

## THE DISTORTED "INTELLECTUAL MERCANTILISM"

## OF THE RADICAL RIGHT

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The economic theory of mercantilism rests on four basic premises. The first is that wealth is the accumulation of money or precious metals. Second, wealth is attained through a favorable balance of trade with foreign countries. Third, strength can be measured by the density of population available to produce goods for export. And finally, authorities were expected to encourage a favorable trade balance lest the nation fall behind others.<sup>1</sup>

Although mercantilism is no longer a dominant economic paradigm, the underlying rationale has become a paradigm of social knowledge. Reputable "Intellectual Mercantilism" values knowledge as the accumulation of facts and information through communication with opposing viewpoints. Ideas which become popular in an open marketplace are valued over those which are unpopular. And finally, intellectual mercantilism values demonstrated expertise when facts conflict or when quick action is necessary.

But like its economic forerunner, intellectual mercantilism has its flaws. Like money, there is no finite supply of information to hoard. Furthermore, knowledge involves the appraisal of facts (their validity,

reliability and applicability) and reasoned analysis. The emphasis on popularity can lead to an acceptance of poorly reasoned ideas through improper scrutiny, unnecessary reliance on authority, or reliance on unqualified authorities.

On balance, intellectual mercantilism has served us well. But its weaknesses become especially apparent when the paradigm is pushed to its limits -- as when a low credibility speaker argues an unpopular thesis before a hostile audience. One such instance is the American Radical Right -- those individuals who believe that America is increasingly in the grip of an overwhelming conspiracy to destroy our way of life.<sup>2</sup>

#### The Accumulation of Facts

Historian Richard Hofstadter has noted that the paranoid style of the Radical Right is characterized by a gigantic inferential leap from an abundance of facts to a fantastic conclusion.<sup>3</sup> John Birch Society founder Robert Welch musters a 72 page bibliography to support his charge that Dwight D. Eisenhower was a conscious, dedicated agent of the Communists for all his adult life.<sup>4</sup> The 300 page argument is supported (or weighted down) by 74 pages of footnotes -- a full page of notes for every four pages of text. Yet that support relates to details of Eisenhower

life, communist strategy, and American foreign relations. Little if any of it directly relates to the inferential leap which Welch asks his readers to take.

Welch is not alone in his concern with verifiability. John Stormer's None Dare Call It Treason relies heavily upon extrinsic support, with 791 footnotes for 230 pages.<sup>5</sup> Alan Stang's 550 notes for 214 pages seems to contradict his thesis that It's Very Simple.<sup>6</sup> The late Nazi leader George Lincoln Rockwell supported his claim that Senator Joseph McCarthy was too easy on Communists by noting that he had read all the transcripts of the hearings.<sup>7</sup>

There is nothing generic about this kind of painstaking documentation. Welch, Stormer, Stang, and Rockwell were all in low credibility positions. Schooled in the intellectual mercantilist tradition, each learned that documentation and verifiability strengthens an argument.

But in each case the accumulated evidence (or sign thereof) is used to support the wrong portion of the argument. None of the authors help the audience with the difficult inference. In Toulminian terms, they provide Data when Warrant-Backing is needed. But for intellectual mercantilists who have lost some of their critical abilities this technique can be quite convincing. The ability to verify, and the quantity of verifiable evidence becomes persuasive in its own right. Each message is supported

with a plethora of verifiable facts, which may or may not be accurate or valid. But just as the economic mercantilists exchanged money, so the intellectual mercantilists trade facts. Whereas currency is acceptable because it is guaranteed legal tender by the government, Welch's facts and interpretations are guaranteed tender by the John Birch Society. Radical Right literature is often promoted as "carefully researched" or "thoroughly documented." but it is rarely if ever advertised as thoughtfully reasoned.

#### The Balance of Information

The mercantilist economy sought to export more than it imported, thereby accumulating a favorable balance of payments. The communicative parallel suggests that the intellectual mercantilist engage in communication with outgroups and receive more information than he/she sends.

First, the mercantile emphasis on foreign trade suggests that "in-group" communication is ordinarily pointless. Domestic trade was only valued as a part of the foreign trade process. The reputable intellectual mercantilist reads and listens to both in-and-out-group viewpoints to enhance his/her understanding. Once the I.M. forms a judgment and begins to speak out, rhetorical efforts are directed toward the out-group -- those people capable of

altering the exigence. The reputable I.M. sees only limited value in in-group persuasion.

A second element of this balance of information is the reputable I.M.'s desire to learn more than he/she says -- to create a warehouse of facts to be drawn upon if necessary. This favorable balance of information is the I.M.'s measure of knowledge -- the repository of facts unknown to others.

Both principles are evident in the discourse of the Radical Right, but in altered form. The Rightists do study their opponents. They read Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Pravda, the Daily Worker and the works of 'villains' like Alger Hiss. The John Birch Society distributes Communist pamphlets like "The Negro in a Soviet America"<sup>9</sup> and "American Negro Problems"<sup>10</sup> to their followers. Rockwell shows his audience a copy of a "secret" pamphlet from the American Jewish Committee.<sup>11</sup>

But whereas the reputable intellectual mercantilist studies out-group messages to refine a worldview, the Radical Right studies out-group messages to drive the enemy into intellectual bankruptcy. Facts, goals, and strategies are seen as precious metals to be accumulated. The Right hopes to devalue the Communists supply by revealing them to all, thus destroying the monopoly.

For this same reason the Radical Right does not address the Communist out-group. Although they read out-group materials, they will not exchange materials with

the out-group. They take great pains to maintain the secrecy of their membership lists and financial condition.

One of the Radical Right's major problems over the years has been an inability to move from the consolidation of forces to a confrontation with the enemy. This difficulty is understandable within the framework of their distorted version of the intellectual mercantilist paradigm. In their effort to attain a favorable balance of information they do not engage in profitable exchanges with the out-group. Instead they shoplift in the marketplace of ideas, taking ideas without giving anything, fearful that the enemy already has a tremendous advantage.

#### The Value of Population

The mercantilists valued dense population because it meant that many people were available to produce goods for export. The reputable intellectual mercantilist similarly values ideas and facts which become popular through rational consideration in the democratic marketplace of ideas. Popular ideas are respectable because a large number of people have reflected upon the known facts and accepted the claim. This presumes that receivers are knowledgeable, critical, and able to reach decisions freely.

But the Radical Right follows a different model of human interaction -- one of control. Their discourse is replete with the "mindless metaphors of control" discussed by Bonnie McD. Johnson.<sup>12</sup> They view communication as the physical manipulation of audiences, as physiological ingestion, or as magic. Senders control their receivers. Popular ideas are, for them, an indication of demonic control and infection. And the only way to supplant those ideas is to supplant the sources of control with new sources of control -- the Right.

From their perspective, ideas are not found in a marketplace but on a battlefield. Competing rhetors do not rationally induce; they cure disease and they break spells. Since "bad" ideas can easily infect, receivers should be insulated from, or inoculated against, those ideas. In a large circle, the Right seeks to prevent the foreign, trade of ideas -- precisely the opposite of proper mercantilism. But this is difficult without assistance, hence their reliance upon authority.

#### The Role of Authority

The mercantile economy was pitted against all other economies in an effort to accumulate as much as possible of a finite substance. Anything short of total commitment resulted in loss. Thus the mercantilists secured the help

of the state to organize and support them in a veritable economic jungle.

In much the same way, the reputable intellectual mercantilist looks to experts for assistance in the quest for knowledge. But since he/she values a personal warehouse of facts, the reputable intellectual mercantilist turns from personal study to expert testimony only when necessary -- as when facts conflict or when quick action is necessary.

For the Radical Right quick action is always necessary. Faced with a "gigantic conspiracy to enslave mankind"<sup>13</sup> which already controls 80% of America, there is no time to lose.<sup>14</sup> Americans need a quantity of facts, but they must be the "true facts." So the Radical Right turns to authorities who provide them with a package of authoritative analysis, extensive recommended readings, and verification.

Autocratic leadership is, from their point of view, understandable. If America really were 80% Communist dominated, we would probably need the Welch/Rockwell brand of leadership to overthrow it. But to the extent that we do not face that danger a refusal to consider diverse viewpoints endangers our ability to compete effectively in either the battleground or marketplace of ideas.

But assuming for the moment that the threat of an internal Communist conspiracy is sufficient to warrant



extensive reliance upon authority, we must consider the Radical Right's basis of expertise. Again the Radical Right distorts the paradigm of intellectual mercantilism. Dale Leathers has noted that fundamental mistrust is endemic in the worldview of the Radical Right.<sup>16</sup> Everyone is mistrusted until they prove otherwise. The best proof of trustworthiness for the reputable intellectual mercantilist is a favorable balance of evidence -- indications that the individual has, more often than not, been worthy of trust. Ideally, one should show an extensive record of trust without any incidence of fault.

But since the Radical Right mistrusts everyone, the best way to prove oneself is to admit that one has been untrustworthy. This confirms the Right's worldview and establishes a common bond of trust. Thus, the Radical Right, over the years, has emphasized the revelations of admitted former Communists like Louis Budenz, Whittaker Chambers, and Manning Johnson who testified against people who proclaimed their innocence. In view of the Right's standards for expertise, it should not be surprising that much of these converts' testimony was later disproven.<sup>17</sup>

In short, since they are in constant danger the Radical Right relies heavily on authorities. Their suspicious nature leads them to evaluate expertise according to a questionable standard.

### Conclusions

This paper has suggested that the logic underlying economic mercantilism functions today as a paradigm of social knowledge, and that the pitfalls of this paradigm are particularly evident in the discourse of the American Radical Right.

Specifically, the reputable intellectual mercantilist sees knowledge as the accumulation of facts from communicative exchange with diverse others. Through rational consideration of these facts in a free marketplace, good ideas become popular. When quick action is needed or when facts conflict, one turns to authoritative expertise for assistance. Expertise is determined through the accumulation of credentials.

But the Radical Right operates in a distorted form of this paradigm. They pilfer facts from the opposition without engaging them, and they use the facts they can muster regardless of their validity, reliability, or applicability. This evidence is usually misapplied, leaving the receiver to inferentially leap across the wide chasm of implausibility with the false confidence of facticity. Receivers are expected to take that leap because they are incapable of rationally considering the alternatives. Receivers are always controlled by someone, and the Radical Right thinks it better to encourage a major

leap than to allow people to remain in the dangerous grasp of the Communist conspiracy. This danger is so serious that reliance upon authoritative expertise is a necessity. But that expertise is determined on the basis of admitted failure rather than proven wisdom.

The foregoing discussion has been designed to suggest the influence of an Intellectual Mercantile paradigm of social knowledge, and the dangers of disassociating the elements from the paradigm. Indeed, it seems that the reputable I.M. paradigm is less significant than its perversions. The perversions help us understand not only the Radical Right, but our aggravation with college debaters and their evidence files, tenure and promotion processes which rely upon the quantification of productivity, and journalism which reports disparate pieces of trivial information. It remains for us to consider the relative value of reputable intellectual mercantilism and the potential challenges to it from, perhaps, an Intellectual Keynesianism.

NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>Since the term "mercantilism" was coined to describe a set of continuing economic practices, these principles of mercantilism have been distilled from a number of sources. Charles Wilson's pamphlet "mercantilism," (London: The Historical Association, 1971) provides a brief overview of the historical importance of mercantilism. Brief treatments are provided in Edmund Whittaker, Schools and Streams of Economic Thought, (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1960), pp. 31-54; and Eduard Heimann, History of Economic Doctrines, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1945), pp. 24-36. For more detailed discussions see Philip W. Buck, The Politics of Mercantilism, Rev. 2nd ed., (New York: Macmillan, 1955); Laurence B. Parker, The commercial Revolution, 1400-1776, (New York: Henry Holt, 1927), pp. 39-71; and the classic indictment of mercantilism, Adam Smith, The Wealth of Nations, (New York: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1957), especially Volume I, pp. 375-397. As one reads this material, it is well to recall Hecksher's introductory comments: "Mercantilism . . . is only an instrumental concept which, if aptly chosen, should enable us to understand a particular historical period more clearly than we otherwise might. Thus everybody must be free to give the term mercantilism the meaning and more particularly the scope that best harmonize with the special tasks he assigns himself. To this degree there can be no question of the right or wrong use of the word, but only of its greater or less appropriateness." (p. 2). I have tried to use the term economic mercantilism to embrace the general principles discussed by the above authors without offending any of them. More important is the rhetorical/economic parallel. Although "mercantilism" has been disdained since Adam Smith, Wilson points out its contribution: "It was the embodiment of enthusiasm for economic gain, and its relentless systematic pursuit of material ends constitutes, it may be, one of the factors which help to explain the more rapid material progress of the West as compared with the stagnation of, say, Asia." (p. 27). This paper takes the position that the same may be said of intellectual mercantilism and the pursuit of knowledge.

<sup>2</sup>What I term the "Radical Right" has also been called the Far Right, the Extreme Right, and Ultra-Conservatism. I prefer Radical Right because it captures the anti- leftist position, while stressing the distinction from the more passive conservatives. These groups seek to change the Establishment more in the fashion of the Radical Left than Conservatives. For further discussions of the Radical Right, see James McEvoy, Radicals or Conservatives?: The Contemporary American Right, (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1971); Daniel Bell, ed., The Radical Right, (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1964); Donald Janssen and Bernard Eismann, The Far Right, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963); Brooks R. Walker, The Christian Fright Peddlers, (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964).

<sup>3</sup>Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," in The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), esp. pp. 37-38. Studies by Sanders and Newman and by C.A. Smith have explored Hofstadter's suggestion that there is a clear distinction between the evidence one uses and the inferences one draws. Sanders and Newman's analysis of Stormer's None Dare Call It Treason led them to conclude that Hofstadter had underestimated the role of selective exposure and selective perception, thus, indicating a faulty diagnosis. Smith's comparative analysis of two paranoid and two non-paranoid books about the same subjects supported Hofstadter's position. See Keith R. Sanders and Robert P. Newman, "John A. Stormer and the Hofstadter Hypothesis," Central States Speech Journal, 22 (1971), 222-225; and Craig Allen Smith, "The Hofstadter Hypothesis Revisited: The Nature of Evidence in Politically 'Paranoid' Discourse," Southern Speech Communication Journal, 42 (1977), 274-289.

<sup>4</sup>Robert Welch, The Politician, (Belmont, Mass.: Belmont Publishing Company, 1963), xxxviii-cx. For an analysis of evidentiary practices in The Politician, see Smith, 281-288.

<sup>5</sup>John A. Stormer, None Dare Call It Treason, (Florissant, Mo.: Libert Bell Press, 1964). For an analysis of Stormer's evidentiary practices see Sanders and Newman.

<sup>6</sup>Alan Stang, It's Very Simple: The True Story of Civil Rights, (Boston: Western Islands, 1965).

<sup>7</sup>George Lincoln Rockwell, "Minority Forum Address," (audio tape, University of Kansas, n.d.).

<sup>8</sup>The rhetorical impact of verifiability is discussed more fully in Paul I. Rosenthal's "Specificity, Verifiability and Message Credibility," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 62 (December, 1971), 393-401. ("In short, verifiability is the primary linguistic factor enforcing a statement's credibility, not because the listener will verify the statement but because he or anyone else can verify it." (p. 400).

<sup>9</sup>James W. Ford and James S. Allen, "The Negroes in a Soviet America," (New York: Workers Liberty Publishers, 1935), distributed by American Opinion.

<sup>10</sup>John Pepper, "American Negro Problems," (New York: Workers Library Publishers, 1928), distributed by American Opinion.

<sup>11</sup>Rockwell, "Minority Forum."

<sup>12</sup>Bonnie McD. Johnson, "Images of the Enemy in Inter-group Conflict," Central States Speech Journal, 26 (Summer, 1975), 84-92.

<sup>13</sup>Robert Welch, The Blue Book of the John Birch Society, (Boston: Western Islands, 1961), p. 21.

<sup>14</sup>"Scorecard," American Opinion, (December, 1979).

<sup>15</sup>Welch, Blue Book, p. 149.

<sup>16</sup>Dale G. Leathers, "Fundamentalism of the Radical Right" Southern Speech Journal, 33 (Summer, 1968), 245-258. Leathe finds a dilemma for the Radical Right persuader: "Thus, the reactionary persuader is faced with two alternatives, both of which are highly undesirable: (1) He can maintain, as he does that appearances are so uniformly deceiving that anti-Communism cannot gather the necessary facts on which to base wise decisions....(or) (2) He can maintain that appearances are uniformly liable to attract the larger 'uncommitted' audience..." (p.2) The present analysis suggests two additional alternatives: (3) that appearances are so uniformly untrustworthy that only a trustworthy authority can help gather the proper facts and values together, and (4) that appearances are so untrustworthy that people who affirm their untrustworthiness should be trusted.