

NEW HOPE FOR THE TECHNOLOGICAL SOCIETY:

BERTA SICHEL* *An Interview with Jacques Ellul*†

S: YOUR BOOKS ARE BETTER known in the United States than here (in France). I ask people about you and they say, "yes, I know him, but not very well." It's surprising because . . .

E: No, no it is not surprising. I am better known in the U.S. than in France . . . It's not surprising because I have always been a critic in all social circles and environments. It is easier to accept criticism from a distance. When it is a Frenchman who is criticizing, it is well listened to in the U.S. But when criticism comes from too close, it is badly taken. I am critical of the French left, yet I am a leftist. I am critical of the Protestant church, yet I am a member of that church. I am critical in ecological circles . . . all the groups that could listen back away. There you have it. In the university I have always had a very tough and difficult time because I criticized the university.

S: How did you start studying *la technique*?

E: I started a long time ago with one of my friends, Bernard Charbonneau. We belonged, before the war, and even before the invention of television, during the 1930's, to a political/philosophical group, the group of Emmanuel Mounier. Perhaps you have heard of it and its magazine, *L'Esprit*. We examined the society of today, contemporary society. At the time we started to think about the development of the machine. We started to learn about Lewis Mumford, for example. Charbonneau and I asked ourselves the following question: "If Marx were to come back to our society, how would he view the contemporary phenomena using, of course, his method?" In his time, 1850, the phenomenon of capital was the most important. Applying his method to our present society, we con-

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cluded that if Marx were here in the world today, he would say that technique is the most influential factor in society, because everything follows technique. So, that is why we started to examine technique . . .

S: How do you see the new technologies affecting the progress of the dialectic?

E: The process of capitalization nowadays, it's not the same as in Marx's time . . . So, the most important thing for me is the revision that has been attempted by Marxists who have tried to see what *informatique*, *telematique*, and all the other new advanced developments have caused to change. What has changed essentially is value. Value is produced less and less by workers and more and more by the intervention of machines. Consequently, the analysis made by Marx about the exploitation of surplus value from the workers' work is no longer accurate. . . . What Marx demonstrated is that when the mode of production changes, the superstructure changes as well. And we are now living in the presence of such a contemporary phenomenon; that is to say the contemporary mode of technical production is no longer like the industrial method.

S: What is the main difference between the industrial and technical modes of production?

E: With the industrial method of production they have tried to get bigger and more powerful, while today they try to become smaller and smaller; using less energy and having maximum efficiency by mobilizing the smallest amount of human and natural resources. It is a complete reversal. We are in the presence of a qualitative change . . . Marx always insisted on the fact that it is necessary to analyze the situation in light of the latest decisions and the newest facts. In his time, it was industry. Nowadays, it is information and automation. . . .

The socialists have not yet understood the problem and the Soviet Union continues to use an industrial mode of production, like fifty years ago. Consequently, it would be a matter of the first order to know what will be the possibilities offered to man to modify the social structure. We are not too far from knowing. I have been studying this question for a long time and very intensively and what is clear is the uncertainty of all the sociologists, political scientists, and economists. They don't know.

S: You mentioned Lewis Mumford as one of the persons who helped inspire your study of technique. But, in your book, *The Technological Society*, you do not agree with him . . .

E: Well, what I mean is that he was the first to think about this question. I am not in agreement with his historical vision of the evolution of technique. I agree with what he says in *The Myth of the*

Machine, because there he goes a lot further than in *Technics and Civilization*.

S: What don't you agree with?

E: It is only a small aspect in the book *Technics and Civilization* about the origin of technique, where he says that the relation between technique and society is the same nowadays as in traditional society. But I say that is not so.

S: Why not?

E: Because since the eighteenth century the phenomenon of technique has completely changed the social relations. In other words, in traditional societies technique is dominated by other forces, for example, by religious forces, which are more important than technique. What happened after the eighteenth century was a reversal, after which technique became the determining factor in society instead of being subordinated.

S: Talking about books, you seem to have reversed your vision of the technological society in your latest book, *Changer de Révolution*.

E: Everyone was surprised by this last book. But I have changed a lot less than everyone thinks, because in general the preface of the book *The Technological Society* has been forgotten. In the preface I say, "If man does nothing; if he doesn't decide to change his direction I am going to describe what will happen." Do you understand? My whole book is the description of the fatality of technique. If man does not change . . . But if man changes politically, if he thinks differently, if he changes the goals of his life, he will or might evolve differently. Everyone forgot that. I wrote that in the first pages.

S: But, now it seems you feel there exists more hope . . .

E: What I notice about the new technique is that there is a change, not in the development of a technician society (*la société technicien*), but in possibilities. In other words, I do not see any tools or means for man to be able to change the course of history. For example: I was good friends with the anarchists. I helped them during the Spanish Civil War, but I always told them how can you expect to achieve anything in an industrial or more than industrial society like our own. There is no way to control it. Now, with the new developments in computer science (*informatique*) and everything organized around it, we have new alternatives, different ways to organize society.

S: So, it is the possibilities created by computers, computer science, and its applications that changed your point of view?

E: It is the appearance of a change in technique that has allowed me to see possibilities. But these are just possibilities. People do not see this idea, though it appears in my last book, *Changer de Révolution*, and they interpreted what I said as computers are going to change

society. I said: if leftists decide to form a new socialism, actually a kind of anarchism, a socialism of freedom, they have a tool which will allow the society to transform itself. But it is not the computer itself that is going to modify anything in society. If man does nothing, the computer can make society worse. The state will be even more controlling, much more authoritarian. Propaganda will be even more effective, etc., etc. . . . In other words, thirty years ago we saw no developments in technique which would allow man to change society. Now, technique provides a tool which can be used to change society. Now, does man intend to do it? . . . There are a lot of possibilities but what is very, very dangerous is that now we can be equipped with *telematique* (a combination of computer technology and telecommunications), television, and computers and . . . man is directed toward computer games. Now, that is dangerous, because we are going to start to play. And we will make other games and will forget to try to change society. Propaganda has already changed its character. Now propaganda is being used for amusement. Now propaganda is much less political and much more *divertissement*: "we are going to profit from our leisure time and are going to have fun" . . .

S: What do you foresee for the organization of leisure time in our technological society? What about the promises of free time when machines work for us?

E: Please, not the organization of leisure time, because from the moment you have the organization of leisure time, once again the social body will take charge of the individual and he will not discover the only important thing which it is necessary to discover in a society like ours: freedom. . . . For me it is very important that we arrive at a real reduction of work time in order to give the individual the possibility to express himself on . . . The dangers which prevent this are, obviously, television. It is easier to stay for hours in front of a television screen than to create something, and also the increase in computer games. . . . That seems very, very terrible to me because let alone, man is not lazy. It is something we have heard 10 million times, that is, if we make fewer working hours for him, the individual won't do anything. That is not true. What I notice is that and individual always finds something that interests him. Always . . .

It's amusing, the University of Bordeaux is three kilometers from here. In order to get there, I take a little path by a little group of houses owned by retired people. I admired what all these people who were retired had found for themselves. All of them have a hobby; they invent their activities. They create their foci of interest. There were some who have small workshops where they build pieces of furniture. I think that if you free man, and you say to him: "you have

some time to do what pleases you," he will find something that he likes to do. . . . I am sure that if we allow people the freedom to be themselves, we would have a much more alive and balanced society. But more than anything else, no organization of leisure time. If you have to gather people together and lead them in order to show them what to do, everything is lost. It's not worth it. . . .

S: I would like to go back a little bit to make clear something that you said about the "new socialism," comparing it with a form of anarchism. What is your idea of this "new socialism"?

E: Socialism is a very old idea. In France, in Spain, this corresponds to what was called "anarcho-syndicalism" — anarchist unionism. In Spain, it was very well known. That means that already in 1900, eighty years ago, there were people who thought that it was necessary to divide big organizations into smaller organizations, to a human scale. They would divide the factory to dimensions of small *ateliers*, for example. So that everyone would be interested in the organization of the work. In short, there would not be a difference between those who organize the work for the others and those who work. But there was no way to put these good ideas into practice. No way to reduce a large company to a series of workshops. It is impossible. . . . I don't believe absolutely that *micro-informatique* is the solution. It is a possibility that exists now and that didn't exist before. The problem is to know if the big corporations will continue to have so much influence on the decision that there will not be real decentralization, from the economic or political point of view. The microprocessor is an instrument that can help to find a solution. I don't see any other.

S: I think that it is now also impossible, even with *micro-informatique*, to break the big organizations into smaller ones. The big corporations just get bigger and bigger. . . .

E: Yes, the big corporations are getting bigger and bigger, but there is now the possibility. There are two things: there is the physical possibility to reduce the work place to a human scale while maintaining the same efficiency level. When you talk about big corporations getting bigger, I think that is part of the world crisis, and they have reached the multinational dimension; a size so enormous that nobody controls exactly what these companies do. I think we will see a series of economic catastrophes, of bankruptcies. Right?

S: Are you saying that corporations like IBM, Exxon, or AT&T can go bankrupt?

E: Yes. When they become too big there will come a point where they will collapse. We are not too far away. When you observe the number of countries which have such important debts to them, if at any time one were to assess the cash balance of these companies, one would find a series of imminent catastrophes within them.

S: But this idea of breaking up the big corporations into smaller ones, and that everyone is responsible for his own work and energy, this was also a very common idea in the sixties, with the counter-culture, Marcuse, and so on . . .

E: Yes, that is Marcuse and others. But what did not exist in the sixties was the physical way to produce it. Marcuse said that it was going to be the people of the third world, the hippies, and women who would be the revolutionaries, who would bring about the change. Marcuse was absolutely uncertain on this point. While now I see a very small possibility, if we are resolved to use these new ways, to reorganize production and distribution, and not only to have fun. We are, as we say in French, *sur le fil de raziator*. I don't know.

S: Do you see any difference between a "technological society" and what has been called an "information society"?

E: If there is not an orientation in the direction of free socialism with complete decentralization, the "information society" will be an even more developed society of technicians.

S: Do you think that the means of control and repression will become more complex and stronger, especially with the refinement of means of communication and telecommunications?

E: On the one hand, it will become stronger and, on the other hand, it will be less and less necessary because people will become more and more the same. People will be more and more conformist. It is frightening to think that in the schools one finds all around students who conform completely to society. Today the student accepts as completely normal something which would have been considered an invasion into the private life of the individual, which would have been unacceptable. Therefore, there will be more control, which already seems extraordinarily powerful.

I am picking an example out of the hat. There are on all the tall monuments in Paris television cameras which film all the time everything that happens in the main streets. The excuse that they use is that they are facilitating the circulation of traffic, but in reality each time there is a meeting, a parade, everything is filmed. And it suffices to enlarge the film to know who was there.

S: I think one can say that the information society has two sides: on the one hand, it represents the development of communication/telecommunications which will distribute information better. On the other hand, it represents repression, a closed system . . .

E: Surely, but more than that, in order to have better distribution of information we must face two big problems. First, we already have too much information. The normal individual can not record all the information he receives from television and newspapers. There is too much. That is the first difficulty. The second one is that with the

multiplication of information the things which are fundamental are drowned in a quantity of things which are not important.

S: But it has become a great business of capitalist nations to sell information, any kind of information . . .

E: I think that information is a product, now . . . Who can control information? In France, there is a commission called Information and Liberty. You can contact this commission in order to find out if anything about you has been put in a file or in the memory bank of a computer. But, who is going to have the idea to ask this question? People who are already educated, an economist or a teacher might look for this information. But the average citizen is not going to try to find out if there is a file on him, if there is a collection of facts which could be used someday. So you see, to make an effort to control information implies a very educated individual. To me, that is the danger of the memory banks, where everything is recorded and no one knows anything about it. . . . In the systems which are not capitalist, the people also have no control over the memory banks, which are in the hands of the party. Only the party can control, retain, and limit the information. In one instance, the information is in the hands of the capitalist corporations, in the other, it is in the hands of the state and the party. The individual just is not able to get control of it; neither in one nor in the other.

S: So, the problem of control exists anyway . . .

E: Yes, the problem of control exists always. Evidently the answer from a viewpoint of freedom is: I won't call for the suppression of memory banks but the opening of memory banks within many small *organismes*.

S: The whole idea about decentralization that you had talked about before?

E: That's it. Exactly.

S: So, we can say that decentralization is a way to diminish social control?

E: Yes, with the condition that there is a true decentralization, and not the type that is being produced in France at the moment, which is called decentralization but which is not decentralization. True decentralization is when the citizens themselves can have access to certain documentation or facts . . . But that would involve not only a change of institutions, but also a change of mentality and psychology.

S: How could this change come about?

E: I think that if the university was truly as it is supposed to be, it would be extremely useful for change. The university teaches technique, but at the same time it should teach criticism, the ability to criticize technique and the world in which we live. For this reason,

in 1968, I agitated with the students in order to obtain what was called in France the "autonomous universities," which meant that each university would be free from the state, self-organized. The professor and the students would organize themselves. It was a complete failure, and I think the political situation today in the universities is worse. They are concerned only with preparing modern man for technique. I think that a university should do just the opposite. That's one element. Another element should be the churches. You know that I am a Christian. I did all that I could to get the public councils of the church to take on the role of education. Education that could enable a man to become a responsible citizen, capable of taking seriously what happens in his community, etc. That did not work out either. I think that actually in France, and elsewhere also, there are small groups of young people who try to change themselves, psychologically and morally. If they are not suffocated I think there is an extraordinary possibility to see a change. Today in France the young people seem very good to me. Those who are eighteen to twenty-three years old are very, very good in contrast with the forty-year-olds, who have failed drastically. It is possible, there is a small change . . . for the moment, it is small.

S: What do you mean when you write that today it is more important, more decisive, to solve the difficulties raised by technology than to solve purely political issues, like election problems and so forth?

E: We do not live in a period which is comparable to other historical periods. All the problems in the societies which have preceded ours, the Romans, monarchical society, all the problems were in reality political problems. The world today can no longer be directed in the same way as before, because politics does not have the same power it used to. And it is that which makes this period different from the others.

S: How do you see it?

E: As an historian, I can say that there are historic periods of development and of balance within society and then that there are periods of breakdowns, rupture. There are always historical periods. But the one which followed the end of the Roman empire — Europe in the fifth to the tenth centuries — is not the same thing as the period of the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries. But it has always been this historical/political question which was dominant, and now this has changed. Politics does not have the power it used to have. The political man does not direct society. It is another force.

S: Who directs society?

E: The *mechanisme technicien*. It seems to me that there was a great period in human history when nature was the most important

element. Man was weak in comparison with nature and he had to battle constantly within the natural environment. Approximately 5000 years before Christ, society became organized and nature was no longer the most important phenomenon. From 5000 before Christ up to approximately now it was the political world which was the most important. In other words, what was most important was the organization and management of society. Now we have come to a third period where the most important phenomenon is neither nature nor politics nor society. It is technique which directs individual as well as collective life, etc. . . .

S: Technology will become an authoritarian force, like a church or state?

E: It is the problem of Galbraith's technostucture. I don't think that they (technology and church) represent the same type of power because the technician doesn't try to exercise a general power, if you will. He tries to apply his technology as best he can and in order to facilitate the development of his techniques in his own domain. . . . The difference is that the men of the church, as well as the men of the state, seek to organize the entire society. They see themselves as organizing society, they view the society as a whole. They have a total view of the state, of the nation as a whole. They have a doctrine, whereas the technician has no doctrine. . . . The technician is a pragmatist, and he applies his technique pragmatically. It is because of this fact that one finds everywhere that technicians make a society become a technical society.

S: I would like to ask you some questions about propaganda. If you were to write another book on propaganda, how would you write it?

E: Oh, yes, my book is very old.

S: What has changed in your analysis of propaganda in the last twenty years?

E: If I were to write another book about propaganda, the central themes would remain exactly the same. Why? Because propaganda, anyway propaganda in China or the Soviet Union, has remained almost the same. The methods are a little better, a little more developed, but really it is almost the same. What seems greatly changed and developed in this era is what I call sociological propaganda, which refers to the ways of integrating man into society. That type of propaganda seems much more important to me than political propaganda. In the so-called democratic countries, direct political propaganda is a lot less effective. In France today, the failure of government propaganda is very important. In spite of the efforts of propaganda, the French people don't believe the government anymore. But if they do not believe in government propaganda anymore it is because they believe that society should work, that they

should be happier, have more cars, etc. In other words, they are more integrated into the society than they were before.

S: Why don't you use the word advertising but always prefer propaganda, even when you are talking about advertising?

E: That is something that I am studying again, in face of the development of advertising. When I started my studies on that I had the impression that the phenomenon of psychological manipulation by political propaganda was more important than *publicité* (advertising), but now it's the other way around because the situation has changed in the face of the development of commercial advertising. Nowadays I think advertising has become more manipulative of people, more so than propaganda. Advertising has now created a new type of man . . . *Publicité* is one of the ways to shape a new mentality for modern man. It has succeeded in making modern man into a consumer and has pushed him to take advantage of consuming. And now, advertising has shaped a conformist man . . . a man who is more into pleasure. He is a lot less worried about his work, more worried about consuming than living the agreeable part of life . . . I think for this reason we find ourselves in a society which more and more tries to strip the individual of his responsibility. And it seems that we are in a completely different world compared to other societies. And being in the presence of such complicated phenomena, we do not have the impression of being able to do much.

S: At this moment in the U.S., microcomputers and electronic products have been supporting the media, especially the print media. In a magazine like *Business Week*, or even *Newsweek*, at least 50% of the advertising is devoted to these products . . .

E: That is it. In France also. With an extraordinary influence coming from government because the government thinks that it is going to save the French economy with microcomputers.

S: What do you think will be the consequences of government's intimate relationship with scientific research and science?

E: Now, that is a problem. But there are more and more French scientists who do not go along. Which means there are more and more scientists, at least this is one of my hopes, who understand the seriousness and the danger which this represents. In France it is incredible. You hear frequently that science "does not wear the same dress." The French scientists are not ready today to permit just any use of science. They are not very favorable to all research, and our government fights and combats this tendency. The government wants absolutely that science become purely practical. They want products which can be produced and used immediately. It is very simple, you know. The money for the centers of theoretical research is transferred to laboratories for practical research; for utilitarian

research. I find that at the present moment industry and science find, in a certain way, themselves linked in a relationship established by the state.

S: So, how do you see the interaction of these forces: government, science, industry, and propaganda?

E: The danger of this liaison is that the critical spirit which is part of science and which encourages judgments is disappearing. That is what we are doing. That is one of the *robes* of modern propaganda: the disappearance of the critical spirit which encourages judgmental decision about what is being created from the political viewpoint and also about the effects of technique. Propaganda is an obstacle to reflection.

S: What do you think about the effects of mass media on society?

E: Exactly. The point that always seems the most important is that the individual is becoming incapable not only of differentiating between true and false information, but differentiating between the information which has a real effect on his life and that which is irrelevant. The enormous quantity of information . . . There is not time to read it. This is the problem of receiving tons of information every day. See, something comes that really, vitally interests us, but it is lost, unperceived among all the other stuff. Or else you have to say to yourself, as I do, with the newspapers which I read, "I am going to take a certain line of information and I will not read anything else; I will not listen to anything except this; and the rest, tough." My oldest son is fascinated by Cambodia and life in Cambodia. For a long time he has paid attention to practically nothing except that which concerns Cambodia. I am forced to do about the same thing. I chose a few points, but even so I have already mountains of folders. . . . Now it is really more difficult . . . When I worked on the problem of technique it was relatively compartmentalized, and now I have to keep myself informed about the phenomenon of medicine, the phenomenon of the diffusion of information in the political milieu, how it gets through or how it does not get through. . . . In the development of science in France, it is evident that the more technical methods are advanced, the more difficult learning of knowledge becomes. Knowledge has become very difficult. From the historical point of view, we are crushed by over-documentation. Yes, knowledge can be recorded in a computer. But how is that going to help us? To know that everything is in the computer . . . because I, myself, won't have the power to think? We have to believe that this is a problem of all scientists. We must not believe that this is a problem that can be solved as we have been solving our problems throughout this century: by greater specialization. Because now we have realized that in order to be good in a very

small field one needs an enormous amount of knowledge from other areas. You see? Now I don't know if you know the French philosopher Edgar Moran, but this is exactly what he tried to demonstrate in his last book, *La Methode de la Methode, la Nature de la Nature*. He tries to show that a scientist today can't work well if he does not have a more and more global vision, and a global vision is becoming enormously difficult to obtain. I'll take my little area, which in the beginning was my specialty, Roman history . . . Today, if we took a list of books on this specialty we would find more than 1,000 pages of titles, which is to say that there are about 12,000 works on the question. That's impossible for anybody. That's why I mentioned this example of Roman history. People think, "history, oh, it's always the same," but it's not. We evolve. We search. We find new documents and relics. Little by little, things are found which help us to understand texts which before were not very well understood. So we reread everything. Starting from the beginning. History now is really a fabulous process of discovery. Possession of knowledge . . . — its relation with power — is going to be a relation of domination. Power is growing . . . In reality, the man at the bottom has fewer possibilities to act against those in power . . . The power which is growing is government power, the unions, the parties, the big corporations. . . .

S: Do you really think that the unions can increase their power when automation is taking over the assembly lines, displacing workers, and so forth?

E: This is completely true. Only unions today are not at all the same as the unions fifty or eighty years ago. Now the unions are enormous organizations. Their character is no longer revolutionary at all, and their ideas are completely reactionary. I mean that they continue to demand salary increases, controls on unemployment, etc., etc. They are incapable of understanding the problems of society today. So they will lose their power with automation. . . . The problem right now is the creation of groups which aren't the old visions or political parties but new groups which will, I'll say, play or act in another domain. Now, I am very critical of the ecologists.

S: I'd like to know your opinion about the ecologists.

E: Yes, my friend Charbonneau and I, we began the ecological movement in France a long time ago, but we're very critical of what the movement has become now. They lost the truth of their fight. But we're trying to recreate the movement. You see, movements like this, which are neither unions nor political parties, like the struggle against nuclear power, the peace movement, movements concerned with the dropouts and marginals are very important in our society. But they are situated outside the mainstream. I think it is they who

are going to give corporations trouble (not the unions). Greenpeace is important in the same way. It is this type of people, this type of movement which confronts power, and no longer the unions. . . . Relationships with power, I think, should be created from the bottom by the bottom (*la base*). . . .

S: What do you think of the increased role of technology in the cultural area?

E: Yes, that's yet another enormous one. I think that cinema today is admirable, an art. We created some works in cinema which are for me great works of humanity with a distinctive character. But they are created and then they fade away. Godard, on the other hand, is an author who sees eternity. Art permits man to think of eternity, and it is this that is important. . . .

. . . Extraordinary films are made today, but tomorrow they are finished. Most of our great works are works which fade away, disappear . . . The specialists see them in film archives, but that's it. . . .

What seems most disturbing in modern art is that they have rejected everything which up to the present was considered to be the purpose of art. The role of art . . . If you take the writings of musicians and painters, etc., because they talk a lot, they all have a great compulsion to talk, they will say first of all that it has nothing to do with making a beautiful work. It is not about creating something which has a meaning. Art, for thousands of years, has been one of the ways with which man has given meaning to what he lived, to the events in the world.

S: What do you mean by "give meaning to man"?

E: What I am trying to say is that in a society, man can't live if his life has no meaning. He would commit suicide. So he found a number of ways to give meaning to it: religion, certainly philosophy and certainly love and family. But art was always a means of finding a meaning . . . Art allowed man to believe that he is eternal and that is important. And also for a long time art was the search of a certain beauty. Today there is no beauty. Now, one reads there is no more sense, no beauty, art strives to be either a face of *moyen technique* or the expression of the absurdity of the world. All the art is absurd. . . . If the world got worse, art would get worse. Instead of giving it light, instead of giving it hope, it would only make the world darker. To me, this seems horrible.

S: Beauty is a term, I think, which has to evolve. The value of beauty is mutable. I think it has a lot to do with the level of perception or the information level of the individual. Finally, I think there is a sense of beauty and that people are sensitive to it, depending on their level of awareness. . . .

E: Certainly, that is one of the directions that art can take.

S: What I'm not sure about is the value of beauty . . . It is hard to define it. . . .

E: Yes, that's true. It's very difficult to clarify. It depends on what environment you generally find yourself in. There is no *absolute* for beauty . . . There, I definitely agree with you, but what I wanted to say is that now you are in the presence of a very great number of painters and musicians who say, "Beauty no longer interests. We don't have to look for beauty anymore. It's finished."

S: Yes, it's a matter of terminology — it's beauty, thought of as having a classical value. I think there still exists a search for beauty, but what has changed is the sensibility, perception, and the value of this term.

E: Yes, I accept that. I can't stand pop music. It is physically impossible for me, while my son lives with it. He can cope with it very well . . . But, also we have another terrible element in modern art. I said before that we have two and I just talked about one. The second is that it's an art which destroys man a little more. That is to say that . . . for example, the Theater of the Absurd. It is terrible, as if life wasn't already absurd enough. Is it necessary that art show us with a production that life is absurd? You see now what I mean when I say that the statement of modern art isn't about the search for meaning or sense? . . .

S: Before we finish, I would like to ask you some questions about the third world. As you know, a country like Brazil is living in a "Catch-22" situation. It has an enormous foreign debt, yet it must keep itself running.

E: They are all at the point that if they ever had to repay their debts, nobody would be able to close the accounts. It would only mean bankruptcy for most of the developed countries. So it is necessary to understand that it is not true that France will be able to export its gimmicks to the third world. That's idiotic. The third world doesn't have money to buy what's sold to them. On the contrary, in order to avoid bankruptcy in the third world, industrial countries have to produce what the third world needs to organize itself. Do you understand? No computers, they are not necessary. But, for example, for Africa, Zaire, etc., it would be useful to show them how to manufacture solar pumps and all the materials which are good for these countries, and only for these countries. They are not produced precisely because there are not any other buyers. Obviously, it's necessary to produce them and send them fast. We are rich enough and active enough to do it. Of course, it means a lower level of comfort for France. Perhaps we wouldn't have satellites, microcomputers, etc., but we would use the money for something a lot more important.

S: How can the latest technology be used in the third world countries?

E: It's absurd. The problem can't be solved from that side. For the third world, I think that disinterested solidarity of rich peoples with other peoples is the only answer. That's dreaming, and that's why there will be a crisis. People and government are stupid. Stupid. They don't understand that a disaster in the third world means a disaster for the whole world. There is only one solution to avoid disaster in the third world. It is not aid, care packages which serve for the moment, etc. They need to be helped to find methods to develop themselves.

S: The French are adopting a certain humanist marketing strategy to sell products to the third world . . . What do you think of this Socialist policy?

E: Yes, yes, well the French humanist strategy, . . . Mitterand's statement was typical. By helping the third world we can lift France out of crisis. The minute you say it is in order to lift France out of the crisis it's a lost cause.

S: We are one year before 1984 and seventeen years before the year 2000. What are your predictions for man and society? You've heard of "Big Brother" and the Apocalypse.

E: Oh, no. You know, I think that the most probable thing is that we are going towards a crisis, a break. The most likely, in my opinion, will be bankruptcies. I don't believe there will be an atomic war. I don't believe it at all. Because everyone's too afraid. It could happen by accident. But I don't think the government has the courage to push the button. Everyone is too afraid. The Russians also. But what is certain is that there will be confusion, extraordinary confusion, disorder.

S: Today you are less sad and pessimistic than you were twenty years ago? What has changed?

E: I am less pessimistic. I mean, I am more human. Thirty or forty years ago I was more rigid. What's changed? I've changed. I changed in relationship with other people. Thirty or forty years ago everyone was sure that the world was progressing. Everything was tremendous, life was wonderful, etc., etc. At that time, I said, "no." Be careful. Now everyone I meet, especially young people, are uptight, nervous, afraid. In this environment, and relating with these people, I tell them to listen, that there is a chance. There are few possibilities, but one should never lose hope. What has changed is the people for whom I write, the people to whom I talk. When I write a book or article I always think about my audience. It's never abstract.

MYTH AMERICA AND OTHER MISSES: A Second Look at the American Beauty Contests

A.R. RIVEROL*

EACH YEAR, DOZENS of articles appear in popular magazines, periodicals, and supermarket tabloids claiming to reveal some previously untold secret about a national symbol — the American beauty queens, Miss America, and Miss USA. As if airing out the family's dirty laundry or unearthing the skeleton in your grandmother's closet, the popular press wags its finger a week or so before and after pageant time with such headlines as: "Almost Miss America," (*TV Guide*, 1982), or "Won by a Nose" (*Daily News*, September 16, 1982). Articles such as these, while entertaining, deal mostly with pageant scandal. Many analyze the content but ignore the cultural and media context. Consequently, they miss the mark instead of marking the myth.

It is perhaps this sensationalistic approach to the Miss America Scholarship Pageant, Miss USA, Miss Universe, and other pageants that has turned off serious media criticism in this area. Pageants have been dismissed as fluff. Yet any institution that can boast of being an American tradition (Miss America 1982's theme was "An American Tradition"), any institution that can be accepted by even its opponents as a worthy adversary must be studied more closely to see if its claims of being a tradition are true.

A discussion of beauty contests, however, could not be complete without a historical overview. There is only one mention of a pageant existing prior to modern times. If the prehistorics judged their mates

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