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RADICALISM AND THE LIMITS OF REFORM:  
THE CASE OF JOHN REED

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## ABSTRACT

Poet, journalist, editorial board member of the Masses and founding member of the Communist Labor Party, John Reed is a hero in both the worlds of cultural and political radicalism. This paper shows how his development through pre-World War One Bohemia and into left wing politics was part of a larger movement of middle class youngsters who were in that era in reaction against the reform mentality of their parent's generation. Reed and his peers were critical of the following, common reformist views: that economic individualism is the engine of progress; that the ideas and morals of WASP America are superior to those of all other ethnic groups; that the practical constitutes the best approach to social life. By tracing Reed's development on these issues one can see that his generation was critical of a larger cultural view, a system of beliefs common to middle class reformers and conservatives alike. Their revolt was thus primarily cultural, one which tested the psychic boundaries, the definitions of humanity, that reformers shared as part of their class.

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In American history the name John Reed is synonymous with radicalism, both cultural and political. Between 1910 and 1917, the first great era of Bohemianism in this country, he was one of the heroes of Greenwich Village, a man equally renowned as satiric poet and tough-minded short story writer; as dashing reporter, contributing editor of the Masses, and co-founder of the Provincetown Players; as lover of attractive women like Mabel Dodge, and friend of the notorious like Bill Haywood, Emma Goldman, Margaret Sanger and Pancho Villa. When the repression attendant upon United States participation in World War I destroyed Bohemia and devastated the ranks of American political radicals, Reed moved onto a global stage, became a chronicler of the Russian Revolution, associate of Trotsky and Lenin, and member of the Executive Committee of the Communist International. He died of typhus in Moscow in 1920, was buried before the Kremlin Wall, and ever since has been more honored in the Soviet Union than in his homeland.<sup>1</sup>

The man who engaged in so much notorious activity was a product of a solid middle class family, one in which radicalism was not so much despised as simply unacknowledged or unknown. Like most

Bohemians of his generation, Reed's heritage and upbringing were genteel, his family politics those of reform and his personal ambitions enormous. His father was a Progressive, one of his first heroes was Theodore Roosevelt, and his aim from an early age was to be successful and famous. That such a well-enculturated young man should follow a path towards martyrdom in the Soviet Union not only says much about him, but also provides an interesting perspective on the first two decades of the twentieth century, and on the theme of reform so central to American life in that era. Reed was part of a broad, inchoate movement in which some children of the liberal middle classes were -- in the name of freedom and self-expression -- testing and finding inadequate the behavior patterns and beliefs of their parents. To study his development is to gain insight into this movement -- sometimes called a "generational revolt" -- to see how it both derives from a middle class heritage and highlights the limits of the mentality of reform.<sup>2</sup>

Caution is in order when one sets about to use biography to suggest lessons of a broad historical nature. Reed was a rare individual, an exceptionally talented writer and the only one of his middle class peers to die for a cause. Yet from the perspective adopted here, neither personal accomplishments nor final commitments are most important. Rather, the concern is with the representative of the pre-war radical, artistic subculture that -- for want of a better term -- we label "Bohemia." In this realm -- a hodgepodge of university-spawned intellectuals, avant garde poets and visual artists, European-born and native radicals, feminists, advocates of

birth control and free love, Marxists, Anarchists and Cubists -- Reed was alternately admired, envied and resented, but in the midteens nobody doubted that he was already, as Walter Lippmann proclaimed, "legendary."<sup>3</sup> As such a legend, or culture hero, he experienced in full the ideals, tensions, contradictions and liberations of the subculture which nurtured and honored him.

To be precise about the critique of reform that emerges from John Reed's life, or the generational shift in attitudes that it represents, one must tidy up history even more than usual. The notion of a "reform mentality" is elusive enough, and failure would seem to hover over any attempt to make coherent those sprawling, unsystematic and self-contradictory beliefs that characterize Bohemia in pre World War I days. Yet behind the artistic, political and intellectual clashes, the competing claims of many isms, the faddish cries for the new in art, sex, politics, lifestyle, dress, dance and modes of self-reflection, one can discern commonalities, sense certain tentative gropings away from some cultural patterns and towards others. Here is a dividing line -- not sharp or precise but visible nonetheless -- between parents and children, past and future, which suggests that Reed's contemporaries were forerunners of what would later be called a counter culture; that is, a subculture whose values call into question not only reform politics, but the entire world view we term "bourgeois."

Central to such a world view are the following three beliefs rooted so deeply in the culture that reformers and Progressives could accept them as virtually self-evident truths: that competitive

economic individualism is the engine of personal and social progress; that the ideas and morals of WASP Americana are superior to those of the working class, immigrants and all foreign cultures; that the practical and instrumental constitute the best possible approach to social and political life. It was just such notions that the younger generation was now calling into question. Among Reed's peers one observes a disdain for economic competition and a desire for some form of extended family or community; a belief that the lower classes at home and abroad are morally equal and in some ways superior to those who lord it over them economically, politically and culturally; and a tendency to make aesthetic judgments -- broadly construed -- take precedence over practical ones. Naturally, such attitudes helped to fuel the revolutionary politics which most visibly set Reed off from the tradition of reform.

To trace this shift of attitudes equal attention must be paid to Reed's writings and behavior, for he was a man whose mode of expression included action as well as words. Bumptious, aggressive and self-centered, he nonetheless shared with many contemporaries both a liberation from parental views and agony that the received wisdom of his elders could neither explain nor justify the historical changes he witnessed and experienced. This process helped to create the texture of all Reed's days, but for purposes of this argument it is only necessary to focus on certain aspects and incidents of his career. The strategy is as follows: first to gain an overview of his life, then to see how it serves to highlight the limitations of reform.

## I

John Reed's life began quite literally at the top. Born in 1877, his early years were spent at Cedar Hill, a five-acre estate overlooking Portland, Oregon. A mansion had been built there by his grandfather, Henry Green, one of the city's founders, a pioneer capitalist of extravagant tastes whose descendants had turned ultra respectable in one generation. This meant that Reed was indulged as a youth, and that he attended a private academy in Portland before going off to Morrystown prep school and then Harvard. For his mother, herself the product of an Eastern finishing school, the aim of such an education was to make her son acceptable in the "best circles" anywhere in the United States. For young Jack, going east promised freedom from the straight-laced provincialism of his home town and provided an arena in which to test himself. At the age of sixteen he was determined to be a writer, and he well understood that in the world of letters fame and fortune came only to those who were on the East Coast.

A lack of political concerns in Reed's classical education were offset by his father's first-hand involvements. Businessman Charles Jerome Reed, a strong believer in honesty in both public and private life, was not a man to avoid a call to conscience. In 1905 he entered the world of reform politics by accepting an appointment as U.S. Marshall from Francis J. Heney, a special prosecutor selected by Theodore Roosevelt to investigate fraud in Northwest timber lands. For three years Heney and Reed did their job so well that some of the

leading political and social figures in Oregon were either prosecuted, convicted or implicated in the illegal dealings. All this made C.J. something of a pariah among associates, and served to sharply curtail his livelihood. But it also wedded him more firmly to reform. In 1910 he ran unsuccessfully for Congress as a Progressive and two years later he was active in the abortive movement to help Roosevelt wrest the Republican nomination away from President Taft.

The politics that were central to the last years of C.J.'s life -- he died suddenly of a stroke in 1912 -- touched his son deeply but did little in the short run to affect his behavior. They helped to make Reed see his father as a hero, but at college between 1906 and 1910 he exhibited little concern with local, state or national affairs beyond those which involved C.J. During that period Harvard was struck by what Reed would later call an "influx of discontent, of revolutionary ideas, of criticism and revolt."<sup>4</sup> Part of the normally-complacent student body, responding to the reformers and radicals who had been stirring America for a decade, became passionate about social issues and created numerous political organizations which first agitated for change on campus, then attempted to influence local and state politics. Their concerns touched Reed but little. Occasionally he did attend meetings of these groups, but in general he found them less important than his role in Harvard's literary world -- managing the Drama Club, helping to edit the Lampoon and the Monthly -- and infinitely less compelling than his position as football cheerleader.

Graduation left Reed free to gravitate to Manhattan, by 1910 the cultural as well as financial capital of the nation. At first his lot was that of the fledgling writer; money came from journalistic pieces and editorial duties on popular magazines, but the most important part of life was the attempt to find a personal voice in poetry, fiction and drama. A quick success in the commercial world, Reed was annoyed and dismayed to find that some of his most serious efforts were unacceptable there. These were welcomed by editor Max Eastman into the pages of the Masses, a small-circulation, lively experimental monthly, and soon he was drawn into the realm of artistic, political and economic radicalism to and for which it spoke.

In truth he for some time had been living on the edge of that world. Early in 1911 Reed had with several friends moved into an apartment on Washington Square, in Greenwich Village, the center of a new kind of Bohemia formerly unknown in America, one simultaneously serious and fun-loving, where the worlds of avant garde art and political radicalism intersected. At that time the Village was sending out a call to sensitive youngsters all over the nation, and they were flocking there to find a community where deviant behavior -- like writing poetry, painting, espousing Anarchism or living together with benefit of clergy -- was cherished rather than condemned. Suspicious of the many hangers-on for whom the area was merely a playground, a place to loaf and cadge drinks, Reed was nonetheless at home there. In 1913 he won a large measure of local fame for the privately-printed, lengthy narrative poem, The Day in Bohemia, which helped to capture and define the lifestyle of that generation.<sup>5</sup>

For the next four years Reed was a central figure in Bohemia without ever losing his strong position in the high-paying realm of commercial magazines. So enormous were his drive and energy that the the range of his activities can only be suggested. He was an editor of and frequent contributor to the Masses; a highly-paid correspondent for the mass-circulation Metropolitan Magazine; an author of poems, plays, humorous sketches, book reviews and short stories both commercial and serious; a crucial force in the creation of the Provincetown Players on Cape Cod and in that group's removal to New York City; a member of the Liberal Club and frequenter of Village hangouts like Polly's, the Brevoort, the Crazy Cat and the Working Girls' Home; an early resident of the rural colony in Croton; a supporter of feminism and birth control; and a lover of more than a few young women anxious to shed the restrictive bonds of Victorian morality. His best-known liason was with the wealthy Mabel Dodge, seven years his senior, a woman whose salon was one of the Village's central meeting places.

During these years artistic issues merged into social and economic ones, and slowly Reed was pulled towards radical politics. He could read about the doctrines of Marxism, Socialism, Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Masses, and hear them debated often enough among friends, but on the whole words affected him less than the glaring contrast between rich and poor, the sharp evidence of exploitation encountered daily on Manhattan streets. His first political involvement began in April 1913. In response to the impassioned words of Big Bill Haywood, the slouchy, battered, theatrical chief of the

Industrial Workers of the World, Reed nipped over to Paterson, New Jersey, to see what he could do to help 25,000 strikers who had shut down the silk mills there. A brash assertion of individual rights to a quick-tempered cop landed Reed in jail, and he emerged four days later with blood in his eye and vitriol on his pen. Commitment to the Wobblies came in more than the written word. Reed's prodigious efforts were instrumental in bringing the Paterson Pageant -- simultaneously a propaganda vehicle and money-raising venture for the IWW -- to life on June 7 in Madison Square Garden

Paterson made Reed notorious; his next radical involvement made him famous. Late in 1913 he accepted assignments from the Metropolitan and the New York World to cover the little-understood events of the revolution then unfolding in Mexico. Unlike many reporters, who concocted their stories from rumors circulating in El Paso, Jack journeyed far south of the border, became friends with Pancho Villa in Chihuahua, rode with a detachment of horseback troops and joined Villa's footsoldiers when they stormed towards the important victory at Torreon in March, 1914. So vivid were his articles from the front that the usually critical Walter Lipmann, in the pages of the New Republic, would claim that it was Reed who made America take Villa seriously. In a personal note he was even more complimentary: "Your. . . articles are undoubtedly the finest reporting that's ever been done. . . . I say that with Jack Reed reporting begins."<sup>6</sup>

A good part of the strength of Reed's work derived from his identification with the revolutionaries, whose bravery and beliefs

also helped to solidify his commitment to radical politics. This clearly showed later in 1914 when, as a now-renowned correspondent on the Western Front, Jack could not fill his reports with any of the verve and passion that editors expected. The World War seemed not only meaningless, but also detrimental to artistic and social progress; indeed, to civilization itself. It taught Reed that he could only be creative when his deepest sympathies were engaged. To see the war, as he now did, as a logical outgrowth of capitalism, was to endanger his livelihood. As the United States drifted towards involvement, he was active in the anti-war movement, remaining in opposition even after American entry in April, 1917. By that summer virtually all commercial outlets were closed to him, and gloom over the course of the world and his professional trials darkened Reed's days.

The Soviet revolution saved him from despair. A combination of savvy intuition and financial support from friends landed him in Petrograd in September, 1917. Even before the ten days which he would capture in prose, Reed was a Bolshevik partisan, convinced that only they were serious about ending Russia's involvement in the war. The fulfillment of that promise, and the subsequent feverish plans for social reconstruction, wedded him to the revolution. Briefly he served as a propagandist in the Soviet foreign ministry, then returned to the United States where his papers were seized by the government and he was twice forced to stand trial with other Masses editors for articles which supposedly interfered with the war effort. Influence from his more famous days sprang the papers loose and Reed swiftly

composed Ten Days That Shook the World, then hurled himself into the task of bringing revolution to America. His path led from the Left Wing of the Socialist Party to the founding convention of the Communist Labor Party, and then back to Russia in 1919 to plea for Comintern recognition of the CLP. Shortly after the Second Congress of the Communist International he contracted typhus and died; like millions of Russians he was a victim of insufficient medical supplies, denied by the Allied blockade of the new Soviet Regime.

## II

To see the limits of reform through Reed's life one must not fail to notice first just how much strength and support he drew from his middle class background. Both sheltered and indulged as a child, he was encouraged in literary aims by parents who saw no conflict between cultural pursuits and the possibility of making a decent living. From C.J.'s example he learned about the necessity of standing firm for one's beliefs, and also about the cost of rectitude in public affairs. An education at elite schools reinforced these tendencies. Harvard's elective system provided evidence that following one's own pathway was the essence of freedom, and the content of its courses led inevitably to the conclusion that the artifacts of high culture were the noblest products of a civilization.

This background encouraged Reed's natural tendency to deal with the world essentially as a poet, a person ready to seize upon certain aspects of reality and intensify them with the power of art.

That this was, by usual standards, hardly a practical way of handling life never bothered him, for he lived in a subculture of like-minded people. Indeed, nothing sets Reed's generation so clearly off from that of its parents than this: these indulged children of the middle class refused to accept the notion that practical considerations always took precedence over aesthetic, playful, dramatic, heroic, experimental or experiential ones. This is not to say that they were incapable to holding jobs, completing tasks, raising families or honoring commitments. It is, rather, to suggest a subtler but still significant point: much less than their parents were Reed's contemporaries bound by the delayed gratification and repression of instincts that lie at the heart of bourgeois culture.

The difference between generations was less one of absolutes than degrees. Nowhere is this more evident than in the area of competition. As a good child of the middle class, Reed was full of the combativeness and self-assertion necessary in a competitive order. But, as was common among Bohemians, his ambition was not channeled into economic enterprise. Money meant little to him and he was never interested in acquiring material possessions. When affluent, he shared his income with friends and family; when money was in short supply, he easily did without the things it would buy. This behavior showed that his aim was elsewhere. Reed hungered for success, but as a poet, dramatist or novelist, in realms where monetary evaluation was largely beside the point.

This pronounced thirst for fame made him an unlikely candidate for communal activities, where the downplaying of self is a

prerequisite for group success. Yet if he was commonly criticized for being self-centered, Reed was not immune to the communitarian impulse that ran through the subculture. During Harvard days he enthusiastically endorsed a proposal for a group of creative friends to homestead in the West after graduation and live and work communally. If reality stepped in to squelch such a vision, he soon found himself with many of those same friends in the Village, where the sharing of apartments, income and personal problems meant that life had more the texture of an extended rather than a nuclear family. This was true of Bohemia as a whole. In restaurants, bars, bookstores and hangouts like the Liberal Club, Villagers felt -- for all their internal quarrels -- like a group apart, a family or tribe banded together to defy the curiosity, criticism, scorn and fascination of middle class journalists, tourists, moralists and slummers.

Of Bohemian institutions specifically collective in origin, Reed was a force in two: the Masses and the Provincetown Players. An ambivalence over communal activities was most clearly revealed on the magazine; at monthly meetings he was contentious enough to earn the title "spoiled child" of the editorial board.<sup>7</sup> A recurrent problem centered around the need to accept collective decisions on works of art. This became impossible when the work was his own. Once Reed submitted a poem under an assumed name, and when it was read aloud and then rejected, he revealed his identity as author and insisted that it be included in the next issue. To calm his anger, the other editors had to agree. By the time the Players were formed, he was less self-assertive. Though the most famous of the founding members, Reed was

content to help in small tasks like building sets, painting scenery and acting in minor roles, along with major ones like writing and directing one-act plays. But it was then the summer of 1916, and the mounting pressure of the World War was already moving Reed towards thoughts of political and social change.

The world of radicalism and revolution most clearly reveals Reed's scorn for economic competition and impulse towards the collective. Initially unable to deny his own egocentric desires, he could at least want for others what eluded him. Central to all the political movements he loved -- to the Wobblies, Villistas and Bolsheviks -- was a communitarian vision. Certainly he was impressed by strong or fiery leaders -- by Bill Haywood and Carlo Tresca, by Villa, Lenin and Trotsky -- but his heart went out to the common folk who endured the trials, duties, pain and joy of social upheaval. His words sang, rose towards poetry in describing the selflessness of the Paterson strikers, in jail and on the picket line; the camaradery of Mexican revolutionaries who, accompanied by wives and mistresses, shared water, beans and tortillas on the battlefields; the masses of workers, peasants and soldiers who comprised the real "hero of the Russian revolution" and collectively proved themselves capable of "inventing a whole new form of civilization."<sup>8</sup> The experience underlying such vision was not without its effect. When Reed was organizing the CLP in 1919, one labor leader noted that he did not, like some other middle class radicals, "go down to the working class." Rather, he seemed "with it and of it."<sup>9</sup> This comment, and the final and fatal trip to the Soviet Union at a time when he was sick and

weary, indicate that by the end Reed was able to put commitments to others ahead of those to himself.

Most of life might be necessary to tame ambition, but shedding middle class morality could occur almost overnight. At Harvard Reed drank and smoked, but -- in common with his classmates -- his relations with females were idealized rather than carnal. Less than a year after graduation, however, he was casually spending nights with Village women who seemed unconcerned about protecting their "reputations." Indeed, in Bohemia morality ran in the opposite direction. Young ladies worried over remaining virgins and couples old fashioned enough to get married hid this social misdeed and pretended to be only living together. In an earlier era, sexual adventures might be expected of a young man, but discretion would have been deemed in order. This was not the way of Reed's generation. When sharing Mabel Dodge's villa in Italy or elegant apartment in New York, he never attempted to conceal the fact. Nor was he secretive when, after a 1915 visit home, Louise Bryant, the wife of a socially-prominent dentist, suddenly left Portland and moved into Reed's apartment in the Village. This proved too much for his mother. She refused all invitations to visit the couple and only reconciled with Louise after the two were married in 1917.<sup>10</sup>

Not just the behavior of Bohemians offended their elders. Their perpetual concern with sex, their vocal and written stridency was equally dismaying. Unlike some Villagers, Reed was no theorist of free love, but sexual matters could not help but enter his consciousness and writing. Since childhood he, like many middle class

youths, had been fascinated by the seamy underside of urban life. The step from the vice-ridden Portland waterfront to Satan's Circus in Manhattan was not a long one, and Reed filled some of his best short stories with sympathetic portraits of crooks, con men, and prostitutes. A supposedly "immoral" tale, in fact, propelled him into the realm of radicalism. It was a simple story about a hooker who basically enjoys her work and is never punished for her transgressions. Rejected on moral grounds by popular magazines that had accepted other stories he considered more trivial, this became Reed's first contribution to the Masses.

Magazines which judged Reed's story immoral were expressing a middle class tradition in which the control of impulses -- what Freud calls sublimation -- was identified as the basis of civilization itself. In a hierarchy of nations, such control was seen as the measure of Anglo-Saxon superiority; for America to continue growing progressively stronger, a similar morality was deemed necessary for the entire social order. To reformers, secure in their own elevated standards, this did not mean naked coercion, but the enlightened ways of education, legislation, propaganda. The target was not just sexual behavior, but all the drinking, singing, gambling and other frivolous amusements generally identified with the lower classes.

Reed found such attitudes ridiculous. Experiences in immigrant ghettos and lower class districts of Manhattan, Paterson and Lawrence; among Mexican, Italian and Serbian peasants; and at the homes of French and Russian intellectuals, reinforced his own beliefs that sensual pleasure -- broadly construed -- was part of a wholesome

life. To him the level of a civilization was not marked by its industrial progress but by its quota of human happiness. This led him to denounce efforts such as the one to protect New York working girls by investigating the evil influence of dance halls with their supposedly salacious modern steps. Reed believed that these young ladies had their own "sense of beauty," one that reformers should respect. Such an assertion of cultural relativism was only a way station to a more extreme position. Like other Bohemians, Reed sometimes flirted with a kind of primitivism, one which turned tradition upside down. It was easy to idealize what appeared to be the easier sensual behavior of workers, immigrants and foreigners, and then to harshly judge the lives middle class elders as repressed, constricted, joyless and unhealthy.

The quest for happiness was not simply a personal demand, it had a public dimension as well. Reed expected from the social arena the same color and excitement that he sought in private life, and in the decade of his maturity, radical politics was brimming with such possibilities. His reputation may be that of radical writer and activist, but it would be a serious mistake to see him as basically a political animal. The regular activities of that normally practical process -- elections, campaigns, coalitions, compromises -- never long held his attention, and self interest, at least in an economic sense, rarely affected his judgments. Certainly he had an acute social conscience, and it was no whim that landed him on the side of revolution. But for Reed it was the aesthetics of the matter, politics as poetry and theater, that compelled attention.

There were two parts to this. In the political arena Reed would search for color, tension and release, preferably spiced with a taste of danger. He would also be inclined to judge the results of political action -- indeed, revolution itself -- at least in part by the depth and intensity of art which issued from it. Both elements first appeared in connection with his father's struggle against the big timber interests. Here there was plenty of drama -- courtroom confrontations, late night meetings, secret detectives and spies, revelations of wrongdoing by prominent people, threats of physical danger which led Francis Heney to carry a gun during the trials and C.J. to fear that violence might be done to his loved ones. By the time the excitement was over, the young man had a new hero, journalist Lincoln Steffens, who had covered the events for a national magazine. One result was a rave review in the Harvard Monthly of Steffen's book, The Upbuilders, a group of biographies of reform leaders. Characteristically Reed viewed this work through his own prism, writing that the full Progressive mentality would only be realized when the movement "finally gave birth to a new and splendid national expression in art."<sup>12</sup>

To see radical movements as theater was not difficult. Reed was only one of many partisans to describe strikes and revolutions as morality plays, with bloated capitalists and their minions -- the police, the national guard, or the army -- on one side and the oppressed workers and their leaders on the other. In Paterson he admired Haywood, Tresca and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn for "the boldness of their dream," and depicted the strike as "drama, change, democracy

on the march . . . a war of the people."<sup>13</sup> Mexico was even more colorful. Villa appeared as a kind of Robin Hood, peons and vaqueros delivered lines full of uncanny folk wisdom, and rag-tag armies moved through startling landscapes of barren desert and mountain beneath theatrically-lit skies. At the time of the Bolshevik takeover, a Greek tragedy's feeling of fate pervaded Reed's prose. The Revolution was "endowed with the patient inevitability of mounting sap in spring," and it came like the turning of a season, with "tempest and wind, and then . . . a rush of red blossoming."<sup>14</sup> Leaders like Lenin and Trotsky were able to survive only -- and here the image shifts -- by swimming successfully on a mighty tide they were unable to control.

The desire for revolutionary movements to give birth to new artistic visions was common enough among Bohemians and radicals. With Reed, as always, this included a personal as well as a social hope. His earliest writings as a teenager were tales of adventure; his last attempts -- penned in a Finnish jail cell in 1920 -- were outlines for two novels, one set in mythic realm of knights, the other autobiographical. In the two intervening decades he had come a long way from the world of Cedar Hill, through Bohemia to the Soviet Union, but the original impulse to be a creative writer, to assert the primacy of art over life had never -- for all his involvements in organizing the CLP and activities as a member of the Comintern -- entirely faded.

This suggests that for Reed creation and social conscience were inextricably linked. His best stories and one-act plays -- some written long before his initial involvement with the IWW -- are

critical views of city life. Full of immigrants, derelicts, corrupt cops, shopgirls, hustlers, hookers and ward-heel politicians, they portray an urban landscape where joy is a fleeting emotion in a realm of exploitation and loneliness. Paterson provided another opportunity for transmuting radicalism into art. The pageant Reed wrote and directed, in which Wobblies reenacted their own roles in the strike, stirred some critics to visions of a new, popular, revolutionary theater with the power to move the masses towards action.

Four years later, in the days after the Bolshevik takeover, Reed had similar notions in mind. Learning that many Ukrainian officials were on strike, he put himself forth -- half jokingly, to be sure -- as potential Commissar of Art and Amusement for the region. His aim was to "get up great pageants" and to sponsor festivals "with fireworks, orchestras and plays in the squares and everybody participating."<sup>15</sup> In the winter of 1919-20, when the Soviet Union was suffering civil war, famine and epidemic, he took time to seek out the haunts of Moscow's avant garde, met the explosive Vladimir Mayakovsky and the Futurists, was impressed by their experimental graphics and poetry. He was equally pleased to visit a Prolet Cult Center, where artists worked communally during the day and in the evenings gave classes for workers. In this center one found evidence of a new kind of art, one with a character all its own. Not quite knowing what to make of the work here, Reed described it within a single word, at once neutral and full of hope: "Proletarian."<sup>16</sup>

That the grandson of Henry Green and the son of C. J. Reed should find promise in such a word says much about social change

between 1900 and 1920. From Reed's viewpoint it was a matter of reform not living up to a vision of hope for all people. In a world of crisis, Progressives seemed impotent, unwilling or unable to hold to their ideals. His first hero, Roosevelt, disappointed him by an exclusively national view of reform, by racism exhibited in contempt for Mexicans and by jingoism after 1914. Woodrow Wilson, whom Reed had once believed as high-minded a leader as America could produce, had led the nation to war and then stifled dissent -- including the Masses -- with unprecedented ferocity. Even Lincoln Steffens, C.J.'s friend and Jack's longtime mentor -- had refused to stand against hysteria after 1917, urging Reed to write against the war but not to publish. Abroad it was the same. In Mexico, Carranza was a reformer, but he showed little sympathy with the land hunger of the peons; in Europe, liberal and even socialist leaders had forsaken ideals to embrace war; in Russia, Kenensky, a socialist who sounded more like a reformer, proved to be weak and vacillating, blind to both the acute suffering and real movement of the revolutionary masses.

Had economic and political analysis been his basic approach, Reed might have blamed all this failure on the power of capital to shape history and control men's destinies. Instead, he found reform wanting on several grounds, and its political ineffectiveness was but the final failure that turned him into a revolutionary. New heroes -- Haywood, Villa, Trotsky, Lenin -- took the place of earlier ones, but none dislodged the memory of a father who had passed away before Jack's first involvements with the IWW. Ever after 1912, Reed believed C.J.'s death to be an offshoot of the timber battles. His

own end was a similarly oblique result of political struggle, and the timing and parallelism of both deaths is suggestive. At once able to fulfill C.J. and yet grow beyond the values of his father's world, Reed could repudiate reform doctrines without forsaking the memory of a man whose love and support had helped to launch him on such an impressive career.

### III

When John Reed arrived in Manhattan to seek fame as a writer, it was with his parents' blessing. His father wrote to Lincoln Steffens, "He is a poet, I think; keep him singing."<sup>17</sup> The young man needed no encouragement to do so. Not for the likes of him was life a sombre moral pilgrimage, a burden of weighty duties and obligations. His was always a poet's vision, a demand that experience continually burst through the confines of mundane reality. Something in Reed longed for heroism, and he was drawn to arenas laden with color, adventure, excitement and danger. It was hardly his choice that in the early twentieth century the realms of social and political deviance, of Bohemia and radicalism, were the most likely areas for such activity. Yet these, too, suited his character and temperament, his education and social conscience.

In the grandeur of aim, furor of activity and the breadth of accomplishment Reed may be unusual, but everything he wanted and believed reflected the values of the Bohemian subculture to which he belonged. This generation was not simply reacting against a parental

mentality but a larger cultural view, a system of beliefs and attitudes which came to reformers as part of their middle class heritage. Transcending all political differences between Progressives and their conservative opponents was a common notion of psychological humanity, of the kind of self that was necessary for individual success and social progress. In part a legacy of Puritanism, this mindset had solidified during the revolutionary Era, when -- according to a recent historian -- a fusion of "Protestant asceticism and republican theory" had saddled America with the belief that man "had to devote his life to work, frugality and sobriety, and to be the master of his passions and instinctual needs."<sup>18</sup> Such a character structure, reinforced by a Social Darwinian gloss, was still the middle class ideal at the turn of this century. For males it was expressed in a fear of feminine, the emotional, the frivolous, the passive, the luxurious and the artistic. Such qualities were deemed hindrances in the serious struggle for life, both individual and international, and were largely relegated to the female half of the population.

The limits of reform, see through the life of Reed and his generation, were only in part political; more important was the cultural dimension, the psychic boundaries that reformers shared as part of their class. Reform is, after all, a movement within the bourgeois social order. Bounded by a belief in progress, industrial growth and clock time, it is an attempt to make that order fair, without, however, disturbing the institution of private property which Marxists see as creating the conditions of economic exploitation and

-- as an offshoot -- psychological misery. Bohemia, or what might also be called the counter culture, is a thrust beyond industrialization, instrumental values and clock time, an attempt to heighten the validity of the tactile, emotional, artistic and sensual dimensions of life. Its aim is to deepen feeling and extend the potentialities for experience, to find alternative ways of measuring happiness and to allow those measurements to arise from within the individual.

Serious folk may be inclined to judge Reed's Bohemians harshly. Among them is to be found no reasoned critique of the social order, but rather the gut reactions of spoiled children, wanting the world's goods and wanting them now. This, it may be argued, is unrealistic; worse, it is self-centered. But that is just the point. The products of a society in which the self is promoted as the highest locus of value, Bohemians like Reed developed themselves along lines undreamed of by reformist parents. To refuse to accept life as gray, drab, routine, and to attempt to make it more venturesome, aesthetic, colorful, passionate and interesting, may be selfishness, but it is also possible to see such behavior as an unconscious kind of experiment for the benefit of all. It is one that looks two ways: back to pre-industrial times, before what Max Weber called the "iron cage" of industrialism and bureaucracy was fastened upon the bourgeois world, and to post-industrial society, when the cage may be open once again. Reed and his generation took strength from indulgent parents and created a critique of middle class reform. The startling social change since their day reveals the United States as a society still

attempting to assimilate the results of their experiments with life.

It is no exaggeration to say that the criticism of the limits of reform implicit in John Reed's life is now our own.

## FOOTNOTES

1. This essay largely derives from my book, Romantic Revolutionary: A Biography of John Reed (New York: Knopf, 1975), though the half-dozen years since its completion seem to have altered some aspects of my interpretation. For a full picture of Reed's life and times, readers may consult that work.
  
2. This essay is based upon a notion of contrasting world views or mindsets as they appear in two groups, one referred to as "reformers" or "Progressives," the other called "Bohemians," "Reed's generation," or "Greenwich Villagers." Well aware of the imprecision of such rough labels, I am nonetheless willing to insist that they do in fact correspond to clusters of historical belief and behavior which the historian cannot avoid discussing without impoverishing our sense of life. However, I do not wish, to be simplistic in my approach. Robert Wohl's study The Generation of 1914 (Cambridge; Harvard, 1979), brilliantly analyzes the phenomenon of generational thinking and provides sharp warnings against the potential pitfalls of such an approach. Here I have attempted to heed his words. Thus, by "Reed's generation" I certainly do not mean all those people of his age group alive at that time; rather, I am focusing on that subset of his generation we call "Bohemians," the writers, artists and intellectuals who moved to urban centers such as Greenwich Village and saw themselves as a distinct cultural grouping. Though at odds on many issues they did share certain

assumptions about life that were quite distinct from normal middle class views at the time. In referring to such views as those held by their parents, I do not mean to be taken literally. Though in Reed's case, his father was a Progressive and many of his peers also came from reform-oriented families, there were also Bohemians as old as Reed's parents. The larger point is that symbolically reformers were the parents of radicals. They provided a family and social context -- growing permissiveness in child-rearing and education and growing willingness to experiment with social institutions -- in which radical notions began to flourish. The views espoused in Greenwich Village were part of a long-running assault on bourgeois life, the difference being that in Reed's generation the scale became large enough to be an issue with which defenders of middle class culture had to deal. That no person was a pure type is taken for granted, but the balance of beliefs -- as in Reed and his parents -- were preponderantly on one side or the other. Expressed in print and behavior, this became part of a major cultural dialogue still in progress. Aside from my own biography of Reed, one may consult the following for aspects of this culture clash; Albert Parry, Garrets and Pretenders: A History of Bohemianism in America (New York: Dover, 1960); Allen Churchill, The Improper Bohemians (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1959); Gilman M. Ostrander, American Civilization in the First Machine Age: 1890-1940 (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); Van Wyck Brooks, The Confident Years: 1885-1915 (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1952); Daniel Aaron, Writers

- on the Left (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961); Henry May, The End of American Innocence (New York: Knopf, 1959); James Gilbert, Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America (New York: John Wiley, 1968); Robert E. Humphrey, Children of Fantasy: The First Rebels of Greenwich Village (New York: John Wiley 1978); Richard Miller, Bohemia; The Protoculture Then and Now (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1977).
3. Walter Lippmann, "Legendary John Reed," New Republic, I (Dec. 26, 1914), 15-16.
  4. "The Harvard Renaissance," unpublished essay, John Reed MSS, Houghton Library, Harvard, 3-4. The most important of the new political groups at Harvard was the Socialist Club, where young Walter Lippmann held forth. Other organizations included the Social Politics Club, the Single Tax Club, the Harvard Men's League for Women's Suffrage and the Anarchist Club.
  5. The Day in Bohemia (New York: printed for the author, 1913).
  6. Lippmann to Reed, March 25, 1914. Reed MSS.
  7. Louis Untermeyer, From Another World (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1939), 58.
  8. "Introduction," unpublished, datelined Christiania, March 18, 1918, Reed MSS. This was obviously an early attempt to begin what later became Ten Days That Shook the World.
  9. Eadmonn MacAlpine to Granville Hicks, Dec. 26, 1937, in Hicks

MSS, George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University.

10. The marriage, on November 9, 1917, in Peekskill, occurred just before Reed entered the hospital for a major kidney operation; the motivation largely seems to have been to make sure that Louise Bryant would be his legal heir.
11. Entitled "Where the Heart Is." The story appeared in the Masses ( , 1912), and is reprinted in John Reed, Adventures of a Young Man (San Francisco: City Lights, 1975), 23-29.
12. Harvard Monthly, L (March, 1910), 36-37.
13. "Almost Thirty," unpublished autobiographical sketch, Reed MSS. A somewhat edited version appeared in New Republic, LXXXVI (April 15, 1936), 267-70.
14. "Introduction," op.cit.
15. Albert Rhys Williams to Granville Hicks, n.d., Hicks MSS.
16. From "Russian Notebooks," remaining fragments of notebooks Reed carried in the Soviet Union: Reed MSS.
17. Quoted in Lincoln Steffens, "John Reed," Freeman, II (Nov. 3, 1920), 181.
18. Ronald T. Takaki, Iron Cages: Race and Culture in Nineteenth Century America (New York: Knopf, 1979), 9,10.