

# The "Cultural Revolution" in the AAO

"Bombard the Headquarters" was the first and most poignant big-sign poster in the Chinese Cultural Revolution that reversed the bureaucratic tendency toward petrification, rigidification and hierarchization.

The AAO has now bombarded its own headquarters with a "revolutionary step" as important and far reaching in its own small microcosm as China's Cultural Revolution in its large-scale macrocosm.

## **AAO History: Free Sexuality, Work in Common and Daily *Selbstdarstellung***

The AAO, or Action Analysis Organisation, is the group of ten communities (with its origin and major centre of 80 persons in Friedrichshof, Austria) which has shocked both left and right political and establishment groups by its "new principles of life": free sexuality, (the absence of couple relationships has surely been the most unacceptable factor for almost all groups,) property in common, collective care of the children, and the "human dynamic" factor that "opens up and energises relationships and resolves the knots of competition" - the daily practice of Actions Analysis and *Selbstdarstellung*. These are "Reichian Therapy Methods" towards creative and liberated expression which have been originated, and undergo a continuous evolution, in the AAO communal setting.

But all this we have already heard about and read about, because the AAO has made regular tours throughout France and other European countries during the last three years. And the community has been described and appraised - usually negatively because of its authoritarian principles - in many popular journals.

The point of this article is to talk about "what has changed". These changes are so fundamental that anyone who has taken an interest in the AAO (and with that interest, formulated an opinion, as it is so tempting to do, when faced with such an extraordinary and "radical", if not "outlandish", group) would have to revise his position, at least partially, if this new information and evidence can be heard.

## **Autonomous Communes and Individual Economic Responsibility**

Several important features of the AAO have changed at the same time:

1. *Each community is economically self-sufficient and all decisions are made by the local community (previously, important decisions could be initiated from the "original group" at Friedrichshof).*

2. Each person is economically responsible for himself (previously, each member worked for the AAO and for that was guaranteed room, board, a small sum of pocket money, and travelling expenses for the AAO projects). The "AAO Companies", such as transport, clothing store, restaurant, repair services, and weekend groups for visitors are now "owned" by one of several members of the community. People who work in the community itself for cleaning, cooking, administration, and so on, are paid fixed salaries, usually just enough to pay the fixed fee of room and board. And a large number of AAO members now work in regular jobs in the outside community.
3. While the AAO policy was previously to expand from its central location in Friedrichshof, to reproduce the AAO model throughout the world, and meanwhile to take in many new candidates each month to expand the size of each community, the group has now totally reversed its policy: "Quality, not quantity". "Keep little, and keep raising our level". New people who are excited by the new life possibilities offered by the AAO are encouraged to join others with a similar desire and form their own new community. The AAO communities offer help for other groups: Selbstdarstellung leaders, courses in community economics, and other educational and moral aids to help other groups get off the ground. There is no longer an ideological dictatorship, a "you must do this" attitude which put off so many individuals and groups in the past. With these multiple changes, the AAO has truly "tuned into" the external reality, guarding a number of essential features of its original project, but adapting its spirit and conventions to new necessities.

### **Keep Small and Beautiful**

What has precipitated these fundamental changes? It is here that one could wish that our large national governments could have the same intelligence as the AAO community: Fundamentally, *the bureaucracy was getting too large*. And we see in this a conclusion (usually proclaimed but without effective influence upon changing real practices) that is also upheld by the ecology movement. (See *Small is Beautiful*).

And how did they know that the AAO bureaucracy and organisation were getting too big? Mainly because their economy was foundering. Members of a work unit were less and less conscious of their responsibilities, of the realities, of the necessity to co-ordinate their efforts and avoid needless economic expense. There were "unconscious slips: for example a girl who forget to press a button in the proper manoeuvring of a large truck; result, three thousand francs for repairs. And she treated all this quite nonchalantly leaving her community friends high and dry. Therefore, the response to this and other negligences of individual responsibility was a turn away from a collective economy. Of course, there are some who "miss" the collective economy, especially the "spirit" of "doing it together". Even a visitor expressed her intense disappointment that this idealised economy was no longer functioning: "Vous m'avez donne le gout, et maintenant vous avez tout change" ("You gave me the taste of it, and then you changed it all around").

But with this individualization of economic responsibility, there has also been an "opening" to the outside world: AAO members are encouraged to finish their university education and receive professional diplomas. (Many AAO members come into the group with their university-work half-finished, the frustration of the impersonal and basically uneducating university world serving as a strong motivation to enter the AAO alternative society). Doctors, psychologists, teachers and other diploma-holding AAO members are now taking fulltime jobs outside of the AAO community. One doctor has already introduced certain features of the *Selbstdarstellung* into his practice as medical director of a ward in a psychiatric hospital.

### **Toward Individual Styles and Open Consciousness**

One can also see the traditional AAO shaven head and work jeans uniform frequently changed for individual styles of dress and sometimes longer hairstyles. Is this "adjustment to the external economic reality?" Or is there also a loosening of the AAO "model"? Even "wearing dresses" has come into mode for several AAO women, and not only when going out of the AAO community for working. And I heard no undercutting comments to criticise or ridicule these changes, as can easily happen in a group when an "orthodox" subgroup challenges the inovative persons as "traitors, reformists and bourgeois retroactives". (This type of "rigid orthodoxy" with notions of preserving "the original purity" is not only found in a number of modern totalitarian nation states, but in movements throughout history: Christianity, Marxism, Freudianism, Reichianism, e.g. the loyal and jealous disciples of Wilhelm Reich who brought civil law suits against each other because certain people were not practicing "the true doctrine").

I see the changed convention toward "individualizing appearance" is only one external aspect of "open consciousness". "Open consciousness" is the ability to not put rigid evaluations on people and events according to a prior classification, but to see the nuances and complexities of the matter at hand. Beforehand, one was either in or out of AAO. Those "in" were good, those "out" were either misfits or misled. In an article which I wrote one year ago during my visit to Friedrichshof, "What AAO has to Offer the World", in which I described the many positive radical elements of the AAO community, I criticized this tendency towards a powerfully judgmental "black and white and colourless" way of thinking. (I called this the AAO's "hard language" which results in attack and defensive counter-attack with an interlocutor, rather than a true "give and take" dialogue).

In my opinion the picture has radically changed with many of the colours now brought in. In talking with members of both the Paris and Geneva communities, I was struck by this "democratisation of thinking" where the AAO is no longer seen as the single salvation to humanity, but rather appreciates itself as but one group living and working in a context of radical social change, ready to offer and receive help in exchange with other groups that have a similar humanizing orientation. In this "democratisation of thinking", the faces of "right and wrong" are not so clearly defined, what is positive

and what is negative in a situation can be appreciated in the same analysis. We are closer to Fritz Perls' motto, (Perls is the "father" of Gestalt Therapy) that "we can criticize what we appreciate, and also, we can appreciate what we criticize."

For example, the *Selbstdarstellung* seemed to me last year to be run with some rigid rules: only one person in the middle, no touching, only the "guide" has the right to provoke, and a certain "style" of expression was demanded. Others have told me that the SD rules were not as flexible as I saw them.

### **SD Confrontation**

Nevertheless, the SD has changed too during the past year. There have been many more experiments, and each community adapts it to its special style. For example, the group in Geneva has used a more theatrical orientation and from this base they have developed short plays and even a comic opera called "Rock America" which they are currently presenting in different cities throughout France and Switzerland.

Also, another form of SD called "confrontation SD" has become "a new wave" in many communities, where people are encouraged to interact in two's, three's and small groups, and the small groups enlarge and divide according to the spontaneous actions of its participants. A very important addition is as follows: At the moment the ongoing action can be "cut" by the director, in order that participants and observers can give a "brief analysis" of the process: who is dominating others by a negative competition? Who is giving new and creative directions for the group? Who seems caught in rigid roles played too often in previous SD's? What are the historical and mythical archetypes uncovered by the spontaneous action? What events were turning points? And so on. And after several comments and observations, the SD continues with new overtones and renewed zest.

Of course, these confrontations are wildly chaotic and unformed. They will change too with the group's continual self observation and feedback. And there is no longer the mystifying messianic image "Now we have the technique! Now we have the method of all time, for all situations, for all people!" No, the creation is personal, adapted to the instant, and ready to change further with an evolution of the group's capacities and with changing circumstances.

The AAO's "Cultural Revolution" has gone so far that *there is no longer an AAO*. The title AAO is being systematically dropped, and each group is finding another name for itself. For example, at Geneva, the group is called CREE (Centre de Rechercher d'Expression Emotionnelle). The communities are still in contact, in fact, with an internal telephonic/telegraphic system linking them all up, and certain projects are still shared by all. For example, the central group at Friedrichshof, where the AAO originator Otto Muehl lives, has a project for an open school for children, and "vacations"

for all AAO members with "courses in formation" also available; the other AAO communities contribute to these and other projects.

### **Leaders Who Give Up Power**

I find one further conclusion based on the AAO's "Cultural Revolution": If the original AAO leaders (Otto Muehl, Berndt, Theresa, Claudia, etc.) had been "taken and seduced" by the privileges and power that inevitably come with a leadership position, the transformation could have never occurred. In other words, this transformation gives a certain "proof" that the motivation to be "leader" in the AAO was (and is) to help the establishment and growth of these communities, and not to personally profit from and abuse the leadership position. Can we imagine "leaders" in our present society - directors of industry, heads of universities, cabinet appointees - willing to *reduce* their organisational structure and allow a *decentralisation* of power and functions? Would such leaders be so willing to *reduce their personal power* for the welfare of the people they control and supposedly "serve"? Obviously not. And unfortunately, probably never. And why not?

One way to see it is to return to Wilhelm Reich's analysis. Those who live in a world of sexual frustration will be prone to use power as a substitution for real organic satisfaction. Others who live with their roots embedded in a truly satisfying reality - a reality that satisfies our sexual and communal needs, as represented by the AAO, and as embodied by its leaders - have no need for power over other human beings. They can "let go". And they have. So there is no longer a centralised AAO. There are now a number of autonomous and mutually cooperative communities, each one striving to allow the potential of its members find its full flowering.

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Robert Lipsey

## **The Boredom Threshold for Books and Therapists**

I get less confused these days when I find myself in a library. I remember a time when I'd see all that literature and my head would start to swim. After an uncomfortable half-hour I might leave with a couple of books under my arm but as often as not I'd be aware of a sinking feeling.

Later, at home when I'd recovered, I'd sit down and try and read one of the books. I'd plough through a couple of chapters and my eyelids would start to grow heavy and the sinking feeling would come over me again.