

Orange County, Yugoslavia¹

Think of how much of the Hegelian dialectic might be summed up, as an overall title, in the idealist Coleridge's favorite proverb, 'extremes meet.'

(Kenneth Burke)

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL COMMENT: WHY I DID NOT VISIT DISNEYLAND

When I was 18 or 19 and in my early 20s, I drove past Disneyland many times, cruising the freeways of Orange County in southern California, but I never stopped.² I knew that this was the pilgrimage center of fundamentalist capitalism, Mickey Mecca, and that terminally ill children often expressed their desire to visit Disneyland before they died, as their 'last wish.' At age 19, this seemed to me reason enough not to go. But there were still more personal reasons for my resistance. At that time, I was active in mountaineering—I passed Disneyland most often on my way to meet other climbers in the southern Sierra. From my moving vantage point on the freeway, all I could see of the park was the huge plaster model of the Matterhorn sticking up above the fences. Each time I saw the fake mountain, I thought of the four climbers who perished in the Whymper party when their rope broke on their return from the first successful ascent of the real Matterhorn in 1865. Disneyland became associated in my mind with death. Disney's Matterhorn itself reminded me of the grotesquely distorted plaster 'death masks' I had seen in museums. It made no sense to me, at the time, that someone would want to make a death mask of nature.

Disneyland is also the palace of little hyper-real celluloid animal

deities, not dead, and not alive either. Mickey Mouse and his friends are an evident reprise of American Indian mythology. But in Disneyland, the animals appear as a virtual inversion of the mythic Indian figures. At Disneyland they are innocent, stupid, and entertaining, not willful, crafty, and instructive. The thematic outlines are the same for the Indian spirit quest and the touristic visit to Disneyland: both involve a sacred journey to a distant objective to obtain a few precious words from a protective animal spirit. But the libido, energy, and wealth are flowing in the opposite direction at Disneyland, not into the youth as a special kind of power, but from the youth into the park as a special kind of place. As a quasi-religious center, Disneyland bears too strong a resemblance to other similar places before it: it was built on a violent denial or suppression of the religious beliefs of the people who had previously occupied the same site.

In 1960, in my sophomore version of dialectical materialism, I 'read' Disneyland both as a suppression, and as a false excuse for the failure of the surrounding society. If the freeways of southern California are jammed up, the monorail at Disneyland moves with perfect precision. If the people in the neighboring communities are condemned to live in their own waste, 'Main Street USA' at Disneyland is pristine. If society has become violent, in Disneyland there is peace. If society has become too commercialized and materialistic, at Disneyland one can get by on discount 'Disney dollars.' If California seems to have no center or reason, Disneyland at least beckons as a center, real place, or destination. In other words, Disneyland's reason for existence is to 'prove' that capitalist social reality is some kind of weird accident that should not be associated with actual political and economic relations: the heart of the system is pure and good.

In 1981 I spent five months in Orange County making ethnographic field observations. I visited Disneyland once, especially to see the 'Music Fountain' at the Disneyland Hotel, because it was the attraction my respondents in nearby communities, the 'locals,' often mentioned as the one they enjoyed the most.

WHY I VISITED ORANGE COUNTY

Coleridge's favorite aphorism, 'extremes meet,' at first appears as a liberal way of obscuring distinctions and foreclosing arguments.

Extremes may eventually meet and even merge, but only in the realm of myth, and then only under conditions where consciousness of contradiction in thought and life is totally repressed. Nowhere in America, I think, is everyday life more mythical, the contradictions more extreme or more repressed, than in Orange County, California. In the 1950s, before Disneyland was built, Orange County, just south of the city of Los Angeles, was rural and suburban. Today, it is densely populated with almost 3 million souls. It is also ethnically diverse, with communities composed almost entirely of Vietnamese refugees in Garden Grove, Mexican American communities in Anaheim, thousands of Cambodian refugees living on Minnie Street in Santa Ana, and so on. But it is not the 'demographic reality' of Orange County which interests. Nor is it anymore even Disneyland. It is the mythic side of Orange County, south of freeways, the blond side—John Wayne Airport, the Irvine Company, Newport Center, Fluor Corporation, and the matrix of 'up-scale' housing developments in which these corporate structures are embedded.

This is the side of Orange County responsible for its *Zeitgeist*, its self-appointment as the geographic capital of conservative ideology in America today. The people of south Orange County openly express their political conservatism. They freely state their hostility to 'big government' and are proud to explain that this was the first place to be known as 'Reagan Country.' State Senator John Schmitz, who represents this area, was elected to public office after disclosing his membership in the ultra-conservative John Birch Society. Savvy political analysts suggest he was elected, not in spite of, but *because* he confessed to being a Bircher. On this side of the freeways, the communities are mainly white; the 1980 US census gives the population of the city of Irvine as 62,134 inclusive of 916 'black' individuals.

The social and historical origins of Orange County conservatism are clear enough. The last mass migration of white people into southern California was from the Bible Belt in the 1930s, dust bowl migrants from Arkansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma. They arrived poor but became, if not wealthy in every case, at least middle class and better off than the Mexican Americans with whom they share the region. Theirs is not a Philadelphia, Mainline, or New York, Wall Street-type conservatism based on clear class divisions and the preservation of traditional privilege. It is a petit bourgeois conservatism based on trivial distinctions, hair color, automobile

'detailing,' whether or not one's children can afford cocaine (as opposed to 'déclassé' marijuana), or a few thousand dollars' difference in the average price of the same model home in adjacent tracts.

There are visible contradictions on the surface of this life, most of them silly or a little bit sad. In suburban neighborhoods, otherwise strongly anti-romantic in design practice, one finds the street names 'Goldenglow,' and 'Hon.' The latter is not named for a Laotian general, but is thought to be a slang contraction of 'Honey,' a term of endearment. 'Pro-family' Senator Schmitz, who is author of legislation limiting sex education in the schools, has a 'honey' living here. In 1982, Schmitz had both a family and a mistress living in two adjacent Orange County housing tracts. We learn of this when the mistress, who was described in the newspapers as 'a longtime Republican Party volunteer,' was arrested for having mutilated the genitals of one of the senator's illegitimate sons (*Sacramento Bee*, July 21, 1982: A3).

The arrangement that Schmitz had is ethnologically unremarkable. It would be commonplace in Africa, for example. But this is certainly not the way in which the Schmitz family would want to understand itself. The fundamental feature of the Orange County ethos is the difference and distance between public self-understanding and the barely repressed underlying passions. What is socially important in Orange County is not actual values, but the public expression of inflated values. Bumper stickers on silver and black BMW and Honda sedans proclaim 'God Loves Me,' and 'My Other Car is a Mercedes Benz.' Orange County is also a place where some 'spec-built' houses are made twice normal size, on the plan of English country houses, and named by their developers before they are sold, 'Claredon Hall,' and so on. The people who live in these over-sized tract homes sometimes imagine themselves to be *Gentry*, which is the name of *The Magazine of Orange County People* (published by Gentry, Inc., Costa Mesa, CA). A newspaper survey (*Orange County Register*, April 16, 1985) reports that the main cause of mental depression in Orange County is 'money worries,' and the way respondents generally relieve 'deep depression' is by going shopping.

These are mere surface contradictions, the sorts of things that could happen in any community in a hurry; matters that time, an election, or a little cosmetic surgery can heal. There are other contradictions in the mental life of Orange County that are not susceptible to an easy fix.

There is no clear line where the earth meets the sky in Orange County. The soil is sandy loam, excellent drainage for growing citrus. There are places where one can run one's fingers through the dirt without resistance. And the same could almost be said of the sky. Super-saturated with automobile emissions, it is brown and heavy, more substantial than the San Gabriel mountains which it can hide even on a cloudless day. This local absence of a distinction (earth/sky), fundamental to consciousness in other communities, in American Indian communities, for example, is the first indication of the way the Orange County mind defends itself against the requirement of clear thinking. This mind survives contradiction by rejecting fundamental distinctions, accepting only minute and particulate matters. The Orange County mind identifies itself with the dirty indistinction of its earth and sky and shields itself with shining surfaces. It is dirty on the inside, while assiduously maintaining sparkling exteriors. Once thought has moved itself to inhabit the framework of Orange County consciousness, every sign is drained of meaning and is only self-referential. Thus, the revelation that Senator Schmitz had two families at the same time, seven children in one and two in the other, a wife and a 'mistress' living in separate households a few miles apart, provided no scandal.³ Nor was there any scandal as a result of the revelation that the 'mistress' was not a fully competent mother. Schmitz had only to make public re-affirmation of his conservative views and the evident passion leading up to the affair was buried. In fact, he was able to seize the disclosures as an opportunity to make anti-abortion speeches and to affirm his credentials as a 'good family man.' Schmitz represents Orange County in both literal and metaphoric senses.

In this system of expression, auto-referentiality is all that counts. We are to accept everyone's public self-accounting at 'face value,' never subjecting the circumstances of life to alternative re-interpretation. Owning a Porsche is supposed to mean that the owner is affluent, not insecure. The question 'Why?' is taboo. Passions that bind and separate one person from another exist as they do in all human communities, but in Orange County they disappear in a literal and metaphoric smog.

Automobiles, invested with as much symbolic and libidinous importance here as anywhere else on earth, brilliant in every other way, are typically colorless. More than this, they are intentionally colored colorless. By overwhelming preference, they are metallic grays with just enough of a true color added to produce a

mysterious hint of some possible color. They are pure shining essences reflecting commitment to the appearance of cleanliness and precision but without any statement or mood. A true red or blue, anything that might lend itself to political or other interpretation is avoided. This valorization of vagueness when it comes to basic values extends itself to the total arrangement of the housing tracts. The streets meander in overlapping spirals and ellipses. The total design is purposefully centerless; that is, without absolute internal distinction.

This is not merely a local aberration: Orange County is also being held up as a model for the future development of Western Civilization; even more, 'a kind of hypersuburbia,' Orange County is, as a southern California businessman put it, 'a demonstration city for the world' (Zalaznick, 'The Double Life of Orange County,' *Fortune*, October, 1968:139). This suggests we might learn something about the future, and perhaps gain some control of the future, by studying what is distinctive about Orange County values and the form of their expression, especially in politics where they are providing models that go beyond the county line.

Orange County is ur-form of 'community' organized around conservative, anti-government, anti-socialist values: a monument to individualism, private initiative, and 'freedom.' This is not to say that everyone who lives there subscribes to these values. Only about 70 per cent voted for Reagan, for example. But the organization of the communities is the most perfect expression of conservative values, even for those residents who would disagree, as those who disagree, especially, would affirm.⁴ In the precise form of its local expression, this is a guilty ideology at best. We can quickly learn from the revenue balance sheets that 75 per cent of the wealth of the area comes directly from 'big government' in the form of contracts to industry and support to the El Toro Marine Corps Air Station.⁵ The same contradiction appears in the appeal of a Costa Mesa tax consultant which approvingly quotes former President Ronald Reagan: 'Are you entitled to the fruits of your own labor, or does the government have some presumptive right to spend and spend and spend?' Then, in the same appeal, separated from the President's words by only one period (.), the consultants claim that they can show you how to extract wealth from the poor: 'You legally avoid taxes.... Uncle Sam will buy an apartment for you, stock it with tenants, pay 75 per cent of their rent, give you \$100,000 in legitimate tax deductions over a five-year period,

guarantee you rehabilitation loans and eliminate 99 per cent of the risk' (*Gentry*, Holiday edition, 1984:11). Apparently, in the smog of the Orange County consciousness, it is okay for an avuncular government to 'spend and spend and spend' for evil purposes, that is, to set you up as a slum lord. The psychology is obvious: once the original contradiction is repressed, its ill effects are also hidden, or even transformed into beneficial results. The advertisement ends on an up-beat: we will tell you how to exit the shelter and 'turn a problem into a huge profit.' The conservative ideological attack on 'big government' is a simple displacement, a pre-emptive strike against the government as a way to avoid having to credit government for schemes and accomplishments they want to call their own.

In Orange County ideology, the existence of another class, somewhere on the other side of the freeways, a tenant class that you can 'stock' your apartments with, is always assumed. There is never a direct confrontation with significant human differences or positive principles, especially those that might be widely shared, for example, a commitment to social equality. There cannot be. The idea of equality necessarily produces an anxious vacillation in the Orange County mind as any serious concern for equality might expose their pseudo-solidarity with exploited classes with whom they pretend to unite against 'big government.' Instead, there is an attack on socially progressive methods. The way social workers, social scientists, and socialists want to achieve their version of 'equality,' according to Orange County myth, is by suppression of individual expression, privacy, private initiative, by making humankind 'un-free.' This is a crude psychological appeal to Americans who have proved themselves highly to precisely these kinds of manipulations that are attributed to 'socialists': namely, a willingness to give up individualism in a desperate drive toward standardization of thought, behavior, and aesthetic display. In short, they find in their alienation from their own passions, from the greed and lust that they cannot acknowledge even to themselves, in their own self-imposed lack of freedom at the level of appearances, exactly what they think they should fear most, not from themselves but from 'Socialism.'

This contradiction and the false consciousness which covers it up manifests itself at every level of thought, behavior, and organization in Orange County. The city of Irvine, a place now grown to more than 150,000 souls trapped behind the corporate curtain, was

centrally planned in every detail, including precisely controlled social class composition. An official Irvine Chamber of Commerce information bulletin mailed in reply to a query from a prospective migrant to the area reads, in part, as follows:

If you are looking for a great place to live—Southern California style [try] Irvine, Calif. Uniformly designed homes in Irvine, Calif., are controlled by the strictly enforced rules of the planned community. In this cluster of quiet villages the scent of the Pacific freshens the air above homes all painted in earth tones.... Life is zoned by master plan around the university campus, industrial parks, living and recreation areas, green belts and small shopping centers. Residents may observe the five-member City Council in action from their homes, all wired for cable TV. Neighborhood committees make sure that dwellings are painted in bland colors and that lawns are trimmed. Even the citizenry is fairly homogeneous: surveys show that 56 per cent of all families have annual [1982] incomes of \$40,000 or more, 73 per cent own their own homes and most, household heads are college graduates. Some may find the uniformity overpowering, but to most it is a small price to pay. The schools are rated superb. Crime, though a problem, is not rising as fast as the population. Urban fears are no part of life in Irvine. Says language teacher Susan Salessi: 'I feel very safe. I don't have to drive long miles to work, to the beach, to enjoy all the cultural activities I could want. Here I have everything.'

(Sent to the author in an informational packet on Irvine Chamber of Commerce letterhead)

Irvine, built from scratch on a former ranch, is a perfected Levitt Town type of community jointly owned by the Taubman-Allen Irvine Company, Mobil Oil Corporation, Donald A. Bren, Henry Ford II, and several others. The land within the community was arranged, in advance, according to formula: 1.5 per cent for a new university, 40 per cent for housing stratified by class, 30 per cent for agriculture, 5 per cent for industry, and 25 cent for park and wild land. 'Problems' experienced by natural communities were planned out. There is no housing for the poor. The effect of industry on residential property values has been controlled. If there happened to be appropriate housing available near the university, students might remain in Irvine for longer than they are in school,

potentially giving the place a shabby, leftist character. So the area immediately surrounding the Irvine campus is purposefully kept free of all development. The entire urban space is organized according to the concerns of corporate planners, an 'ideal' or literally ideological community with the 'social problems' of natural communities solved in advance.

This set of ideals extends itself to the level of individual households and family life in the form of total subservience to corporate central control. The homes, clean and comfortable with 'many luxury touches,' come in four or five models per tract which repeat themselves along the landscaped streets according to formula: ABCD, ABCD, ABCD, etc. While these homes are technically 'privately owned,' because their ownership is in the hands of individuals, not corporations, freedoms traditionally associated with private home ownership no longer exist. One finds, for example, restrictive rules binding home owners vis-à-vis such matters as the species of shrubbery which can be planted in the yard, the types of dogs they can own, as well as the already mentioned color restrictions on house exteriors. There is a general rule operative throughout the area, rigorously upheld by covenant and collective agreement, 'earth (that is, dirt) tones throughout,' an only partially repressed color bar, based on the prevailing folk theory that bright or primary colors are associated with 'colored' people and other minorities known for unrestrained expression. The Chamber of Commerce document mentions that every house is wired for cable television. It does not go on to state that no house may display an external television antenna. Recreational vehicles and small boats cannot be parked visibly on driveways or in the streets in front of the home (they must be stored in special lots), cars cannot be left with their bonnets open, even on private drives (all automotive repair must take place in closed garages), and so on.

While nominally espousing 'privacy,' 'private property,' and 'private enterprise' as primary values, false consciousness reveals itself at the level of architectural detail. One notes immediately that the most elaborated, over-scale, and over-decorated part of these homes is not the 'back region': dens, children's bedrooms, or other truly private spaces. It is the entry hall. Every procedure has been employed to make these entrances the most impressive part of the house: hand-carved, double-doors 5 meters tall; Italian tile floors; fountains and full-sized palm trees just inside; 'cathedral' ceilings with crystal chandeliers hanging from gold ropes, and so forth. The

entire ensemble is designed to impress the paper boy or cosmetic sales person and others who visit infrequently and do not penetrate the children's cramped quarters in the back. In short, the house is designed to impress strangers. In architectural reality, which is one of the 'realist' forms of reality, public opinion is again valued highly, and that which is private is repressed.

The rules constraining home owners in Irvine read much like those which occupants of military base housing must sign before moving in, and for good reason. The corporate executives who are the 'owners' of these homes must operate in a rigid framework of control extending from small details of life (length of facial hair and front lawn) to its total organization; for example, periodic interstate and international transfer required to maintain one's place on the 'corporate ladder.' In addition to the requirement of moves by corporate transfer, families also face disruption by divorce and other voluntary intra-regional moves driven by desire to live in a marginally 'better' place. And even if none of this happens in one's own family, it is a dominating concern in any network of friends. One can visit homes in Irvine where the family expresses pride that they have lived for several years with thick sheets of clear plastic spread over the carpets, cleverly increasing the resale value of the house, they believe. No urban-based Eastern Europeans subjected themselves to more restriction at the level of everyday life. It might be argued that Orange County 'un-freedom,' extending into one's own home and beliefs, cannot be compared to socialist central control, because in Orange County, it is fully accepted and desired by everyone as contributing to the common good and is not, therefore, totalitarian in character. This is precisely the argument that loyal party members in East Germany or Yugoslavia gave for their regimes before the people expressed themselves differently on the same matter.

Nowhere in the world can one find an airport recording ('the white zone is for loading and unloading only') that speaks with greater authority than the one at the John Wayne Airport. And if, in mid-week, one should happen to leave the airport on foot and try to find a motel room nearby, there is nothing for less than \$150.00 per night for a single with brown plastic furniture. When confronted on this point, the motel staff will quickly agree that no individual person should ever have to pay such high rates, but they argue that no individual ever actually pays his or her own bills. Everyone is on a company account. That is why the rates can be

so high. Sometimes the person staying overnight on a company account ultimately works for the same conglomerate of corporations which own the motel. One recognizes the pattern immediately: it is socialism, a kind of international corporate socialism which has the same base and affects as the other kinds: central control and total economic dependence leading to mental incompetence; corruption; unearned privilege for the 'party loyal'; blind acceptance of all prevailing values.

Orange County was not my first experience with totalitarianism. In the 1960s I visited Yugoslavia and saw immediately that any romantic ideals I might have held concerning socialism were clearly wrong. The roads of Yugoslavia were also filled with Mercedes-Benz and BMW sedans of party officials. I was detained often by the police on small pretexts. Once I was with ten or fifteen people arrested at dusk in a remote rural area for riding in the back of a truck licensed to transport commercial goods, not humans. The confusion attracted a large group of peasants who had been working in the fields nearby. They gathered around. I saw an opportunity and seized it. The corrupt police were now surrounded by socialist peasants, even tougher appearing than the police themselves. It was a populist issue. Why shouldn't the people ride free so long as the truck was empty? So I purposefully escalated the conflict, raised my voice, snatched my passport back, and insisted that everyone be set free. The peasants joined in and began yelling and growling and brandishing their crude tools. It worked, I thought, and was elated until I realized that the peasants had joined in on the side of the police: socialist false consciousness.

In Zagreb as in Irvine it was also difficult to find a room. The one 'tourist' hotel was too expensive. But there were black market rooms to be had for pennies. Someone would lead the way through labyrinthine alleys, looking furtively about, perhaps for the police. The path would lead eventually to a couch or spare bed in a worker's apartment and perhaps a light supper of hard bread, tomatoes, oil and sweet basil. Extremes meet: there is corporate socialism in Orange County and free enterprise in Yugoslavia.

For the average-person-in-general today the difference between capitalist and socialist modes of production is not a real one. It is felt mainly as the dominant form of ideological expression, a pure abstraction which is lived as a myth. If you live in Orange County you must be certain that under socialism you would be 'un-free'; if

you live under socialism you must be certain the capitalists exploit the working classes and use force to maintain their historical advantage. But in Orange County you learn to live without freedom while pretending otherwise, and in Yugoslavia you learn to be a capitalist.

One might ask how thinking subjects can live with this much contradiction. In the case of Orange County, the people seemed to be sustained by a crude sensuality, perhaps also derived from their Bible Belt heritage, an equation of sex, dirt, and power. I observed two sun-tanned women, a mother and daughter with matched, platinum-tipped hair and nails, wearing designer tennis outfits, driving a new Mercedes convertible, the one with the largest engine. They were the perfect embodiment of Orange County bourgeois respectability, but their personalized license plate revealed the aggressive crudeness that seems as basic to Orange County life as the contradiction itself. The plate read 'WAY 2 GO' and beneath, on the custom frame, 'Anything Else Sucks.' The same psychology has been raised to a science of display in the 'model' homes which are shown to prospective buyers. These homes are over-decorated with wallpaper and furniture and purposeful 'lived in' touches. Among the latter, one notes a pair of men's pants, with belt in loops, draped over the back of a chair in every second room. These are not just model homes, they are also places where we are supposed to think that men come to remove their pants. Perhaps the license plate is right. It gives the standard answer to the question of how to live a contradiction: have a dirty mind.

NOTES

- 1 This chapter is based on transcriptions of tapes made of a lecture I have given since 1982 in my introductory course, 'The Community.' This material has not been previously published.
- 2 There is excellent literature by theorists and others who did take the trouble to visit Disneyland. Refer, for example, to Marin (1984), Eco (1986), Jameson (1984), Baudrillard (1988), Gottdiener (1982), Boorstin.
- 3 'Conservative politician involved in sex scandal' is a virtual myththeme or 'tale type' in modern culture which is reason enough to attend to the details of any given example. The language used in this particular disclosure is instructive. Given the facts of the relationships that occurred here (Schmitz's son and daughter-in-law by his 'wife' explained that they were 'god-parents' to the 'illegitimate' children of

the 'mistress'), I would have preferred to use the more sociologically accurate phrase 'wife and wife' in this sentence. The English language is very nicely set up to cover for male bigamists in a way that it cannot cover for female bigamists, this being only one of its built-in gender inequalities.

- 4 One hesitates to base a sociology on the 'group mind' concept, especially in America where there is substantial disagreement on 'basic' values. But we are dealing here with communities in which the homeowners' associations have passed binding covenants requiring every home to have beige curtains in the windows, or at least beige drape liners so that the sides of the curtains exposed to the street are uniform in color, not merely intra- but also inter-household. As a regulatory norm, the 'beige drape liner' covenant has a kind of auto-referentiality that can only signify uniformity of thinking. It differs from other community regulations, the common agreement not to operate power mowers before 10:00 am on Sundays, for example. Every individual can have a different good reason for not wishing to hear a power mower—it disrupts worship, it hurts the head after a night out drinking, and so on. But the only possible reason for requiring everyone to have beige drapes is so that everyone will have beige drapes.
- 5 I am indebted here and elsewhere to a fine paper by Alain J.-J. Cohen (1978).