build, weapons of mass destruction under a strategy of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). Chemical, biological and atomic and hydrogen weapons were developed to destroy the earth and its inhabitants ten thousand times over, though initially targeted at a totalitarian society that was supposed to differ from authoritarian societies in the mind control exercised by its rulers making it ostensibly impervious to change. It was a strategy built on the basis that the weapons could never be used, and were useless if they were used, but to be useful one had to make the enemy believe they could and would be used (Adelman "Ethics"). It was a formula born in *Alice in Wonderland*. This marriage of the use of creative power with destruction led the New Left to denounce the amorality of power. They also bewailed their own powerlessness. Not content any longer to be bystanders that put not only their own lives, but all human life, at risk, the New Left demanded power over all institutions which directly affected their own lives.

What was the result of the intellectual attempt to "seize" power, at least over their own institutions? A college founded on the principle of participatory democracy, where political power is open to anyone who decides and wants to exercise it, came to be ruled by the gun. From the principle that right makes might, from the heritage of the civil rights movement, from the non-violent movement that began with such impact in Montgomery Alabama, a culture of violence and might is right emerged. Why? Because Rochdale claimed to be a community where everyone could participate, but, in truth, was a "community" of the alienated, where the principle of tolerance extended to psychopathology and psychosis. It was a community of space and not of time, and then of inner hallucinatory rather than public space. Communities are created when people over time acquire common myths and beliefs, common images of themselves and share and enjoy a territory with which they identify (Anderson). Rochdale was an instant community, an oxymoron in itself.

It was also a community which made the control of one's inner space a priority, a clear indication that the inner self was out of control. The governing passion was outrage at the "system"; the expression of that outrage was the goal of using reason to control external life while presenting oneself

as powerless, that is, without the fire of creative passion.¹⁸ Rochdale was the birth child of a movement where angry militancy was repressed and acted out in a non-violent protest movement. When that non-violence migrated inwardly into passivity, the militancy was acted out in an assault on the immediately surrounding material world. This fundamental split between reason and passion could only be expressed in either violence or hallucinatory escapism.¹⁹

But why didn't a Rochdale emerge in the United States? After all, it was the centre of western ideology and its hang-ups. Why did the largest free university in the western world develop in Toronto?

When Rochdale was born, Canada had just celebrated its centenary. It finally had its own flag just as the groundwork for Quebec separatism and the Americanization of Anglophone Canada was beginning to flourish, just when air travel was replacing the long ribbon of steel which united Canada, just when the airwaves began to be filled with electronic signals which ensured American predominance in the realm of communication, just when children raised from infancy on the images of television, rather than on the printed word, began to enter university. Canada was a fiction epitomized in the repatriation of the constitution by a means which excluded the Government of Quebec and the subsequent Meech Lake fiasco. For the economic and communication links, which were prerequisites for keeping English Canada separate from the United States and united with Quebec, were on the verge of disappearing. What Canadians did not recognize as they celebrated the centenary of the birth of their country was that the material factors that held their country together were in the process of disintegration.

Where the very symbolic foundations of a national community are clearly artifacts created in the present just when strong symbols from the common past are needed to resist the imperial homogenizing and melting pot program of Hollywood dominated communications, then in retrospect it should not be surprising that a condensed version of what would emerge as the character of American inner cities was transplanted into Toronto. It should be no surprise that the two most successful accomplishments of Rochdale in the print media should be Coach House Press²⁰ and the largest collection of science fiction in the world, one representing a retreat into inner private space, the other, the conquest of far-out space,²¹ one an identification with the past, the other with imagining the future.²²

Why did this happen?

The Political Contradictions of the West

Why would Rochdale exhibit all the symbols of capital accumulation, epitomized by being housed in a high-rise building that the members owned, while also breaking all the rules of financial responsibility? Why was an experiment in human living in quest of community housed in an institution dedicated to higher learning? Why were Rochdadians so committed to searching for wisdom in an authoritative voice of truth while disregarding all formal rules for sorting out and delegating responsibility and accountability? Why did participatory democracy mesh the principle that those who governed required the consent of the governed with the principle of egalitarian opportunity to participate? Why was Rochdale such a hothouse of creative energy in its sculpture studio, its films, Theatre Passe Muraille, poetry and science fiction? At the same time, why were all established forms of coercive power initially rejected, but, eventually, why was control over Rochdale allowed to be taken over by the bikers, who were the security guards initially employed to police the place and protect those trading or experimenting with potent drugs? Why did Rochdale become the illicit drug capital of Canada? What did all these symbolic contradictions have to say about the liberal society in which Rochdale was born?

The modern liberal state is dedicated to imposing a set of limits by a pattern of justice which, in turn, legitimizes the role of the state. Out of the quest for justice emerged a movement based on experiment with life itself to test and deny limits to the point of self-destruction.²³ Instead of limits defining the boundaries between the private and the public, between the realm that is of concern to the government and the realm that is the exclusive realm for the individual, instead of limits defining the horizon of the social and the cultural, the New Left were constantly on the edge, challenging all limits: “The guiding values of democratic experimentalism are spontaneity, imagination, passion, playfulness, *movement*—the sensation of being on edge, at the limits of freedom” (Miller 147).

The liberal state engaged in the quest for justice only when events seemed to threaten the viability of the civil society dedicated to capitalist accumulation. Liberalism did not oppose communism because it was unjust, but because it threatened capitalism and the free market system. The civil rights struggle was only joined by the state when the tactics of non-violence were applied to bus and business boycotts that would make the system unworkable; and then the Vietnam War ensured that the War on Poverty and the

Great Society programs could not be adequately funded. In the international arena, civil rights only became a part of foreign policy when directed at the apartheid government of South Africa, as a reluctant extension of the domestic civil rights movement. When finally employed in the war against totalitarian communist regimes, cooperation continued with authoritarian military dictatorships that specialized in disappearances as long as the market system of capitalist accumulation was protected and expanded. Liberal society no longer kept conscience and capital linked in an uneasy alliance and balance. Each realm, moral standards and capital accumulation, went its separate way. Formal authority seemed to lose any foundation in authentic authority. And coercive power seemed to have little to do any longer with the preservation of the right of creative expression. With boundaries broken and limits ignored, disintegration replaced integration as the motif of society. And the young were asked to play the sacrificial lambs in acting out the contradictions epitomized in the political world by the struggle between the social justice left liberals and the laissez-faire right liberals.

The Ideological Roots of the Problem

The American right (the laissez-faire liberals) contended that the rules of justice were merely servants of dominant natural laws, operating independently of the state. The reactionary ideology of its proponents led the Reaganites, once they were in power, to appoint justices to the supreme court only if they upheld such a vision. This material reduction fails to comprehend and support the normative responsibilities of the state: “It fails because of the potential for conflict between the limits imposed by a pattern of justice that successfully legitimates the state’s rule and the inequalities—of goods and of rights—that allow the economy to flourish” (Fisk 5).

The role of the state in imposing limits through a pattern of justice was also a problem for the leftist justice liberals. If the right laissez-faire liberals argued against the state imposing limits in the name of private accumulation, the left liberals argued for a system of justice which was primary, which itself knew no limits, but was the fount and source for imposing limits on all other rights and goods.

On the one hand, we had the doctrine of the primacy of unfettered material accumulation of possessive individualism and, on the other, we had the absolute priority of right over any system of distributing goods, a dematerialized or ethereal sense of right, what Michael Sandel (1982) called “deonto-

logical liberalism”(14). Such a view was based on a Kantian autonomous and transcendental self, without history or the lessons of any prior experience and capable of legislating for itself the rules by which that self was to be governed. Whereas Rawls (1971) had tried to ground that transcendental idealism in a sense of reasonable empiricism, Rochdalian tried to transmogrify themselves into disembodied subjects in becoming “spaced-out” on drugs, or cast into another space in their imaginations, or cast back into real space if they committed suicide while living in a very specific space which they ostensibly owned. After all, in the end, space was not real. It was merely a transcendental unity of apperception. Space was merely extension without history or territory, a pure subjective ground for intuiting and sensing at all.

If the New Left tried to apply justice to reality, whether in the opposition to the ultimate obscenity of material accumulation *ad infinitum*, the nuclear arms race, the quest for arms that had to remain useless if they were to be useful, or in the attempt to make justice real in its application to blacks and aboriginal peoples, Rochdalian purified the effort and took the conception of justice back to its uncontaminated Kantian roots while, at the same time, making that vision as concrete and grounded as one could make it by trying to create their own real community based on principles of absolute justice. As the possessive individualists acted out their vision of the liberal dream of an ahistorical and limitless world in the business of business and politics, the rebels acted out the dream of an ahistorical and limitless world within the hard empirical reality of a concrete tower.

What was the absolute fundamental rule of that pure sense of justice—to respect the fundamental autonomy of every other person, to regard every other being as a self-legislator. That self was an unsituated, decontextualized self. People were not Jews, Anglicans, females, blacks, or homosexuals. They had no histories and did not need to develop a history in common as a basis for providing trust and understanding. If materialist liberalism idolized possessive individualism, idealist liberalism created a vision of abstract justice built on detachment even from a self that one possessed. In the pure vision of true justice, the self was dispossessed just as Rochdale as a whole eventually was. Justice was not a matter of allocating responsibilities and possessions in situations of conflict with very specific histories and values at stake. In the effort to ground that self in empirical reality rather than transcendent *a priori* principles of rationality, there is the presumption that a

mature self with a unity and identity already exists and is not something that emerges through experience. The reality is that Rochdale was attractive to those in quest of identity while its political organizational principles presumed that everyone already had defined unified selves, even if that unified self was empty and without content. But it was precisely this sense of emptiness that the flower children were rebelling against. Just as Rawls rejected Kantian metaphysics and a moral epistemology in which an autonomous self could deduce universal principles of justice from abstract *a priori* principles in favour of reasoning within a concrete frame, Rochdaliens were committed to create and legislate their own community within a very definite concrete frame, but still without a sense of a preexisting history, without responsibilities to a preexisting intellectual or civil community of which they were members. The Rochdaliens were to the New Left what Rawls²⁴ was to Kant, sharing the same fundamental sense of justice and the conception of the self, but determined to make it work in a concrete situation. They only revealed the fundamental absurdities of a position that assumes justice (defined now as fairness) can achieve genuine detachment from any inherited wants, leaving parties so detached from the immediate interests at stake that they are incapable of governing altogether.

There was only one dining hall in Rochdale. How was it to be run and under what rules and to what ends? The various parties in contention advanced their positions without being bound by any moral ties to each other or the institution in which the dining hall existed. Earlier, I said that the party who could sit the longest through interminable meetings won, but this depiction is not quite adequate. For the party also had to articulate a vision that appealed to very general principles of what a community ought to be. However, the appeal did not have to refer to preexisting commitments and arrangements. Like Maoism and the Red Guard, like the Trotskyists, a vision of a continuous revolution prevailed in which, at any moment of choice, each individual was in the original position of establishing general rules of governance. Justice does not arise from a respect for human conventions and a willingness to alter them in accord with second order rules of change when those conventions prove dysfunctional, based on the assumption that such rules offset a propensity of humans to be selfish and ungenerous in their personal aspirations, but from a deliberate setting aside of such conventions on the premise that everyone is capable at all times of advancing his or her own interests but in a disinterested manner.

If society was at heart constructed on the premise that all humans had the same appetite to acquire goods ad infinitum, that greed was good and an unfettered market was the ideal, then Rochdalianism was dedicated to constructing their own society in total detachment from the conventions that had been constructed to limit selfishness by indifference to selfish interests altogether, and on the foundation that a sense of benevolence and community would automatically prevail. The conceit of unfettered and disinterested reason matched the conceit of unfettered acquisitiveness that would become openly the prevailing idea of the external world once the left “liberal” ideal had exhausted its credentials in disregarding selfishness and the need and value of community conventions and historical practices and experience in the quest for ideal justice.

The ideal rational world of justice as fairness would reveal itself as the apostasy of self-indulgence, while the appetitive world of unfettered greed as the guiding principle of creating a wealthy world would bang its head against rules of justice embodied in inherited laws and practices designed to reign in greed. Liberal societies did not seem to be able to provide a coherent frame for itself which accepted both the conditions and rules of a market system while holding up a system of justice built on detachment so that the legitimacy of formal authorities could be accepted.

This fundamental contradiction at the centre and foundation of the liberal polis²⁵ was acted out in Rochdale in the quest for ideal freedom in the expression of unbridled license. Rochdale could not deal with justice as imposing limits, time limits, limits to those who were to be given the responsibility for making decisions, limits to consumption, limits to the range of plurality of lifestyles deserving of toleration.

At the basis of this liberalism, both in its materialist and intellectual guises, is a world considered to be made up of autonomous individuals with a plurality of goals, values and beliefs out of which they must construct a cooperative community. Instead of a community existing in advance out of which individuality forms and flourishes, in terms of which norms are established for reason and deliberation, a community can only be a construct that we develop on the basis of personal experience. The self, unlike the objects of the material world, is that which we possess *a priori*. As transcendent, it is ephemeral and unreal. Conceived of as a private possession, it is characterized by what is seen to be the essence of the material world, a world of objects ripe for appropriation and acquisition. But the self has an

identity independent of any relationship to things, possessions, family, and so on. It is at once the quintessential essence of the bourgeois self and its antithesis. No wonder that Rochdale, in trying to realize this self, was a madhouse in which psychopathology strolled its corridors.

Now such a self, in order to preserve this essential distinction between the self with a given identity independent of the surrounding world, must, like Odysseus (Sandel 55-6) attempt to survive his treacherous journey home, assume various costumes and disguises and become a chameleon so that he can return home the same person. Such a self, in the end, wants to retain both his self and his possessions and is best represented politically by an actor capable of playing only one part in various costume dramas. However, a self that acts out the contradictions of this dichotomy must continually destroy any sense of identity, becoming, like Madonna, only the sum of the various costumes worn, repeatedly enacting the process of self-destruction and recreation at a faster and faster clip lest any permanent sense of self be entrapped by its essential self-definition as a material "girl." The fundamental contradiction between this mythical agent of free choice and the agents of consumer desire designated to provide the engine of construction of the material world is acted out in creating fantasy worlds unboundaried by either the laws of nature or the conventions of society.

The madness of the "real" world destructive of the "other" is characterized by possession without end or purpose or use. The madness of its self-destructive mirror reflection is characterized by the eternal and unending quest to dispossess the self of its materiality and, subsequently, in the therapeutic communities that succeeded Rochdale, such as Therafields, in the quest to dispossess the self of memories of family, religion and inherited community. The result is a disempowered self acting supposedly to express the will of the people, to express and give power to the people, but one which is incapable of employing power because it is disembodied from goals which are agreed upon and become woven into the fabric of a community.

No one was able to establish a clear and publicly recognizable self with specific goals and acknowledged means to reach those goals. Anyone who made the effort had to be destroyed since such posturing was a direct challenge to a vision of life as infinitely accommodating and fluid. And so these dispossessed souls huddled together in the quest for a community which would at one and the same time be a community concerned with the person and a community of scholars. But the very presumptions upon which the quest

was based guaranteed that both senses of community would be destroyed. The individual was to create his or herself out of a direct encounter with experience while disregarding the lessons of experiences of history. For if history led to the madness of the modern world, why not regard history as bunk, forgetting that the historical premise of the modern polis was based on this very radical assertion?

NOTES

- 1 G. Almond and S. Verba, *The Civic Culture*, where a subculture of dissent is viewed as a critical instrument for maintaining and preserving the values of society. This essay argues that Rochdale served no such purpose. My own earlier essays on Rochdale College in *The Canadian Forum* in 1970 and on the New Left in *Social Theory and Practice* ("The Canadian New Left as an American Daimonion," 1971) argued that Rochdale acted out for the society in which it was situated. Those essays were more psychoanalytic, more along the lines of the analysis of the family where children are used to act out the conflicts between parents. Those early essays were more concerned with the affective role of the project and the activities of the sixties in general. This essay is more analytic and cognitive, concerned with political theory and the fundamental value premises of society. As such, it also argues that Rochdale adumbrated the problems of society at large that emerged in the eighties.
- 2 It is not the only experiment that could be examined for such purposes. Mark Kitchell's award-winning documentary, *Berkeley in the Sixties*, depicts one of America's foremost universities and the social and political movement spawned in that environment. "And what we see in *Berkeley in the Sixties* is more evolution than revolution—the evolution of the Movement from forum to circus." Brian Gorman, *The Toronto Daily Star*, July 23, 1991, B4.
- 3 In one version of that school, David Kertzer (1988) depicts a festival of liberty performed by forty Swiss soldiers, who survived their rebellion against their aristocratic officers, juxtaposed against a counter-festival to celebrate the values of law and order.
- 4 The latter (contrasted with positive freedom) was referred to as negative freedom, action unfettered by others, by Isaiah Berlin in his 1958 inaugural lecture when he became Chichele Professor of Social and Political Thought at Oxford.
- 5 California, with an economy larger than all of Canada's, feels it is in a financial crisis, although its deficit is not as large as Ontario's.
- 6 The first mortgage, a 4.3 million dollar loan, was obtained from the Canada and Mortgage Housing Corporation for 25 years at 5 3/8%. The second mortgage of \$430,000 represented effectively deferred taxes on which interest would be earned on pre-tax profits while the stock of Revenue Properties increased in value based on these paper profits.
- 7 See Maurice Agulhon, *Marianne to Battle*.
- 8 Bruce Mazlish (1968) in "James Mill and the Utilitarians" noted that "James Mill rejected his own past and, as a 'self-made man' . ." (1039).
- 9 As Christopher Lasch (1965) put it: "the heroes of the youth-culture die twice untimely, constantly superseded by heroes more up-to-date" (75). That conviction was perhaps

- drawn from Randolph Bourne, the originator of the doctrine of youth as a class and instrument of change who, in his 1913 book, *Youth and Life*, asserted, “The modern child from the age of ten is almost his own master” (qtd in Lasch 76).
- 10 “The New Left failed to learn from the experience of the Old Left . . . the need for a patient, long-term approach to building movements; an emphasis on the value of winning small victories as part of a strategy preparing the way for larger ones; a willingness to work with others with differing viewpoints around limited goals; a commitment to internal political education; an understanding of the need for a representative organizational structure that holds leaders responsible to their own constituents rather than to the priorities established by the media; an appreciation of the value and fragility of civil liberties; and a sense of historical irony that would allow its adherents to keep both victories and defeats in perspective” (Isserman 219).
 - 11 In the former case, when material influence is reduced to material servitude and when formal authority merely provide jobs for the apparatchik of lawyers and accountants, politicians and brokers, corporate heads and senior managers who provide no authentic vision for the values and goals for humans, but who draw enormous incomes for their roles, a mirror image of Rochdale is created, although there is an inversion in tactics. This is what occurred in the eighties.
 - 12 Rochdale was American populist democracy plopped down in a province that was a caricature of order and good government, where patronage had been institutionalized and legitimized. This was apparent in the selection of the legal firm to handle the Rochdale mortgage. The fees at full tariff were paid to the firm of Lang Mitchener, a firm identified with the federal liberals then in power and on the approved list of legal firms on the CMHC list. This institutionalized patronage was one way to help ensure that Rochdale obtained its mortgage.
 - 13 As put in a CUCND (Combined Universities Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) brief to Parliament in 1960, “For us, the members of CUCND, the dilemma begins with the basic values which we hold—a society based on the worth and dignity of the individual, which recognizes equality and self-government as the rights and needs of all men. We recognize that we have learned these values, and come to hold them ourselves, by meeting them in the culture that surrounds us. But we find that our society has not in fact developed ways to live and act according to those values” (Qtd in Roussopoulos 9). This phase, of serving as the conscience of society caught between professions of values and actions which did not accord with those values, was transformed into an action program, first aimed at society and then, in Rochdale, at oneself, but without a solid link to the past or the material realities of that society.
 - 14 Even a crown corporation, The Company of Young Canadians, set up by the federal government of Canada to enlist youth in social services and community organizing in Canada, was organized on the same principle. The organizing committee “conceived the boldest plan for such an agency in the history of the western world. It was a real example of participatory democracy. The key to the organization was that power would be in the hands of the young people themselves” (R.A.T. Phillips qtd in Daly 25). Canada was unique in making participatory democracy the governing doctrine of federally funded institutions and organizations.
 - 15 In the vision of C. Wright Mills in *The Power Elite*, “the left would establish a society in which everyone vitally affected by a social decision, regardless of its sphere, would have a voice in the decision and a hand in its administration” (Qtd in Miller 83). Arnold

- Kaufman, the philosopher at Ann Arbor who was such an influence on Tom Hayden, the key drafter of the Port Huron Statement, justified participatory democracy not by . . . the extent to which it protects or stabilizes a community, but by the contribution it can make to the development of human powers of thought, feeling and action. In this respect, it differs, and differs quite fundamentally, from a representative system incorporating all sorts of institutional features designed to safeguard human rights and ensure social order. ("Participatory Democracy and Human Nature," 1960; qtd in Miller 94).
- 16 The problem was not unique to Rochdale: "[A] large part of Berkeley's problem appears to be that so many people are so deeply involved in city government. All those not permanently alienated, it is tempting to say, are involved—but involved in a febrile, almost obsessive way. The involvement encouraged by the radicals has led to cynicism rather than citizenship, to a pervasive sense of civic exhaustion rather than a sense of the rewards of creative civic participation. It is an involvement based on anger and animosity, and it has produced few benefits and many casualties" (Collier 214).
 - 17 It was even worse: "Participatory democracy . . . could be manipulated by interest groups, infiltrated by provocateurs, throw up leaders who were not subject to democratic control" (Fraser 356).
 - 18 This description was aptly applied to C. Wright Mills, the father of the New Left. "His carefully cultivated image—the powerless intellectual as populist outlaw—masked an unresolved tension between an emotional sense of outrage and the conviction, inherited from the pragmatists, that reason ought properly to control man's destiny" (Miller 89).
 - 19 "There were two dominant tendencies among the people I have here in mind, and superficially they would seem in conflict one with the other. On the one side there is angry militancy, full of hatred and intolerance and often quite prepared to embrace violence as a source of change. On the other side there is gentleness, passivity, quietism—ostensibly a yearning for detachment from the affairs of the world . . . an attempt to escape into a world which is altogether illusory and subjective" (Kennan 5-6).
 - 20 Coach House Press specialized in poetry and fine editions harking back to an earlier age. Coach House Press existed prior to Rochdale's creation; it was housed in a coach house in the lane just south of Rochdale rather than in Rochdale itself. As Stan Bevington, the head of Coach House Press said, Rochdale was a great place for him and others at the Press to live, but it was too dangerous and crazy a place to house the Press (Mackowycz 56).
 - 21 Leonard Cohen's novel, *Beautiful Losers* (also a comment on the Canadian character), epitomized both aspects of the dichotomy and the inability to find a way to accept and integrate the surrounding world: "[N]ovels such as Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, whether we like what it is saying or not, faithfully capture the spirit of the age, complete with existential vacuum and oblivion release" (Sutherland 144).
 - 22 Judy Merrill, a grandmother, a famous American writer and editor of science fiction, became a creative force in Rochdale and organized the very successful Rochdale Summer Festival in 1969 dedicated notably to celebrating the American landing on the moon. It was Judy Merrill's large collection of science fiction books that became the core of the science fiction collection.
 - 23 One American New Leftist, Fay Stender, was "the paradigmatic radical—relentlessly pushing at human limits; driven to a fine rage by perceived injustices; searching for personal authenticity in her revolutionary commitments; and, at the climax of her career, finally losing the distinction between clients and comrades, work and life" (Collier 22).
 - 24 "[T]he circumstances of justice obtain whenever mutually disinterested persons put

forward conflicting claims to the division of social advantages under conditions of moderate scarcity” (Rawls 128).

- 25 In Sandel (1982), the heart of the contradiction is to be found between Hume and Kant: “As a Kantian conception of the moral law and the kingdom of ends seems to deny justice its human situation, the Humean account of the human situation seems unable to accommodate strong claims on behalf of the primacy of justice” (40) and in Rawls’ unsuccessful attempt to overcome it.

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