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### ***The Revolutionary Ascetic. Evolution of a Political Type* By Bruce Mazlish.**

**(New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1976. 261 pp.)**

#### **Review by Arnold D. Richards**

The *Revolutionary Ascetic* is Professor Bruce Mazlish's third major attempt at psychoanalytically-informed historical exegesis. The first, *In Search of Nixon*, was straight psychobiography, clear in focus, but limited by the lack of data about Nixon's formative years. The second, *James and John Stewart Mill*, benefited from access to considerable biographical data about both father and son, as well as information about their interaction. In that work, however, his extrapolations from the psychobiographical findings to broader historical trends, including speculations about the shape of the industrial revolution and the rise of nineteenth century liberalism, are less convincing. In his third book Mazlish's focus is primarily psychohistorical rather than psychobiographical; although Emerson's dictum about the understanding of man leading to the understanding of events is an appealing and perhaps theoretically incontrovertible principle, Mazlish's attempt to explain the revolutionary process by generalizing about the personalities of those who make revolutions requires great logical leaps to achieve credulity.

The historical theses of the book are: 1) that asceticism is a central dynamic of the two major modern revolutions, namely, the Russian and the Chinese; 2) that there is a link between revolution and puritanism; and 3) that there is a developmental line from a) religious asceticism to b) worldly asceticism to c) nineteenth century capitalism and industrialization to d) the revolutionary ideologies which transformed the Chinese and Russian societies in the twentieth century. Mazlish defines a "revolutionary asceticism" that links Mao's and Lenin's applications of Marxism to nineteenth century liberalism and utilitarianism. He makes the point, which I think is well taken, that both the Chinese and Russian revolutions were essentially modernizing upheavals in which fostering industrialization was at least as important as eliminating an oppressive regime. The most recent events in China—their new constitution, for example, which stresses the importance of the promotion of technology and scientific thought—clearly reflect this order of priorities.

Professor Mazlish's psychological theses are that "ascetics" make revolutions and that the revolutionary ascetic is an ideal personality type to which modern revolutionaries will partially correspond. However, here one may ask: Do ascetics make revolution, or does successful revolutionary activity require a certain amount of self-denial and self-discipline as well as a singular sense of purpose and devotion to a cause? In other words: Is there a trivial connection which might hold true as well for reactionary or counter-revolutionary leaders as it might for revolutionary ones?

According to Professor Mazlish the revolutionary ascetic has two major characteristics: first, he abhors "wine, women and song," and second, he has "few libidinal ties" and is therefore able to "deny the normal bonds of friendship feeling and affections and [to] eliminate all human consideration in the name of devotion to the revolution" (p. 6). Drawing from Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Mazlish develops the thesis that the revolutionary leader has displaced his libido from individuals onto an abstraction, namely revolution. Mazlish

uses his case studies of Lenin and Mao to establish this thesis, but in both instances he is handicapped by the relative paucity of childhood developmental data, autobiographical material, etc.

Unfortunately, Mazlish's approach to the data that he does have is often superficial and facile. For example, he makes much of Lenin's relationship with his mentor Plekhanov. Mazlish finds it significant that Lenin began to sign his articles in Iskra with the pseudonym "Lenin" directly after he broke with Plekhanov over policy. Mazlish says, "the Ulyanov given to sentiment has been replaced by the hard, unloving, unyielding Lenin" (p. 116). We are now in the presence of the prototypic leader "with few libidinal ties." Mazlish fails to consider the alternative that Lenin's pseudonym was taken from the River Lena possibly in emulation of Plekhanov who took his pseudonym "Volgan" from the name of the River Volga. Thus Mazlish has not proven his conclusion that the name change signaled a significant break in Lenin's capacity for libidinal investment.

Solzhenitsyn's portrait of Lenin in his *Lenin in Zurich* has a very moving account of Lenin's subsequent relationship with his mistress Inessa, which, although partially fictionalized, rings true. It establishes convincingly that even after his break with Plekhanov there was nothing strikingly deficient in Lenin's capacity to relate to people. The important issue is how to account for Lenin's success. Mazlish links it to his personality; this reviewer attributes it to his genius as a theoretician. Within the realm of personality, Mazlish focuses on asceticism and constricted object relations, but fails to give due weight to Lenin's opportunism and his consummate skill as a politician in small group meetings which, on the face of it, would seem more directly related to his success.

Similar objections could be made to Mazlish's inferences about Mao. Since he had three wives and several children who seemed, at least from Snow's account, to have meant a great deal to him, Mao probably did not lack objects. His reputation as a singer and dancer is evidence against asceticism. More important, he probably succeeded as a revolutionary because he was able to adapt his Marxist ideology to the particular Chinese situation, and especially to the role of the peasants. Through all the years of the war against the Nationalists, his policy of keeping the Red Army honest and paying peasants for supplies instead of taking them by force helped win the peasants to his side. He made the long march into the most successful propaganda road show in history. Mao's mastery of public relations seems to have contributed more to his success than his putative asceticism or his hypothetical deficiency of libidinal ties.

In summary, *The Revolutionary Ascetic*, although at times lively and interesting, is not convincing as historical or psychological argument. It can be faulted for being based on inadequate data and for a lack of logical rigor which limit its value for historians and psychoanalysts.