

June 23/73

Wednesday's Child is a movie based on the ideas found in R.D. Laing's writings. It depicts an ordinary English family that drives one of its members crazy. Dealing with a very difficult subject matter which continually borders on the cliché, the film comes off as a sensitive and highly successful portrayal of the subtle viciousness of the family in capitalist society.

It was shown Friday June 22nd at UBC to about 500 students and assorted therapy-addicts. The show was sponsored by two faculty members and a local existential psychiatrist under the auspices of the Center for Continuing Education. For the past year, the Center has been offering a program of encounter group therapy headed by the guru-sponsors. Much of the audience was made up of people enrolled in the program.

However moving Wednesday's Child was as a film experience, its power was eclipsed by the packaging prepared by the sponsors. In a long silly introduction, a spokesman for the Center declared that they were not in the business of mental health or mental illness but in the "business of identity."

"It's a good business," I whispered to my friend.

Following the film, the package was wrapped up with an agonizing open discussion among the three ringleaders and the remaining audience, during which 300 people tried at once to express "how they really felt" about the movie.

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Their discussion typified the ideas indoctrinated by the hip-liberal therapy many of them have been undergoing.

The film's impact on me was quickly washed away by the infuriating confusion of the comments. I have been away from the university and group therapy long enough to have forgotten the reactionary role they play educationally and politically.

Rather than trying to clarify the random, all-important FEELINGS of the audience, the sponsors actively promoted the hopeless mystification of the viewers' reactions. Attempts to understand the film were put down as being "intellectual." Someone who committed this cardinal sin was interrupted by one of the sponsors who solemnly declared that RIGHT NOW he was experiencing a pressure in his forehead because the mother in the film reminded him of his grandmother. "I'd like to know what you're feeling RIGHT NOW."

Apparently no one felt that revolutionary social change was needed to obliterate the cruelty dished out by families in the name of love. Or if anyone did, it would have been entirely out of place to say so. That is not a FEELING.

The existential-group-therapy scene is bounded by a rigid set of customs. People in it are groomed to feel and express certain things and to suppress other things. Politics is a no-no. You're obliged to wallow narcissistically in your personal misery, to explore and express it endlessly (this is called GETTING YOUR SHIT OUT), but not to draw

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political conclusions from it and certainly not to engage in political action.

Disdain for politics is, of course, one of the most common guises for reactionary ~~xxxxxxxx~~ politics. The Human Potential Movement, one of a dozen names for the new group therapy, has codified one form of political cynicism by enshrining right-wing individualist values--usually blended generously with religious mysticism.

Therapy begins with a false notion of bourgeois freedom. Choice is open to each of us. ~~ONCE you xxxxxxxxxxxx~~
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GET IN TOUCH WITH YOUR REAL FEELINGS (these phrases are used so regularly that there would be a key for each of them on an existential-therapy typewriter), you're then free to EXPRESS YOUR REAL FEELINGS, and thus to obtain some liberated state: enlightenment, enjoyment, being centered, being together or whatever.

Freedom is conceived as being independent of political or social conditions. Although the "schizophrenic" girl in the film is hopelessly trapped in a web of impossible circumstances, one member of the audience described his main FEELING as REAL ANGER toward her for not making the choice to get away from these circumstances.

His comment is very instructive and reveals in a nutshell the conservative ideology behind hip-liberal therapy. The therapeutic formulas go as follows:

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- 1) Every individual has free choice;
- 2) He can use his free choice to achieve happiness of unhappiness;
- 3) People who are unhappy (emotionally disturbed, mentally ill) have chosen to be so.

In political terms, number 3 is re-statable as the reactionary conclusion that the oppressed are responsible for their own oppression.

The realm of freedom in capitalist society is extremely narrow for all but the ruling class. The scope of one's freedom shrinks very fast as you go down the scale of social classes. It is true that most people who ~~are~~ become mental patients have lost whatever shred of free choice their class normally affords them. One main goal of the group therapies is to expand the realm of freedom to the limits permitted by one's class position. Since these therapies are the private preserve of the middle and upper-middle classes, it is easier to promote the illusion of real freedom than it would be for working class people. The great majority of people who end up in mental hospitals are workers who have been denied the luxury of false consciousness nurtured among therapy group goers.

The girl in the film in fact ^{is} ~~is~~ a proletarian, working in a chocolate factory between hospital stays. The man in the audience who was REALLY ANGRY at her (for being oppressed)

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was of course a middle class university student. His outlook of contempt for the ~~apparatus~~ exploited is common among those whose lives are affected by the extremely powerful institutions of ~~education and psychiatry~~ higher education and private psychiatry.

Go see Wednesday's Child next time it comes to town.

Avoid gurus.