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**Reagan's America.** Lloyd deMause. New York: Creative Roots, 1984, 193 pages, $16.95.

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> This book is the story of the feelings and the fantasies that we shared in Reagan's America . . . it is not difficult to describe what happened in Reagan's America. It is only difficult to believe that we wanted it that way. (Author's Foreword)

I have reviewed Lloyd deMause's work before, and find myself sliding from distinct skepticism to grudging admiration for a theorist of such scope. We do wonder how in blazes the American public can stand still for the hocus pocus that stands for economic and foreign policy in Reagan's America, and tend to blame it on the ignorance and indifference of grassroots Americans. However, deMause documents a widespread consensus involving very intelligent, well-informed spokespersons in the news media who seem to reflect, portray and promulgate the craziness that we have witnessed over these last few years, both the Carter and Reagan years.

One example of this craziness is the way in which President Carter came to be portrayed by the media and perceived by the public. This portrayal, of a weak, powerless and vacillating chief executive, must be seen in context for what it is—a distorted image that in no way represents the accomplishments of Carter as President. The economy actually improved under Carter, in objective terms; his foreign policy, leading to approval of the Panama Canal treaty, the Camp David accords, and the saved lives of hostages in Iran must be seen as reasonably sound.

Why, then, did people perceive Carter as such a poor President? Lloyd deMause's answer is that he did not satisfy the blood-lust of the American people who demanded (psychologically) violent aggressive action in the Iranian hostage crisis. They wanted retaliation even if such action (deMause says because such action) would result in the deaths of the hostages. Jimmy Carter's feeble helicopter attack failed to satisfy this lust for blood. The American people were angry with the Iranians, it is true, but the origins of their anger lie within each individual, and within the collectivity as well, according to historical group fantasy theory.

Historical group fantasy is a cyclical process—deMause estimates that America has gone through half-a-dozen fantasy cycles which last, on the average, 21 years. A cycle takes us from images of safety and security to uncomfortable feelings of threat, weakness, and finally collapse. These latter stages cause collective panic, with accompanying demands that our leader *do something!* I will discuss the concept of group fantasy in a moment, but first, let me describe further the political irrationality that deMause endeavors to explain.

In 1981, the end of the Carter administration's term of office, Federal expenditures, expressed as a percentage of the Gross National Product, had actually *shrunk*, and the relative Federal debt had also decreased to one-half the percentage of GNP compared to

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the level of 30 years before. Yet Ronald Reagan's State of the Union depicted us as being in the "worst economic mess since the Great Depression." Carter's caution had saved the lives of the Americans held hostage in Iran, but the people were not impressed. They had wanted bold aggressive action against Iran even if it meant—deMause says *because* it meant—the deaths of the hostages.

The point of this book is that such contradictions occur because of the unconscious fantasy-needs of the American people, sometimes reflected in public opinion polls, sometimes concealed. These unconscious fantasies can create tremendous pressure on the nation's leaders, *or* create a permissive atmosphere for the leader who, like Reagan, is bent on aggression. Take the invasion of Grenada, for instance—by no stretch of the imagination could that tiny island-republic be considered a threat to the United States. And it took considerable imagination-stretching to accept the justifications, legal and strategic, offered by President Reagan for the invasion of the island. The American public accepted these transparent justifications with enthusiasm, deMause suggests, because it needed fulfillment of its rape-and-kill fantasy. "When Congressman Ted Weiss said on 'Night Line' that he was about to introduce a resolution impeaching Reagan for unconstitutionally unilaterally declaring war by invading, host Ted Koppel said, 'But . . . but . . . our polls show 9 to 1 in favor of it!'" (WNBC-TV, October 27, 1983, quoted on p. 157).

Our violent fantasies can press for realization in several ways. They mandated the massive defense buildup undertaken by Reagan. These fantasies can also be turned inward toward our own leaders, and deMause presents evidence that such fantasies had grown and peaked before John W. Hinckley, Jr. shot President Reagan. The final impetus for Hinckley's act (p. 13) was the flood of media articles with themes of violence and killing—both *Time* and *Newsweek* ran covers on violent crime each picturing a hand holding a revolver (p. 11) the week before Reagan was shot. Such messages are not accidental, says deMause, but reflect the unconscious feelings running rampant in the populace. The media were filled with hidden messages suggesting "Kill the President" during the week before the assassination attempt. For example, deMause cites the headline in *U.S. News & World Report*:

*Waste—Reagan's Next Target*

This headline contains two hidden messages: Waste Reagan [Kill Reagan] Reagan's Next Target [Reagan is the Next Target]. Among the people who "got the message" from the hundreds of headlines and magazine covers was Alexander Haig, who began, *the week before the shooting* to worry about "who will be in charge" if the President were incapacitated, and to talk about presidential succession. We have not remembered this behavior of Haig's, because of the prominence given his statement just *after* the assassination attempt, that "As of now I am in control."

> The reason, of course, why so far no one has questioned why Alexander Haig began talking about "succession" just before the shooting was that in a real sense the same unconscious assassination wishes he was acting upon were shared by the entire country. (p. 13)

One other person who picked up these "subliminal" messages was, of course, John Hinckley:

> Hinckley had been stalking both President Carter and President-elect Reagan with guns in his possession for the previous six months, but just couldn't "get himself into the right frame of mind to actually carry out the act," as he later put it. It was not until March 30th, he said, when he got what he termed "a signal" from a newspaper and told himself "This is it, this is for me," and he walked out and shot Reagan. (p. 13)

Lloyd deMause, the psychohistorian who depicts our national life in this way, operates from a perspective that has been described as a breakthrough in the psychoanalytic study of history by one admirer. Caspar Schmidt (*Journal of Psychohistory*, 1980) credits deMause's accomplishments in this field to the employment of psychoanalytic understandings of group phenomena. The key concept is historical group fantasy, defined in an earlier work as:

> a set of shared unconscious assumptions, quite unrelated to objective reality, about the way it *feels* to be a member of a historical group at a particular time in history. (deMause and Ebel, *Jimmy Carter and American Fantasy*, 1977, p. 11)

In his earliest explanation of historical group fantasy, deMause focused upon fantasies based on the birth experience. That is, at times people share feelings of being safe in the womb. At other times, they act as though their womb-world is insecure, shaking and quaking. These feelings are said to re-cycle periodically, culminating in the upheaval fantasy of birth. The stages no longer seem to be taken quite as literally by deMause and his followers although there do seem to be periods of greater or less collective insecurity with concomitant demands for strong action—as in the Iranian Hostage Crisis. In interpreting the imagery in Reagan's America, deMause speaks of the "cracking" phase followed by "collapse" in which the nation sees its leadership as having failed.

It is too bad that, in social science, each of us hews to his or her own favorite system of explanation. Few of us would quarrel with facts, for example, that the Reagan administration is bellicose toward the Sandanistas of Nicaragua. Likewise, we would agree that whether or not Reagan will attack Nicaragua depends upon how much support he expects from public opinion. The disagreement arises when we try to explain the public's perception of these events.

Group fantasy theory has been elaborated in many places by deMause, together with his colleagues of the Institute for Psychohistory, which publishes the *Journal of Psychohistory*, notably in *Foundations* (deMause, 1982), and in their book on Carter (deMause and Ebel, 1977). As depicted in *Reagan's America* through cartoons and magazine covers, group fantasies about the build-up of poisons in our society and about our feelings of "going down a dark birth tunnel" seem amply demonstrated. However, it is difficult to know whether the illustrations in this book truly represent widespread fantasies of that particular historical moment or not. This point is crucial because deMause believes that historical events result in large part from pressures exerted on leaders by shared group fantasy, and that these fantasies can be observed in the mass media. In the 163 pages of text comprising this slim volume, there are depicted over 150 separate cartoons, magazine covers, and charts. Illustrating his thesis that "it was pleasure which was the enemy that Reaganomics was designed to defeat," deMause cites the anti-feminist and anti-sexual statements of George Gilder, the author of *Wealth and Poverty*, "the bible of Reaganomics," and reproduces a cover from *U.S. News and World Report* that juxtaposes a pool party photograph, a special section on "Our Endless Pursuit of Happiness," and headlines on "The Reagan Revolution," tax and budget cuts.

DeMause's argument, that we demand sacrifices to atone for our guilt over having too much, leads not only to the assertion that victims of the Reagan budget cuts actually died to satisfy these psychological needs, but that the 241 Marines in Lebanon killed by a terrorist bomber on October 29, 1983 actually served as a blood sacrifice. This thesis is illustrated first by a clip from the *Washington Post* depicting Aztec human sacrifices (p. 149) and second by a Frank Ewers cartoon showing a marine in the crosshairs of a gunsight (p. 151). The argument that the Beirut situation was set up for a terrorist attack

(the truck containing 12,000 pounds of explosives drove through an open gate past sentries with unloaded guns) is supported by the "preparations" that deMause recorded:

> (1) all 300 Marines at the airport were told to sleep in the same building, (2) signs were posted at the gates announcing that all weapons inside were unloaded, (3) gates were left open and without adequate barriers, (4) the sentries were forbidden to load their weapons, (5) the sentries were forbidden to open fire at unauthorized vehicles which tried to force their way in and (6) the Moslems were bombarded to let them know the Marines were now their enemy. (p. 151)

It is this dependence upon the obvious that represents the real problem for the social scientist evaluating deMause's thesis. His arguments are persuasive, plausible, and accord with the facts; however, his observations cannot readily be repeated by others. If he is right, it is because of some particular artistic/perceptive talent, not because of scientific methods of observation that others can employ.

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