
Mysterious Cult Misuses Humanist Label

Bob von Holdt

Editor's Note: Except for the correction of obvious typographical errors, selections from the documents of the siloists are reprinted verbatim.

For several years secular humanists and members of the growing international Green Movement have become increasingly alarmed by the activities of a previously obscure sect that since 1984 has gone from a "stage of cadres" to a "stage of masses" by creating "humanist" and "Green" political and nonpolitical organizations as fronts for recruiting members. In a 1985 report, International Humanist and Ethical Union copresident Rob Tielman writes:

This "party" is an international sect which was set up in Argentina. . . . There is not a single philosophical relationship with the humanist tradition. . . . The organization has a hierarchical and authoritarian structure and recognizes no democratic decision-making. . . . Simple slogans, like "for peace" and "against unemployment," are used, which obviously speak to young people. If these young people show any interest, they are brainwashed by means of exhaustive indoctrination and social isolation; they have to sever all their connections with nonmembers of the sect. They try to turn these young people into so-called militants who, in their turn, have to recruit new youngsters.

On June 9, 1989, Die Grünen, the West German Green Party, echoed Tielman's sentiments and issued a press release warning of an "international sect running for European elections under the Green label."

This sect, which rather grandiosely calls itself "The Movement," follows the teachings of a somewhat mysterious Argentine named Mario Rodriguez Cobo. Cobo is best known to his followers by the nickname "Silo," and his ideology is referred to as siloism. The Movement defines itself as "the organization which interprets the needs of human beings and produces means to advance from the state of predetermination to that of freedom." It is estimated that it has between 10,000 and 20,000 hard-core "true believers"

in about forty-two countries, though siloists tend to greatly inflate their figures. In the United States their activities appear to be primarily focused around San Francisco and New York City.

Siloists see themselves as an "unstoppable growing human current humanizing the earth." They believe that "if we must participate in public affairs, it is not by vocation, but because it is necessary for life itself, of which we are the most conscious expression," and also that "to unleash whirlwinds of our point of view is primary and fundamental for the creating and generating of a new stage of mankind." Siloists seem to genuinely believe that through their "internal" and "external" work they possess the one true key to transform both the individual and society, creating a new age for humanity. Furthermore, they believe they are morally bound to share this wonderful discovery with the rest of us and convert us to "the correct siloist view of reality."

This moral obligation apparently applies to other movements and schools of thought as well: "The Movement may also be able to guide and transform existing organizations that have demonstrated the ability to contribute to human development."

The siloists were at first so optimistic that they believed all they needed to do was disperse like seeds around the globe and start a chain reaction. One document, circa 1978, states: "We are interested in divulging our ideas, in unloosing an expansive, contaminating, and contagious wave that will slowly spread to more and more sympathetic people, and not in concrete and decrepit power. It is a mental wave, a chain reaction that we are interested in producing."

This initial optimism later dimmed and a different strategy was adopted. A document from 1985, early in the "stage of masses," states: "So we learn that spreading a message is not enough. We need to build strong and enduring structures that will surpass the crisis. . . . Some years ago we organized a political party in one country . . . now we want to do that in every country

on the five continents." Silo, in guidelines issued around the same time, states: "Our tactic is to have access to power by setting up a parallel organization to the system and emptying it. When everything is chaotic, the people will choose us."

During the transitional period between the "stage of cadres" and the "stage of masses," The Movement went through a variety of name-changes and still uses many of these names for its various fronts. From the late 1970s through the early 1980s, it called itself "The Community for the Development and Equilibrium of the Human Being" or, more simply, "The Community." In 1984 it transformed itself into the Humanist Movement and launched the Humanist Party. In 1985, around the same time that it was launching a new nonpolitical front called Green Future as well as the siloist Green Party, "humanist" was dropped from the name of the parent organization, which became simply The Movement.

In many places where The Movement operates it is not uncommon to find quite a variety of different siloist fronts in operation. In San Francisco we have neighborhood Humanist Action Groups, the Humanist Party, neighborhood "Green" groups, Green Future, and The Community, all eagerly preaching the siloist gospel and seeking new converts.

Although the various siloist fronts ("organisms" in siloese) often portray themselves as champions of grassroots democracy, such a concept is not reflected in The Movement's own hierarchical structure. One enters The Movement at the lowest level as a "group delegate," that is, basically anyone who shows any interest at all in The Movement. A group delegate who then recruits ten other new members becomes a "team delegate," and the ten recruits become his or her "base council." The next steps up the pyramid are general delegate, coordinator, and, finally, general coordinator. There are no elections. One rises only through recruitment and building one's own "structure." Information and major decisions flow downward from the top of the pyramid to the bases.

Movement members repeatedly claim that their "organisms" are totally autonomous from The Movement. Their internal documents, however, paint a somewhat different picture. Summarized, the strategy that the siloists have followed since 1984 is to promote the *appearance* of autonomy while maintaining tight internal control.

Dissension, objections, and questioning of decisions are barely tolerated. Former Movement members both here and abroad

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have described how they were forced out for daring to ask too many questions. An internal document from 1984 shows this lack of tolerance quite clearly:

If there are people who try to hold things back they could ruin [an] important process of historical proportions. There are those who after a dedicated period of clarification can surpass their resistances and move forward with decision. But for those people who present "mental reservations," present objections, etc., maybe they are not in a position to participate in the frontline, but rather in less important situations. It might even be the case of inviting some of these people to retire so as to prevent our process from being delayed.

How does The Movement respond when legitimate secular humanists point out the philosophical chasm that separates the two groups? A recent publication of Humanist Action, a siloist front in San Francisco, states:

Although there are many varieties of Humanism today, including the so-called 'secular humanists' popularly known here in the United States, Humanist Action's Humanism traces its roots to the first Western Humanists in the Renaissance. For us, Humanism basically means that human beings come first. Not the State, not the Church, not the Corporations, not the great-god profit, but humans. This is common with other forms of Humanism. In addition we want to bring these ideas into actual practice, into our political reality.

Siloists also admit to having differences with the global Green Movement, which already had established its own identity and values prior to siloist attempts to claim the Green label as their own. Legitimate Greens adhere to four key values: nonviolence, ecological wisdom, grassroots democracy, and social justice. Unlike the siloists, legitimate Green groups do not send people to other countries on "missions" to launch new organizations, they do not send funding to other countries, and they do not interfere in the internal politics of other countries. In their own version of their history disseminated earlier this year, the siloists state: "... since serious differences [with the Greens] arose with regards to general conceptions, implementation and organization, the creation of the Green Party was decided as a renovated and coherent variant." But Greens would like to know why, if the siloists had such serious differences with the Green Movement, they insist on using the same or a quite similar name? And why, in the face of rejection and

denouncement, do they remain adamant in insisting on their right to the name, claiming that they are somehow the "true" Greens just as they insist that they are the true "humanists"? I believe that the answer lies in the arrogance that always seems to accompany those who feel they are on the side of righteousness, and also in a deep-seated paranoia that stems from the conditions under which siloism first developed.

The Movement seems to have been indelibly marked by its early struggle under repressive conditions in South America, which infused it with a great deal of suspicion and defensiveness, causing it to see itself as locked in a bitter battle with "The System." This attitude was spelled out quite clearly in 1978:

We must think of how to develop ourselves in difficult and repressive conditions. . . . This is the medium in which we have to develop and is the one we must compensate. In other words it is war. . . . This is why we practice *the mental martial arts*, the mental belligerence by using principles, laws and knowledge to be able to develop to the utmost our ideas and our work. . . . We have to know that we will be in an environment that will become foreign, hostile, and tense negatively and will increase the aggressiveness and disillusionment with a lot of mental noise.

A 1984 document that describes how the Humanist Party is to be set up says:

We should use a combat style. We are not on the defensive side, on the contrary, we are in a sort of constructive and active attack. We have not done any wrong, our conscience and memory is clear, not like others, many others who believe to have some strange authority. It is "them" who are in the bench of the accused.

This belligerence expresses itself in a variety of ways. It has been noted by a number of investigators that members of The Movement, when questioned or challenged, typically launch personal smear attacks aimed at discrediting those who dare to question them, and show little interest in addressing the substantive issues that are raised. A further manifestation can be seen in a posture siloists commonly adopt of having some sort of identity with the principles they claim to espouse. You are either with them or against them.

This paranoia even extends to the halls of academia. A document entitled "Study of The Movement" prepared for 1988's siloist "Humanist International" in Italy, states:

The Movement encourages the ideological

debate with the behavioral sciences, which while failing to resolve their own problems claim to regulate social life. Due to their conceptual vagueness, these sciences are suspect of being in league with the dominant system of violence and oppression.

The Movement extends this debate to the entire cultural field, and also of course to Art, Philosophy, and Religion, demanding from them a precise definition of their objectives and procedures concerning the liberation of human beings.

By declaring academia as suspect of being in league with the enemy (The System), they are able to rationalize not having to subject their ideology to academic scrutiny and debate, and are thus able to reject any criticism that comes from academic circles.

This attitude toward academia can be further illuminated by another passage from the document cited above:

From a logical point of view, we affirm the method of existential analysis and we oppose it to any previous system of logic that—through inference—aims to arrive from the general to the particular. . . .

In this respect, we reinstate the interpretation of categorical propositions made by Brentano in 1874, according to which particular propositions have a existential character, while universal propositions are only their negation.

We therefore disqualify Aristotelean logic and its derivation (including Hegel's dialectic and Lukasiewicz's contemporary logic) in this precise point, and we stress this subject with special relevance because of its enormous theoretical and practical consequences.

From this point of view they then promulgate a series of propositions, including:

Proposition 1. Human existence takes place in the world. It begins, develops and concludes in the world. Therefore, we cannot assume a direction, a reason or purpose prior to existence, without contradicting the aforementioned.

Proposition 1.1. Human existence begins at birth with the opening up of intentionality towards the world as the first step of liberation from natural conditionings. From this point of view, we cannot rigorously speak of "human existence" prior to birth.

Proposition 2. By "world," we understand all that is different from one's body. However, we consider our bodies as part of the world. Body and the world are given, factual, natural.

Proposition 2.1. Nature lacks intentions. Neither the body nor the world possess separate consciousness. To attribute an end to nature might be used as a device of understanding, but cannot be legitimately derived from this proposal.

What bothers and appalls many critics

of the siloist ideology is this approach, which begins with the "I," the human situated in a neutral, valueless world, and leads them to define value only in relation to human beings. This then leads to valuing nature only for its importance to us, and assigning it no intrinsic value of its own. Legitimate Greens, who take a biocentric rather than an anthropocentric view, see this type of attitude as a major cause of our current ecological dilemma rather than part of the solution.

Two other key elements of the siloist ideology are the concepts of "Synthetic Man" and "Generational Dialectics." Although these concepts are publicly stressed very little if at all, they are important in understanding the siloist world view.

The Synthetic Man concept states that as part of humanity's evolutionary step, all the races and cultures on earth will naturally intermix, creating a fusion of the best characteristics and forming a new race in which even "The differences of the sexes . . . will tend to reduce itself more and more, not only in the aspect of social relations or of mere clothing . . . even in the secondary psychic and sexual characteristics." Siloists believe that by achieving this uniform

sameness and eliminating diversity, evils such as racism, classism, and so forth will also be eliminated. Creation of this new race is thus a part of the siloist mission.

Generational Dialectics is basically a siloist rewrite of history as a continuous series of struggles of the young versus the old: "The struggle of the generations, the foundation of every historical process." This is a major reason why siloist organizing puts such a heavy emphasis on recruiting youth. The Movement's first organizing manual was entitled *Youth Power*.

I have been studying The Movement and siloism for seven years, since a chance encounter with members of The Community at a fair in San Francisco in August 1982. I had for some time been curious about sects and cults and the mechanisms by which they attract and hold people. Living in the Bay Area, I was familiar with and had on occasion seen Hare Krishna devotees, Moonies, and fundamentalist zealots in action. Lurid press accounts of Jim Jones and Jonestown were still fresh in my mind, though I had had no real first-hand experience with these groups.

Initially, I planned only to attend a few meetings, but, like Alice when she ventured

down the rabbit hole, I grew curiouser and curiouser. I posed as a "true believer" and spent the next three and one half years inside The Movement to see what I could learn. Every new piece of information, each new internal document would whet my appetite for more. Still, the psychological pressure and the pressure to recruit others (which I never did) was intense. Finally, the stress became more than I could handle, and I walked away from The Movement in January 1986.

For the past several years I have continued to study the activities of The Movement while at the same time becoming an activist in the growing United States Green Movement. I have been exchanging research both with other Greens and with secular humanists, the result being the formation of a very loosely knit global "Silowatch" network sharing information and trying to inform the public about the true nature of The Movement.

Readers of FREE INQUIRY who know of activity of The Movement in their area or who would like to receive more information may write to me c/o San Francisco Greens, 777 Valencia St., San Francisco, CA 94110. ●

The Influence of Robert Ingersoll

Gordon Stein

Rarely will a high-school student of today encounter the name of Robert G. Ingersoll. Those college undergraduates who take courses on speech may occasionally see his name. Unless they take an advanced course on nineteenth-century America, most college history students will not. Yet during the latter part of his lifetime, Robert G. Ingersoll was perhaps the best-known and most-listened-to American. From about 1880 to his death in 1899, Ingersoll probably spoke to more Americans in person than anyone before or since. He had audiences of as many as 3,000 people a night during several months a year for many years while he was on tour. Why is Ingersoll not better remembered today? Did his ideas have any lasting influence, even if his name did not?

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Ingersoll wrote and spoke about a great many topics, but we would be hard-pressed to find many original ideas in his writings or speeches. He was a popularizer, who brought to the people many ideas that had not been widely known before he said them. He had a unique and often poetic way of putting things, which caused many people to remember what he said.

Ingersoll's influence upon women's issues

Let's start with an easy contribution: birth control. Every historian credits Margaret Sanger with the promotion and successful establishment of the idea of birth control in the United States. But Sanger counted Ingersoll as an influence.¹ He recognized that a woman's role in society would always be a captive one unless she could control her childbearing capacity:

Why have the reformers failed? . . . I will tell them why. . . . Ignorance, poverty,

and vice are populating the world. The gutter is a nursery. People unable even to support themselves fill the tenements, the huts and hovels with children. . . . The babe is not welcome, because it is a burden. . . . The real question is, can we prevent the ignorant, the poor, the vicious from filling the world with children? . . . To accomplish this there is but one way. Science must make woman the owner, the mistress of herself. Science, the only possible savior of mankind, must put it in the power of woman to decide for herself whether she will or will not become a mother.²

This ties directly into Ingersoll's views on women, about whom he spoke and wrote extensively. He had very close relationships with the women in his personal life. He was devoted to his wife and two daughters, and was also close friends with Susan B. Anthony, Carrie Chapman Catt, Lucretia Mott, and Matilda Joslyn Gage. Although it is difficult to say how much Ingersoll influenced the suffragettes, and how much he was influenced by them, he certainly helped to publicize their message. His most direct sentiment regarding women's rights is probably the following:

In my judgment, the woman is the equal of the man. She has all the rights I have and one more, and that is the right to be protected. If there is any man I detest, it