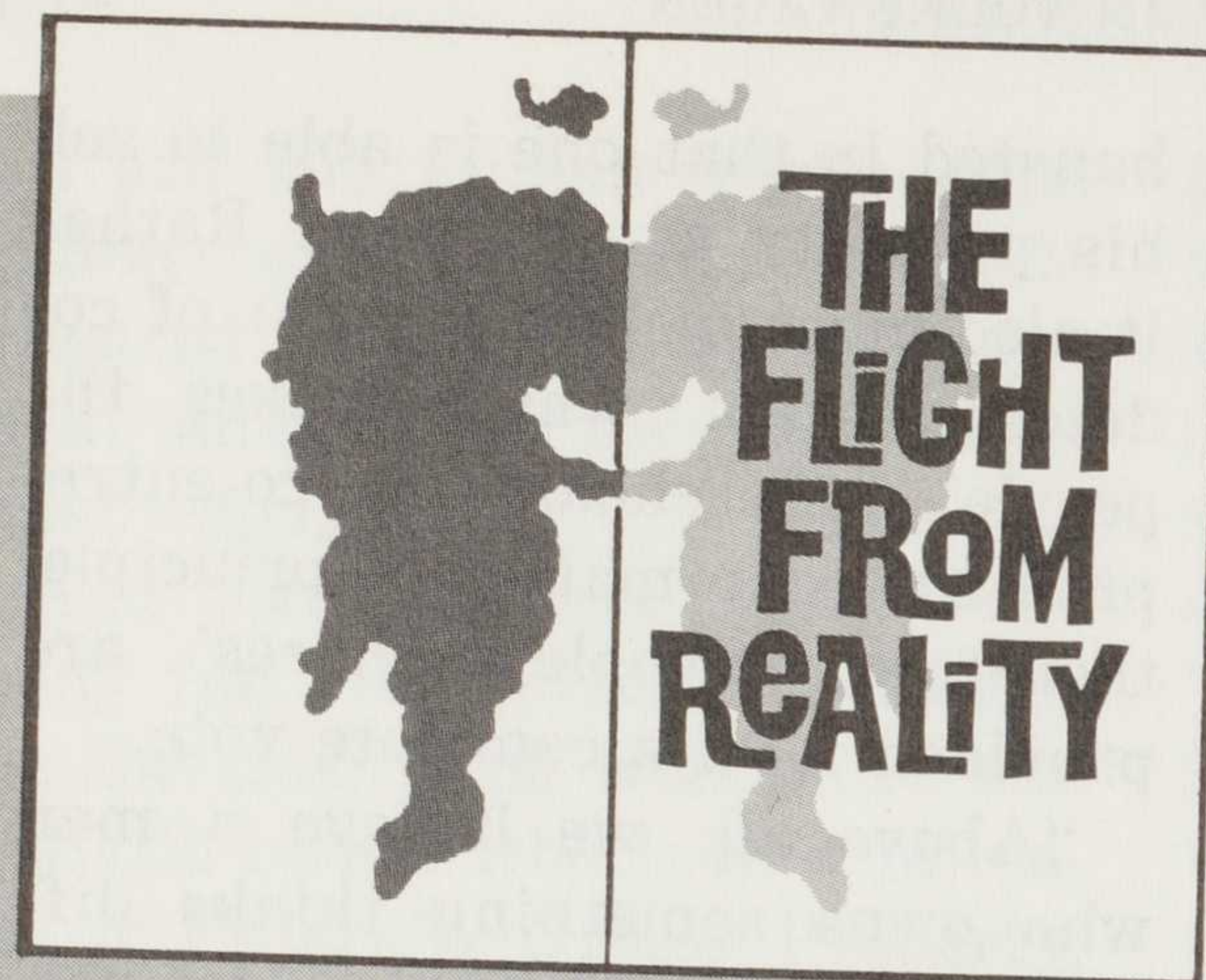




9. The New Reality

CLARENCE B. CARSON

[T]he characteristic mood of our own age [is] that the historical condition determines the human situation. Man's existence is history; or "life and reality are history, and history alone," as Croce said.

—HANS MEYERHOFF, 1959

From the perspective of the post-Second World War era, the work of the generation of the 1890's can be viewed as a "first attempt" at accommodation to a "new conception of reality." . . . In this process of concession and adaptation, the "activity of human consciousness" for the first time became of paramount importance.

—H. STUART HUGHES, 1958

We invoked what we believed to be the three constitutive facts in the consciousness of Western man: knowledge of death, knowledge of freedom, knowledge of society. . . . The third revelation came to us through living in an industrial society. . . . It is the constitutive element in modern man's consciousness.

—KARL POLANYI, 1944

IT HAS BEEN SAID that man is incurably religious. It may be said with equal validity that man is incurably metaphysical in his thought processes. The flight from reality of intellectuals commenced with the cutting loose of ideas from their foundations in an underlying order. This was an attempt to slough off metaphysics,

Dr. Carson is Professor of American History at Grove City College, Pennsylvania. Among his earlier writings in *THE FREEMAN* were his series on *The Fateful Turn* and *The American Tradition*, both of which are now available as books.

for metaphysics is the philosophical study which treats of the underlying order. In the course of time, it became (and still is) commonplace in intellectual circles to denounce conceptions — any that happened not to be considered worthy of consideration — as being "metaphysical." In short, metaphysics was laughed out of court; scorn and abuse were heaped upon this mode of thought.

Pragmatists boldly proclaimed a philosophy that was supposed

to be shorn of metaphysical assumptions. They proposed to operate upon a basis of continuous experimentation to find successful methods within an ever shifting context. Rigorous adherence to pragmatism, however, would result in some surprises for pragmatists. They would begin to discover that there are regularities, that actions essentially the same will result in predictable consequences.

In brief, if the pragmatists adhered strictly to their method, they would begin to acquire knowledge. If they probed a bit deeper, they would discover that there are laws which account for these regularities and predictabilities. At the point that they discovered and believed in laws and principles they would return most likely to a truly metaphysical outlook.

In general, this has not happened. It certainly has not happened among ameliorative reformers, and these generally like to think of themselves as pragmatic. The reason is not far to seek. At the time of the setting forth of pragmatism, thinkers were already coming under the sway of a "new reality." This new reality was based upon assumptions which served in lieu of and could be used in somewhat the same manner as metaphysics. This is not to say that the conceptions

were indeed metaphysical. There is no need to corrupt the language by so denominating them. Rather, they served in this capacity; they rested upon conceptions of an underlying order. Explanations were made in terms of this "order." Pragmatism became largely a philosophy to justify the expediency of men operating on the basis of the "new reality."

Though the conceptions drawn from this new reality are used metaphysically, the fact is not generally recognized. Moreover, they are not subjected to rational examination. The decline of philosophy and the growth of irrationalism have made this state of affairs possible. Even ideologies in America have not usually been explicit. In consequence, assumptions have to be deduced from casually thrown phrases and the fag ends of ideas which one encounters. Still, the conceptions are there.

Three Basic Constituents: Change, Society, and Psyche

There are three basic constituents of the "new reality." They are: *change*, *society*, and *psyche*. These are not separate realities but interrelated parts of a single reality. Historically, each of them, as a metaphysic-like entity, can be traced back to its origins in nineteenth century European