

## 32. KPFA commentaries, part 2

**Henry:** Last time I was up to December of 1968 in my comments about my commentaries. I was talking about the issue of school desegregation in Berkeley, which was very much a preoccupation of the whole town at that time. And it took the form of bussing, and Berkeley was all for achieving racial harmony by making sure that each school in the local school district had a proportional representation of the various races and ethnic groups.

I took the position that it wasn't going to be enough to arrive at anything resembling real racial integration if only one of the various social institutions involved had races mingling together, because it was only one of a number of very important determinants. Education was important, but as I pointed out, in all of the waking hours of those kids, they were subject to other social, cultural and institutional influences, such as the family and the neighborhood.

Anyway, in February of '69, I was at it again, combatting a phenomenon in Berkeley in which social protest was increasingly frequently taking the form of marches. At the end breaking down into some groups which went home, and others that marauded down the streets smashing windows. I called this particular commentary 'Reflections on Violence', which was borrowed from an important sociological monograph written many years earlier. Very roughly, and approximately, I said that the conventional explanation by the city's liberals and radicals was that it was the result of a lack of jobs, and superficial things like that. But I took another tack and argued that it was much deeper, and really sprang from the fact that the people involved in that form of expression had hollow lives, which were very unsatisfactory and boring, and that they needed some kinds of influences which would make their lives more interesting and enjoyable.

Well that attracted a lot of responses from my listeners, and I was encouraged to continue in this vein of deliberately looking at the issues of the day and trying to say something different about them, which would make my commentary series a little different from the other twelve members of the series- from what I call the stable of commentators. For example, in September of 1969, there was a musical -- a rock musical I guess they called it -- that began in New York City, and ended up in San Francisco. It was called Hair, and the critics loved it- they fell all over themselves. The New York Times, for example, called it the 'authentic voice of today'. It consisted of young people wearing tie-dyed shirts and singing 'This is the Age of Aquarius', and so forth, which I thought was not really authentic at all. The young people on the stage may have been of the age involved, but the creators of the show were all well over thirty years of age. And they created a series of stereotypes. So I was a drama critic for the first time.

The following month, October of '69, I tilted my lance at a whole school of journalists, and in some cases ethnologists and biologists, who were producing bestsellers which made man out to be no better than an ape, and in fact many respects lower than the apes, in that mankind was, according to this school of thought, inherently aggressive and violent. I even named names, and they include people like [Konrad Lorenz](#), who was a serious biologist of some sort. [Desmond Morris](#) was another one. I just thought it was very ironic that they all singled out the fact that mankind is malleable, and it is possible that he be trained to be aggressive, and to fight wars,

and whatever else these persons picked out as representative. But that it is equally true he is malleable in any number of other directions as well.

So I sometimes was a little more lighthearted in my commentaries- I occasionally talked about things like baseball, and the power of a team like the San Francisco Giants serving in a very useful way to knit communities together in some form in which social classes and races and ethnic groups all were on the same wavelength.

But then in January of 1970, I found a sacred cow to do battle with. And that was the change in what the courts considered acceptable – and what the community considered acceptable. In what used to be pornography. Almost anything seemed to go nowadays, and this was 1970, and the Radicaler-Than-Thou School, which was represented by the majority of KPFA-nicks, were perfectly satisfied that it was just an example of free speech, and I took a different view myself. I argued that it was belittling and dehumanizing. In February of 1970, I was again in inveighing against window-smashing.

In April of 1970 I became very interested in the subject of population control. A man named [Paul Ehrlich](#) had written a book called *The Population Bomb*, which created a great sensation—because he argued that the world was going to hell by being overwhelmed with more people than there was room for, or that there was food for. And this would result in misery and wars and all kinds of dreadful things. And of course the solution had to be birth control, and that birth control would have to be enforced in some way.

So I took my stand, from the fact that this would be cultural engineering at an unprecedented scale, because you simply couldn't isolate one aspect of culture, namely children, and the relationships between parents and children and so forth. And to restrict the number of children to two per couple, which was frequently thought of as the goal to be reached, you were completely changing men's—in many cases—the way men looked upon themselves as being true men, there was such a strong tendency toward the cult of machismo in many cultures.

And from the economic point of view, in many cultures, the economic base was agriculture on a very small scale. Children became useful to that family size-type of agriculture—at a very early age. And it wasn't anything like child labor, as usually thought of in the mining industry, and industrialized agriculture in California and so forth. Children weren't only useful but they enjoyed being helpful, in ways which children in urban families didn't know anything about because there was nothing useful for them to do. So I went on and on with ways in which the population reformers were talking about completely changing societies in every way, and it was not that simple. And couldn't be enforced even at the point of a gun, because people have these feelings about what was right, and proper, practically in their marrow, and would simply fail to fall in line.

Well, all of these sorts of commentaries struck a chord with many listeners. And the one on population control was different than most of my others in that it elicited both agreement and disagreement. A lot of my listeners liked very much what I was saying, and others interpreted what I was saying as a direct attack on the organization Planned Parenthood. Well, when I sent back copies of commentary to these people, which I always did, I accompanied them with a

letter saying I hadn't made myself clear. What I was really suggesting was that Planned Parenthood retain a lot of sociologists, rather than people simply trying to start people using condoms or whatever else.

In November of 1970 I was going after another Sacred Cow. A professor at Cal State Hayward, whose name was [Theodore Roszak](#), wrote a book called the making of a counter-culture, in which he rhapsodized about what was going on, as he saw it, among the younger generation. He believed that the young people were the key to replacing the old and reactionary culture, with what he called 'Flower Power'. And it was just a matter of time their views on morality and on relationships between men and women were all going to be much more relaxed. And there would be no more wars, and it was all gonna be great.

Well, here again, I tried to don the mantle of a sociologist, and point out that you don't make a culture and you don't make a counter-culture. These things can't be done deliberately, and by any kind of recipe. A culture is so complex you can only make change a little bit at a time. Even violent revolutions, such as the one in Russia—which believed they had changed everything root and branch—when the dust settles, you find out that tyranny has been replaced by another. So I suggested that probably the music the so-called counter-culture, and the styles of dress and all the rest of it, were probably going to fade in the way fashions and fads usually do. And here again there were many requests, all of that kept me going.

In March of 1971, I wrote an open letter to the IRS explaining that I was withholding 15 percent of what I thought I owed in my income tax, because that was the portion that I calculated was going to the war in Vietnam. And I explained that I considered myself to be a good, loyal American, and I didn't mind paying taxes for purposes which helped what I felt valid functions of a society. But I was going to withhold 15 percent, and if they insisted in collecting it they were going to have to go after my salary or bank account or whatever, but I wasn't going to pay it willingly.

Well this got a huge response from my listeners. And among other things they wanted to know what was the outcome. It was really very simple, I never did hear directly from the IRS. They simply attached my bank account and took the 15 percent from it.

I did a commentary on organizing unions among white collar workers, because I visualized that that was the future of the labor movement—if it had a future. And here, as was the case in a number of my other commentaries, I was writing to a considerable extent from personal experience, because I myself had been deeply involved in trying to organize a local union of state employees within the health department where I was working. And I found it wasn't too difficult. We had a going organization I thought. But one of its weaknesses was they elected me as chairman. And as usual I was very inept at that job. Somebody joined who believed that the only proper function of a union was to go on a strike, and I argued that that was not the only function of a union in the state health department, because it was, among other reasons, illegal to strike against the state at that time. But this fellow was so eloquent that I gave up, and the local went out of existence. So I went back to commenting from my position as something of a gadfly.

In January of 1972 I became a movie critic for the first time. The direct Stanley Kubrick—I guess he was a writer, producer, director, and all kinds of things—and he produced a motion picture entitled *A Clockwork Orange*, which was the story of a cacotopia, the opposite of a utopia. It was a dreadful place, given over to lawlessness and sadism, and all kinds of dreadful things. And once again, because it was technologically well done—all kinds of new effects—the critics fell all over themselves praising what genius Kubrick was. And I had to rely on these reviews because I didn't want to see it myself. Although I didn't have something to go on, because he had also produced the even better-known *2001: A Space Odyssey*, in which he seemed to be arguing—or showing—that apes were human-like in their violence. And then he moved on to show that computers could also be human-like. That involved the well-known episode of the computer HAL.

Well, I once again had to take issue with Kubrick's vision, that that was human nature, and that was all we could look forward to, and I took exception. At the end of that commentary, as usual, I asked people to let me know if they'd like a copy of my script, and I concluded with the words "Until four weeks from now, good night". A few days after that, I got the word from whoever was the Public Affairs Director of the station, KPFA, that I was going to be replaced by another commentator. I can't even remember who was running the station at that time, but it was very different from what it had been when I began the whole experience back in 1963.

I have used the 'Radicaler Than Thou' to kind of summarize the atmosphere, and I think in retrospect that I almost certainly would have outlived my welcome before long, because there were so many other things that would have kept coming up. They didn't use the expression 'political correctness' back then, but that was going to become more and more apparent. And in every case I think I probably would have felt that it was a little too rigid and a little too self-satisfied for me to have felt at home.

So that was the end of my experience with KPFA, and I went back to trying to make myself socially useful in other ways. But to summarize, I enjoyed the experience in all respects. For one thing, I found it very useful—almost essential—to have a schedule that I had to adhere to. I had a schedule on the fourth Friday of each month, and I had to appear at the station at 6pm with my fifteen-minute script, which usually ran about eighteen minutes, but they were pretty good at allowing me a little leeway. And then they re-broadcast it the next day. Somewhere toward the end of my tenure, I found that they were also playing my commentaries on their sister station down in Los Angeles. I guess it was called KPFK. And I began getting requests for copies from down there, and that was very gratifying.

I really felt in a certain sense that I was building up a sort of community of interest. I got reactions from some of the same people on a fairly regular basis. I met some of them. I had a number of people suggest that maybe I should put together an anthology of some of my better commentaries in a book. It was very encouraging, although of course nothing came of it. But—even though this was 1972, forty three years ago, and yet a number of those commentaries are still worth thinking about. A lot of them aren't, but some are. So I haven't totally given up on the idea of maybe going back and doing a little selecting, and possibly a little editing, and coming out with a little collection that I might call 'Humanistic Sociology' or something like that.

I have said more than once that I would like to have some effect through the various things I've done with my life, and I think I might have had a little more influence from those KPFA commentaries than almost anything else that I've undertaken. A couple of people used some of my ideas to produce a book of their own, called [Values and Humanity](#), and a number of others. I was asked to speak to a number of classes. There was a high school, I think it was in Hayward, where a woman taught a civics class on heroism, and it happens quite independently I had done a commentary which I called 'The Seventh Age of Heroism', in which I talk about the evolution from the days when the hero was somebody who figured out a way to prevent being eaten by saber-tooth tigers or whatever, to the current state of affairs in which the true hero—as I conceive it—was a person who had a new idea, who stood up against the opinion of the crowd, and ultimately prevailed.

I was also invited to speak at classes in the school of education at Cal, because I had done a series called 'In Search of Higher Education', and it really went over well. I had to give out several hundred copies of that particular commentary. So as I say, it was a very important seven or eight years in my life. And it unfortunately couldn't continue because I lacked the necessity of doing anything on a regular basis. And I just don't have the self-discipline, otherwise I would have continued writing, and then I would have gone out and found some medium that would be sufficiently interested to run them either in the printed form, or in the form of radio. I haven't been completely unproductive, but I haven't accomplished anything quite so satisfying as that seven or eight years.

I've got a couple of things on the stove. One is the book I believe I mentioned in the past, about the labor leader named [Vincent St. John](#), and I'm going to continue collaborating with a woman in Colorado who's working on that. And I've just within the past week or so had another communication with another woman who's doing a documentary on a farm worker named [Mario Moreno](#) [linked incident happened in 2011, guessing it might be an older case?], and she wants to see me again about some of my recollections. And I, in that same period in the last couple of weeks, had a communication from the head of the labor archives at San Francisco State University, who wants my AWOC archives. So I manage to keep thinking and acting as best I can in between doctor visits. Any questions?

**David:** Could you tell us more about the book 'Values and Humanity' and where it came from?

**Henry:** The book was the result of a meeting that I had with Leslie Lipson, of the School of Social Work at the University of California Berkeley, and a woman named Elizabeth Drews who was at Portland State College. And they wrote the book entitled 'Values and Humanity', and it inscribed it 'To Henry with deep appreciation for your generous advice'. So that was good.

**David:** Was that inspired by commentaries that they heard?

**Henry:** That was inspired by a number of my commentaries. The thing that was the scarlet thread through all of them, once I began getting my bearings, was that there is goodness in mankind, I believe, along with Anne Frank—in spite of all evidence to the contrary. That ultimately the goodness of mankind will prevail.

**Eugene:** Well I have a comment and a few questions. The comment is that Theodore Roszak, I think it might have been a second edition of the Making of the Counter-culture, he mentioned your commentary as a criticism. The question- in your commentaries did you ever respond to questions from listeners?

**Henry:** I frequently wrote letters to those who not only requested copies of my commentaries, but asked me to clarify some point. Maybe you're wondering if I ever had them live in the studio with me.

**Eugene:** I'm asking if you responded on the air to questions you might have received, following up from an earlier point.

**Henry:** No, that never happened.

**Eugene:** You said that it helped you a lot to have the monthly deadline. What was your schedule within the month, and did you have an idea more than a month ahead of time, or less than a month? Did you ever start the night before with no idea what you were going to say the next day?

**Henry:** No, I would not be good at extemporaneous speaking, as I think I've made more than abundantly clear in this whole series. But it's very true, and you guys probably know this very well, that I am a great procrastinator, so it was not unusual that I would be caught at almost the last minute. And I would rush to the station and still be breathing heavily when they thrust the microphone in front of me. But usually I would have an idea maybe a week in advance, and I would start making notes. And there were times when I had sufficient time on my hands that I was able to make two or three complete drafts. It was always a problem with my having difficulty compressing my ideas into the fifteen-minute frame. In fact I've frequently had to extend it into a series. I did three series on population questions, for example.

I suppose I toyed with the idea of putting out the scripts to a mailing list. But I never got around to that, and maybe it wouldn't have worked. I liked the idea of there being a kind of barometer in the form of these totally voluntary communications from the listeners as to how I was doing. And I liked the idea of having them write to the station to ask for copies, so that the station would also have an idea of how I was doing. This didn't always work out, because at first I had the station announcer, after I had completed my remarks, he would say 'If you wish a copy, write to this address at the station headquarters'. But a few months went by when I didn't have any requests at all, so I figured out that the announcer was simply not making this announcement. From then on I always included that in the completion of my own remarks.

But some of the reactions I got were almost embarrassing. Someone said my commentaries were incomparable. I think she meant it in a good way. And then there was a guy who said that I was incredibly naïve in my optimism. So I took that seriously.

**Eugene:** Did you keep the letters?

**Henry:** I kept every one of them. Those are the archive boxes that you hauled up to the attic.

**David:** Presumably you got some hate mail, or violent disagreement?

**Henry:** I wouldn't call it hate mail. For the most part those who disagreed with my basic premises just didn't listen. The way I didn't listen to, for example, the station had a guy named William Mandel, and he was an expert on the Soviet Union. And he was given a half hour, and he was on that station religiously, before I started, and he continued on that station after I was fired. That whole station was, and still is, a curiosity. Dozens of times he would swear that it had torn itself apart with its internal faction fights, and yet it still survives. It was fun while it lasted.

**David:** On a different topic, do you still have original transcripts of the interviews with the braceros, from your health attitude study?

**Henry:** In one word, no. I didn't throw them away, the university did. They weren't interviews, they were questionnaires. And my interviewer was instructed to write any added comments that they might have to make, when they had gone through these standardized questions. And he was very good at that, and those I reproduced in my manuscript itself. But the questionnaires and the coding sheets and all that were confiscated.

**David:** So he would transcribe what they said and translate it into English?

**Henry:** Yes.

**David:** And did you reproduce all of those, or just a selection of them?

**Henry:** Most. Every one that was more than two or three sentences. In my monograph, the 750-page one, there were 186 verbatim quotes from the persons themselves. That's another possible project if I live so long. Every once in a while somebody suggests that I exhume that manuscript. Including this woman from San Francisco State that I'm supposed to be seeing within the next couple of weeks.