

WALDEN TWO: A 1950 Review

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The following review of B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two* (1948)¹ was written forty years ago, not long after the book was originally published. My manuscript was set in type -- I have the galley proofs -- but never appeared in print. I have been asked to describe the circumstances.

From 1939, when I graduated from high school, until 1951, when I left New York for Indiana, I probably spent more of my time campaigning against nationalism and war and for a socialist society than I did pursuing my studies. I thought of myself as a person whose mission in life was to transform the existing social order. One of my reasons for taking up psychology was that I agreed with Floyd Allport's contention (*Institutional Behavior*, 1933) that, when closely examined, social institutions turn out to be nothing more than the activities of their individual participants. Accordingly, I concluded that the best way to understand the functioning of various institutions must be through the study of individual behavior. Another reason was more practical: I hoped to earn my living in a way that would not be harmful to others and in a setting that would give me some license to speak on political matters but would leave me relatively free of pressures to conform to the viewpoint of any single political or economic organization. From 1943 to 1949 I pursued my graduate studies at Columbia, and from 1946 to 1951 I taught classes there, mostly in the School of General Studies. Through the influence of Fred Keller and Nat Schoenfeld I had become familiar with Skinner's writings (see Dinsmoor, 1990), and when his second book, *Walden Two*, appeared I immediately purchased and read it. I considered it an extremely innovative and significant contribution to our thinking on the way society should be organized and tried to think of ways of bringing it to the attention of other people who might be interested in that issue.

For about ten years I had been a member of the National Executive Committee of the Young People's Socialist League, the youth section of the Socialist Party, and between my undergraduate and my graduate studies I had even served for a brief period as its National Secretary. But the Socialist Party's endorsement of the American military intervention in Korea proved the last straw, and in desperation the political grouping to which I belonged withdrew from the SP and

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the YPSL and attempted to establish an independent existence as the Libertarian Socialist League. During my last few years in New York I was also contributing a series of commentaries on the political scene as the "American correspondent" to the *New Leader* (later, *Socialist Leader*), the biweekly organ of Great Britain's Independent Labour Party. The best synopsis I can give you of that organization was that it was well to the left of the main Labour Party, had three members in parliament, and was the only political organization with which George Orwell (see *Nineteen Eighty-four*, 1948) was ever willing to affiliate.

Even in New York City, anti-Stalinist radicals were few in number, and they were very aware of each other's presence. To some extent they debated each other's policies, visited each other's meetings, and utilized each other's speakers. I can remember speaking, for example, at a meeting sponsored by the New York branch of the Industrial Workers of the World. I had also reviewed L. Ron Hubbard's book, *Dianetics* (1950), for a student club at Columbia that had been organized by the youth section of the less doctrinaire wing of the American Trotskyist movement (the Workers Party, better known as the Shachtmanites.) The review of *Walden Two* was solicited by a publication known as *Anvil and Student Partisan*, which was sponsored by a small group of similar clubs operating on several different campuses. Looking back, I suspect that what the editors wanted and expected was an authoritative expose, an attack on the book similar to those directed at it by several writers prominent in literary and political circles. After I sent the manuscript in, one of the national leaders of the Trotskyist youth wrote me to express his puzzlement and concern that I could support Skinner's views. The first warning of any difficulty with the publication of my review, however, came when I received the galley proofs. I was told there was not enough room in the current issue and was asked to reduce its length. (As I recall, the magnitude of the necessary reduction was not specified.) As the different paragraphs were to my mind interwoven to an extent that made them difficult to separate, I begged off doing this myself and suggested that the editors, being less emotionally involved, decide on the necessary cuts. At this point, the galley proofs were returned to me for a second time, and the article never did appear in that or any subsequent issue.

TEXT OF REVIEW

What distressed Professor Burris, when his former students returned for a convivial chat, was not so much the blank ignorance they displayed of all that he had taught them of the science of psychology but the uncanny precision with which they recalled the amusing episode on the Spanish streetcar or some other impromptu digression with which he had once filled out a miscalculated hour. He waited with guilty anticipation as Rogers entered upon what seemed to be a prepared speech.

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"Jamnik and I have done a great deal of talking during the past two years, sir," he said, "about things in general. We were doing patrol work, and it was pretty dull. So we talked a lot, and one day I got to telling him your idea about a sort of Utopian community."

There it was again. Yes, as the professor searched back in the dim recesses of his memory, he recalled the queer fellow he had once known in graduate school, Frazier by name, who had maintained with such calm assurance that modern behavioral techniques had at last made possible the actual founding of the new heaven on earth about which so many had dreamed. Good God, what had he told his students about Frazier?

He pulled the APA directory down from the shelf. Eight years back, he discovered the listing: Frazier, T. E....Walden Two, R. D. 1, Canton. Quite like Frazier, fancying himself a second Thoreau. Chances are, though, it was all a pipe dream and had long since vanished into thin air. "But I'll put a return address on the envelope, and we'll soon know." A few days later he found himself accompanying the two young veterans, their respective fiancées and a colleague from the department of philosophy on a guided tour of the community of the future.

Walden Two had its share of the ingenious gadgetry which has been so much more characteristic of the fictional utopias of the past than of their real-life counterparts. The houses were built of rammed earth, with interconnecting passageways to save on rainwear and overcoats; the newborn infants were reared without bedclothes or diapers in thermostatically controlled cubicles; the household tasks which enslave a full half of our population were mechanized, as were dairying, planting, and harvesting; a voluntary staggered schedule permitted full utilization of toilet facilities, the theatre and the dining hall. A system of work credits permitted all to work at tasks of their own choosing for an average of four hours a day, and to use their leisure time for reading, gardening, shopwork, painting, dramatic performances, research and music.

But what distinguished Walden Two from its predecessors was its emphasis on pragmatic, experimental solutions, not only to the problems of domestic engineering but even to the problems of social relationships within the community. This utopia had developed and was developing, not in the armchair but in the laboratory, and the laboratory for its experiments in living was the community itself.

Thus, the class in domestic engineering had made a careful study of the tea service. On alternate days, the tea glasses were carried in braided grass jackets or directly in the hand. Less spilling was recorded when the jackets were used. Volunteers among the married couples were assigned by lot to joint and separate bedrooms; their personal problems were studied by the staff psychologists for eight years, with the conclusion that the separate quarters not only kept the individual happier and better adjusted but also tended to strengthen the bonds of love and affection between the couple. (Remember, this is fiction!) The children were trained in a program of frustration tolerance. At the age of three or four years,

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lollipops were hung about their necks, which they were later allowed to consume if they refrained from licking. Coming indoors from a long, weary hike through the country, they were required to stand for five minutes before their bowls of steaming soup before the meal began. A careful program of gradual immunization built up by the age of six a complete resistance to the petty annoyances which they might face even in this, the most ideal of communities.

Classical utopian writers of the past have often provided excellent suggestions for economic arrangements and for political structures, but they have neglected the crucial problems of relations with the outside world and of ensuring the cooperation of the members of the community. Such living communities as have been established have usually relied upon careful selection of personnel (Brooks Farm) or upon religious indoctrination or the personal magnetism of a charismatic leader. Skinner, however, is himself an experimental psychologist of outstanding reputation, generally recognized as one of the leading authorities on contemporary behavior theory (see Woodworth's *Contemporary Schools of Psychology* or Hilgard's *Theories of Learning*). Naturally, his major emphasis is on the problem of fitting individual behavior to the needs of the community. Indeed, this book may be considered his first attempt to popularize the findings of modern behavioral research and to make it available to the general public.

Indoctrination is not the technique. There is no phonograph to din into the ears such messages as, "I like sewers. Sewers are lots of fun." Indeed, there is a rule against boredom, since it has been found more convenient to protest it than endure it, from the Planners or from the individual members of the community. It is perfectly good form, and even encouraged, to say, "You've told me that before," or "That's not very interesting." Even the cards at the dinner table asking, "Have you been bored today? If not, why not?" were removed, to prove the value of the rule.

Coercion and punishment are not the technique, either, although they have been the main prop of all previous societies, from the most primitive to the most "advanced." Contemporary psychological research indicates that punishment does not, in the long run, reduce the probability of a course of action, but merely "buries it" or "represses" it, to appear again, perhaps in a distorted form, at a later time.

"Now if it's in our power," says Frazier, "to create any of the situations which a person likes or to remove any situation he doesn't like, we can control his behavior. When he behaves as we want him to behave we simply create a situation he likes or remove one he doesn't like."

"We're in the throes of a great change to positive reinforcement," he continues, "from a competitive society, in which one man's reward is another man's punishment, to a cooperative society, in which no one gains at the expense of anyone else."

"The change is slow and painful because the immediate, temporary effect of punishment overshadows the eventual advantage of positive reinforcement. We've

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all seen countless instances of the temporary effect of force, but clear evidence of the effect of not using force is rare. That's why I insist that Jesus, who was apparently the first to discover the power of refusing to punish must have hit upon the principle by accident. He certainly had none of the experimental evidence which is available to us today."

This leads to an extremely important issue, the issue of "freedom." An operational definition of such a word is difficult to obtain. Certainly we cannot accept the view that it specifies that behavior be unpredictable -- "free will" -- and indeterminate. Can we accept as an alternative, however, the suggestion that freedom consists in positive reinforcement, without the use of threat, punishment, and coercion? That positive reinforcement administered in appropriate dosages at appropriate times, in accord with a plan of human engineering, is no different from a situation in which the same positive reinforcement is obtained haphazardly, as the result of accidents of nature or society?

"When men strike for freedom, they strike against jails and the police, or the threat of them--against oppression. They never strike against forces which make them want to act the way they do."

What about the power of the human engineer to impose his will upon the rest of mankind? To this, Skinner-Frazier offers an apology and an answer. Like nuclear fission and other products of scientific endeavor, the principles of behavioral control cannot be buried once discovered, nor could the dangerous discovery be prevented in our present culture. Someone will use them, and better the Planner than the priest, the politician, the policeman or the financier. This is the apology.

Furthermore, the despotism is severely limited. "The despot must wield his power for the good of others. If he takes any step which reduces the sum total of human happiness, his power is reduced by a like amount. What better check against a malevolent despotism could you ask for?...There's no power to usurp," said Frazier. "There's no police, no military, no guns or bombs--tear-gas or atomic--to give strength to the few....Revolt is not only easy, it's inevitable if real dissatisfaction arises." It is clear, however, that Professor Skinner feels uneasy about his answer. He buttresses it by a consideration of the inadequacies of political democracy ("Voting", says Frazier, "is a device for blaming conditions on the people."), and by pointing out that democracy as it is generally understood provides for the satisfaction of the majority but fails to care for the minority (and what one of us is never in the minority?); he provides mechanical checks such as rotation of office for the Planners and unanimous vote for constitutional changes; and in the end, he raises the possibility of revolt.

Fortunately, we need not consider the control of behavior by positive reinforcement an alternative to democratic control. The technician in behavior need not be enthroned any more than the technician in economics, the technician in engineering, the technician in agriculture or the technician in medicine. In fact, contrary to Frazier's insistence that popular interest in the mechanics of

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government is an unnecessary fad of our culture, we can insist that in the period of transition, at least, it is vital: the behavioral engineer is not himself a product of the new society--that is clearly noted in the book--and his own behavior continues to be governed in part by the vicious motivations of a competitive and coercive culture. Later, when the Planners themselves are products of the Plan, the problem may disappear.

The reviewer does not contemplate a blanket endorsement of Skinner's book. There are problems raised which call for serious and prolonged discussion among the advocates of a new social order. But the book does provide some significant thoughts about the nature of a new society, a challenge which we cannot afford to ignore.

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NOTES

¹Skinner, B. F. (1948). *Walden Two*. New York: Macmillan. 266 pp.