'30s, '60s, '90s: A Century of Revolutions?

Former Minneapolis Mayor Arthur Naftalin was the keynote speaker at a symposium on September 16, 1995, co-sponsored by the Minnesota Independent Scholars’ Forum and the Minnesota Historical Society, with support from the Minnesota Humanities Commission. This article is adapted from the outline prepared for his presentation, in which he offered 11 propositions on the theme of “A Century of Three Revolutions?” The respondent panel included James Casebolt, Research Director of the Joint Religious Legislative Coalition; Patrick Garry, attorney, historian, and author; and Libby Larsen, Grammy Award-winning composer and cultural commentator.

By Arthur Naftalin

When Ross Corson, President of the Minnesota Independent Scholars’ Forum, asked me to keynote the symposium on “the revolutions of the 1930s, 1960s and 1990s,” I protested that I was not a student of the “revolutions” and not a proper person for the assignment.

But Ross flattered me into accepting, saying I was the only person his committee could think of who might be able to address the subject in an informed way. I had misgivings but was snared by the flattery and decided I could get by with a few war stories.

Soon after accepting, however, I received a further communication from Ross informing me that the planning committee would like for me to keep my remarks to 15-20 minutes. By this time, I had sketched out a vast landscape of ideas and experiences, so I did not find the time limit a congenial idea. But I thought, “Well, I’ve got so much to say, I’ll just wing it for 15 minutes and let the panel take it from there.”

But then another communication from Ross arrived, asking me to oblige a request from panel members that I share with them a summary of my keynote address so they would know how to prepare their responses.

Being a good citizen, I obediently acquiesced to Ross’s request and prepared a quick-and-dirty set of eleven propositions. They could have been 15 or 20 or 100; they do not constitute a great statement, but they do reveal my deep concern that the successive “revolutions” follow an alarming pattern of civic and cultural deterioration.

Proposition One

The three periods are alike in that they were marked by instability, disillusionment, the rise of violence and serious political protest. But they differ markedly in context and expression. The earlier two “revolutions” inform our present experience in only a limited way.

Proposition Two

Theories about the cyclical alternation of periods of conservatism and liberalism have, I believe, limited value. I see the three periods as part of a continuum in which our communitarian spirit has progressively deteriorated as the push towards plebiscitariansim has intensified.

President’s Column

By Ross Corson

It’s now the time of year when the President of this organization is typically required to justify himself (or herself). In other words, it’s time for the annual report.

The custom is to highlight past accomplishments—and to promise more of the same (or better) in the future. I certainly would not want to break with such a worthwhile tradition.

Some accomplishments: First things first, I’m proud to say we are well in the black financially—thanks to the vigilance of our secretary-treasurer, Lucy Brusic. As I write, our paid membership stands just a few short of one hundred, reflecting modest growth from a year ago. By the time you read this, I hope our roster will exceed one hundred.

Long-time member Curt Hillstrom takes good care of our database, and he is responsible for the well-timed renewal notices that show up in members’ mailboxes. Curt is also responsible for connecting members with study groups.

For programs, we sponsored four “Works in Progress” sessions earlier this year for independent scholars to discuss their current research and writing projects. This fall, we sponsored three symposia on “America
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in the 20th Century.” We were fortunate to have the co-sponsorship of the Minnesota Historical Society and the support of the Minnesota Humanities Commission.

Finally, this newsletter has tried to provide ideas and information of substance, as both a service to existing members and an enticement to new members.

All of these activities are designed to highlight the Forum as a vital intellectual resource for our members and the broader community to which we belong. I fear that a public audience is abandoned as so many scholars are forced to retreat into the burrows of sub-specialties or exhaust themselves in the bureaucratic intrigue of academic politics. Because we are blissfully free from much of the usual institutional myopia, independent scholars are uniquely positioned to serve as public educators in the broadest (and best) sense of the word.

An occupational hazard of Forum presidents, I’ve been warned, is that our aspirations tend to far exceed our reach. So many good things to be done, so few resources with which to do them. At the risk of falling victim to this temptation, I outline a few activities which I hope the Forum might be able to undertake in the next year (or beyond).

Looking ahead, I hope the Forum can build on our core strengths, by continuing to strengthen the newsletter and to sponsor occasional “Works in Progress” and other public programs.

I also hope we might provide our members with some more practical benefits. Independent scholars have real needs for information and assistance about grants, research resources and tools, publication opportunities, copyright issues, etc. In some cases, it might be appropriate for us to put together a workshop or information kit; in other cases, we might point our members to other places where this information or assistance is already available.

A popular perk of Forum membership has been special borrowing privileges at University of Minnesota libraries. Because most of our members don’t have academic affiliations, a serious need is access to the information resources usually provided by academic libraries. But it might be time to move ahead another technological step. The Internet is an ever-more-important information resource and tool. Over the past few years, the Forum has sponsored several workshops and programs about online resources for independent scholars. In this issue of the newsletter, we feature an interview with Tamara Blashko of the Minneapolis Telecommunications Network (MTN), who provides sensible advice for the technologically-challenged among us.

MTN’s River Project helps nonprofit groups in the Twin Cities area offer their members low-cost full access to the Internet—an alternative to commercial providers who provide access that is either more expensive or limited (or both!). The costs are a $30 one-time set-up fee and $80 per year for full access. If you’re interested in paying for this as a new optional perk of membership, please let us know by calling 612-870-1859. We would need at least 10 members who are interested in paying for this to make it viable for us as an organization.

We welcome any other suggestions you might have for the Forum.
A Source for Cultural Historians

By John Parker

Minnesota's much-touted high quality of life is a reality that calls for investigation by scholars, and for scholarly research there is no source surpassing original manuscripts. A collection of manuscripts documenting much of our literary, theatrical, and architectural heritage resides in an unpretentious but easily accessible building at 826 Berry Street in southeast Minneapolis. It is the Manuscript Division of the University of Minnesota Libraries.

Here we find 64 collections of literary materials that include diaries, journals, and correspondence. They are the type of sources essential to critical studies of such notable figures as novelist Frederick Manfred, poet John Berryman, publicist Arthur Motley, and sheepherder-diaryist Archer Gilfillan. Here, too, are correspondence and manuscript drafts of a clutch of science fiction and fantasy authors and the papers of the Henry Miller Literary Society. Literary texts easily spill over into illustrative materials, and students of the U.S. at war will find here some 6,200 World War I posters and some 10,000 photographs from World War II.

Who would question the importance of music and theatre to the cultural life of Minnesota? The Performing Arts Archives contain outstanding collections in both of these areas.

The papers of the Minnesota Orchestral Association include financial recordings. The records of the Minneapolis Musicians Association, the primary local musicians' union, span the years from 1911 to 1967 and include minutes of meetings, financial records, and correspondence.

The records of the Guthrie Theatre include prompt books, production notes, costume bibles, photographs, and audio tapes of all productions since the Theatre's beginning in 1963. Also to be found are various types of documentation from the Guthrie's experimental theatres, Guthrie 2 and The Other Place. Other theatre groups that have placed their records here are At the Foot of the Mountain, Minnesota Dance Theatre, and Twin Cities Design Studios. The vaudeville age is reflected in the papers of Clyde Snyder, a local performer in that genre.

Preserving our cultural heritage has in recent years extended to a concern for preserving historically significant buildings, and this has led to an interest in the history of design, construction, and furnishing of buildings in this region. The Manuscript Division has been a leader in this field with its Northwest Architectural Archives. Here the researcher will find architectural drawings of all kinds, specifications, job files, photographs, and other materials relating to design and construction.

The Prairie School is documented in the Gray-Purcell Papers, which incorporate drawings from the firm of Louis Sullivan. Sixty years of design

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are reflected in the Leroy S. Buffington Collection. Upper Midwest art deco movie theatres are featured in the papers of the firm of Liebenberg and Kaplan. Turn-of-the-century residential construction is seen in the William Channing Whitney Papers. Suppliers of furnishings for buildings are represented by some 6,000 trade catalogs and related literature. Biographical information on architects of this region for the past 130 years are to be found in the Architects Research File.

Altogether, these three distinct collections combine to offer those studying the culture of our region an excellent opportunity for original research. The telephone number of the Manuscripts Division is 612-627-4199. Alan Lathrop is curator; Barbara Bezat is assistant curator.
A Century of Three Revolutions?

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Proposition Three
The driving force in the 1930s was economic. The Depression led to severe suffering and there was wide belief that a responsive government could set matters right. It produced aggressive political movements on both the left and the right, all advocating strong federal intervention.

Proposition Four
The wide-ranging initiatives of the New Deal reflected the "revolutionary" energy, but it was World War II that ended, for the time, the ideological warfare. The spirit of the 1930s was essentially communitarian, a pervasive confidence in the efficacy of government. This spirit was intensified by the New Deal and by World War II, which, despite its costs, led to full employment and a rising sense of shared values as a nation committed to democracy, individual freedom and the "good life" for all.

Proposition Five
The communitarian spirit reached its apogee in the aftermath of World War II. Nurtured by sustained prosperity and by a sense of great national strength, the period produced a mood of social challenge that called for the fulfillment of the democratic promise. This unrealized objective unsettled a large section of the public, especially minorities, women and young people. Expectations for the "good life" and for individual self-realization were rising, but were frustrated by lack of opportunity and by traditional social barriers.

Proposition Six
The unsettled feelings led to a variety of protests—against the barriers to social equality, against practices harmful to the environment, against exploitation of consumers, against conformity in personal behavior. The driving force behind the "revolt" of the 1960s was social. It expressed a deepening sense of individual powerlessness in confronting the big bureaucracies of government and corporations. Small became beautiful. Individuals sought escape through drugs, nonconformist behavior, retreat to nature and withdrawal into self.

Proposition Seven
The unsettled feelings of the 1960s found no common focus until they collided with the Vietnam War. The resentments generated by the war combined with the growing urge for individual freedom to produce a sharp disaffection with government, which increasingly was coming to be regarded as the captive of interests that were not accountable to the public.

Proposition Eight
The communitarian spirit of the 1930s had by the 1960s given way to a growing belief in a plebiscitarian form of populism, which held that the government’s lack of efficacy could be corrected by direct popular action in controlling the political process (initiatives and referenda, presidential primaries, increased voter turnouts, more control of political parties) and by direct individual action (voluntarism, boycotts of offending businesses, acts of civil disobedience).

Proposition Nine
What we witness in the 1990s is, in my view, more accurately described as "counter-revolutionary." The main objective of the present ferment (shared in various degrees by conservatives and neo-liberals) is the dismantling of the programs created in the 1930s and the 1960s.

Proposition Ten
In the 1990s the individual is sovereign; the private market (the ultimate plebiscitarian institution) is in the saddle. The ferment has yet to play itself out. Because the spirit is psychological and essentially irrational, efforts to respond can find no focus. Every public faction has its own cause for discontent—the seedbed for a war of all against all. Faced with such confusion, leaders are totally ineffective, essentially objects of ridicule. (The only respected potential leader—for the moment—is Colin Powell, the perfect Rorschach for the fractionated public.)

Proposition Eleven
Finally, the revolution—counter-revolution—of the 1990s is yet to come. None of our best and brightest, as I see it, has a clue as to what is likely to happen.
So What Is This Internet, Anyway?

Tamara Blaschko works as a development specialist with the Minneapolis Telecommunications Network (MTN). She manages The River Project, MTN's venture to provide Internet access for nonprofit organizations, civic groups, and government agencies. She was interviewed by former MISF President David Wiggins.

Many Minnesota Independent Scholars' Forum members, I suspect, are just considering whether they might get involved with the Internet. Do you have any general advice for them?

Do it. There is no good reason to wait. You should make sure that help and online support is there and that you are getting software and communications equipment that can support a full graphic (SLIP and PPP) interface. This allows you to "point and click" to navigate the Internet instead of having to use a lot of text commands. Some people think that it is better to get a low-level access than to get the full-blown graphic interface. But the ease of use makes it well worthwhile, especially for a new user.

If you are not very computer savvy or comfortable, take a basics class. Don't expect to get it all at once or overload yourself with a comprehensive class. There is about a six- to nine-month learning curve and it is best to learn a little at a time.

What can you tell us about The River Project?

The River Project is designed to facilitate nonprofit groups, civic organizations and government agencies in using the Internet. As a nonprofit organization, MISF qualifies to offer accounts to members at a good rate.

What is your opinion of some of the other services such as the Star Tribune Online and America Online?

Understand that I am somewhat prejudiced here, but these systems like the Star Tribune Online, America Online, Prodigy and CompuServe are closed systems that want to control information. They may provide access to the Internet for their members, but they want to own and sell the information. People can still post out to Internet, but the Web pages within the service are only for the service subscribers, not for the general public.

Unlike The River Project, they want to charge organizations to put information on their service and then they want to charge people to use it. The Star Tribune Online has been saying that they will make this sort of community information available to the schools, but they don't offer an Apple version of their software and that is what most of the schools are using. Most of these services are pushing for the Internet to become commercial. The River Project and the other community-based networks like the Twin Cities Freenet are fighting that. The other thing is that commercial services monitor and censor the exchange of information.

Researchers were the first users of the Internet. With the tremendous increase in the number of other users, has the Internet's value for researchers changed?

There is more to read through, but the venue and dialogue between re-

Do You Want to Get on the Net?

A popular benefit of membership in the Minnesota Independent Scholars' Forum has been borrowing privileges at the University of Minnesota libraries. With the growing use of the Internet for scholarly communication and research, we are interested in the possibility of discount-priced Internet access as an additional benefit of membership.

Most academic institutions provide their faculty and students with Internet access. Independent scholars, however, are on their own. While there are plenty of commercial online providers, the accompanying interview with Tamara Blaschko points out some of the drawbacks of these services, including price.

Through MTN's "The River Project," nonprofit organizations are able to provide their members in the Twin Cities metro area with low-cost full Internet access (e-mail, World Wide Web, FTP, Telnet). To use this Internet service, you would need a computer and a modem. You should have at least a Macintosh Plus with four megabytes of memory or a PC with 80386 microprocessor and four megabytes of memory capable of running Windows.

There would be a one-time setup fee of $30, which includes software. The annual fee for an Internet account would be $80 (less than $7 per month). You would be eligible for these prices because of your Forum membership, but the fees would be in addition to your regular Forum dues.

At least 10 subscribers are needed to qualify for this nonprofit connection, so we need to know how many of our members are really interested in this option. If you are interested, please let us know by calling 612-870-1859 and leaving a message with your name and phone number.

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searchers is still there. You need to select the appropriate venues to collect and share information. There are a large number of groups that are pure entertainment, but the search capabilities have improved so much that it is possible to select what you need. America Online added almost two million users to the system that have never been trained on Internet etiquette. But by following good etiquette, it is possible to make good use of the system for both research and publishing.

Is the Internet a good place for independent scholars to publish?

It's an excellent and inexpensive way to reach a target audience. In fact, targeting an audience is part of the etiquette. There are copyright issues, of course, that are still being worked out. But the best way to disseminate a scholarly publication on the Internet is with a Web page—essentially a preformatted page with a place for text, graphics and notes. It is housed in one system and the address can then be sent to a number of people and groups who may wish to look at it.

I can see how this is a good tool for connecting to like-minded people and information. But is the Internet really a place to discover wisdom?

It allows everyone to be a voice, both a publisher and a consumer of information. It is a free speech forum, so you need to carefully question the perspective and opinions of the information source. They may be providing bogus information or distorting it to reflect a party line. But that is the same with television and newspapers, too. We need to learn how to question the motivation of the source of information. I have found some real gems. Sometimes you can get some real discussion going between opposite points of view and come up with new insights.

What are some of the misconceptions newcomers have about the Internet in general and, in particular, about these online services?

Issues like child pornography and other criminal activity on the Internet have been blown way out of proportion. I certainly don't sanction illegal activity on the Internet, but in any free speech forum you are going to find things that you don’t like. People also worry that their e-mail is insecure. Unless you are on services that monitor this, you don’t need to worry.

The fear of downloading a computer virus is a common worry, but simply using care in downloading applications from reputable sites can prevent this. (Only applications, not simple text, can carry viruses.) I downloaded from 30 to 40 megabytes of data per month and I’ve never gotten a virus on my computer.

Anything you want to add?

Don’t be afraid. It will be uncomfortable at times. Everybody who gets on the Internet will get a strong response from somebody at some point. It is a real mix of humanity, with all of the loud mouths and people who need to be right.

As in any community, you will learn who you might want to avoid and who you want to talk with. You will do best by giving yourself time to listen and learn.

Internet Classes

If you're ready to take a drive on the information superhighway, the Minneapolis Telecommunications Network is offering three Internet training classes in November and December. If you're not yet ready to take a class, you might want to get on MTN's mailing list to learn about future classes. For more information, call MTN at 612-331-8575.

Introduction to the Internet (Saturdays, November 28-December 16, 10:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Fee: $60). This 4-session class will demonstrate the basic concepts and “netiquette” to make using the Internet easy and fun. Classes will cover how to use electronic mail (e-mail), World Wide Web (WWW) and Gopher. Learn by doing, one computer per person offers a hands on learning experience. You will be able to log on and use the Internet with a student account during the class. Lab hours outside of class will also be available. Macintosh and Windows platforms will be taught.

Advanced Internet (December 12, 13, 19, and 20, 6:30 to 9:30 p.m. Fee: $60). Increase your knowledge of the Internet. Learn about File Transfer Protocol (FTP) and Terminal Access (Telnet). There are many ways to search for information using the vast resources of the Internet, learn about the various search engines you can use to find information on any topic. Student Internet accounts will be provided while you are in the class. Learn by doing, one computer for every student. Lab hours outside of class will be available. Macintosh and Windows platforms will be taught.

Basic Introduction to Creating Web Pages (Thursdays, November 30-December 21, 2 to 5 p.m. Fee: $60). Learn how to create your own Web pages through HTML programming—incorporating graphics, sound, video and text. Mac or PC users welcome.

Classes on the Internet are also available through the Science Museum of Minnesota.
Two Views of the Internet

By Lucy M. Brusic

At first glance, it seems that The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier by Howard Rheingold (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1993. $22.95) and Silicon Snake Oil: Second Thoughts on the Information Highway by Clifford Stoll (New York: Doubleday, 1993. $22) have very little in common—other than a common subject, electronic communication. Stoll's book has been widely publicized as expressing a Luddite view—that we should turn our backs on the possibilities of electronic communication while Rheingold's book seems to embrace the endless variations and possibilities of e-mail and its numerous offshoots, such as chat rooms and newsgroups.

The Same Thing

However, a closer examination suggests that both authors are concerned about the same thing—human communication and interaction. Stoll feels that electronics will reduce the opportunities that humans have to interact, while Rheingold feels that electronic communication increases the opportunities for human interaction.

Some of the difference in their points of view may stem from the timing of the books. Rheingold's book was published in 1993, at about the time when many commentators were extolling the virtues of the expanding network for electronic communication. Of late, as if in concert with Stoll, commentators have been taking a much more critical line on electronic communication, as "Cyberspace Trips to Nowhere Land," by Paul Goldberger, NYT, October 5, 1995 or "Get on Line for Plato's Cave," by David Berreby, NYT, June 25, 1995.

Rheingold begins with a story of getting pediatric medical advice from WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link; Rheingolod is the editor of Whole Earth Review) faster than his wife could get information from their pediatrician. His book continues with a history of the Internet and many examples of the communication links it fosters. He is particularly excited about linkages fostered between people who have unusual medical problems; it could be said that the sharing of information in these situations forms the model for his notion of "virtual community"—a community in cyberspace where advice, sympathy, and suggestions based on a common interest are shared. From this model, he goes on to extol the virtues of communities that discuss everything from aliens to vasectomies.

A Note of Caution

Although Rheingold is generally very positive about the possibilities of virtual communication, he ends with a note of caution, suggesting that we must not confuse the suggested reality of the new technology with reality itself: a virtual community is not a real community. Rheingold sees the late nineties as a "narrow window of historic opportunity," when people will either succeed or fail to succeed in gaining control over technological communication.

Clifford Stoll would just like to shut the "narrow window"—opportunity or not—and go back to an age before computers. He is an appealing curmudgeon—taking out after electronic publishing ("Electronic media are not archival" [180]), computerized catalogs ("I'd rather visit a library stocked with lots of books and a competent librarian than one with online catalogs, CD-ROMS, terminals..." [185]), and electronic communication in general ("Computer networks appeal to those who value techie toys over flesh-and-blood relationships" [112]).

Stoll is not a non-computer user, as will be many of those to whom his book might appeal. He is an astronomer, a computer security expert, and the author of an earlier book, The Cuckoo's Egg, in which he told the true story of tracking down a computer espionage ring. His computer communication skills exceed those of most, and his view of the dangers of a headlong rush toward technological communication must be taken seriously.

Throwing Out the Baby

Still, Stoll is so outspoken (albeit engaging) in his criticisms that his book has been rather universally criticized as throwing the baby out the "narrow window" with the bath. Nonetheless, it is important to note that both he and Rheingold, in chorus with many other commentators, suggest that an uncritical acceptance of the Internet may be ill-advised. Arguments supporting this cautionary view mention technological haves and have-nots, saying that the haves (those who have access to the Internet) will have power. No one who has power gives it up easily, and rare is the powerful person who can be counted on to use power wisely all the time. Rational approaches to the use and misuse of this new technology are needed.

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Numerous authors—including Stoll—also criticize the quality of human interaction on the Net. These critiques have a generational aspect; most are written by people who learned to socialize before the Internet became a major feature of the communication landscape. They view the Internet with the experience of one to whom it is an add-on; a younger generation will not have this point of view—the Internet will simply always have been there. Stoll’s remark that “anyone who is directed away from social interaction [to interacting with the computer] has a head start on turning out weird” (136) is typical, if possibly hyperbolic. Nonetheless, he has a point. It is probably out-Stolling Stoll to suggest that there should be an age limit for working with computers, that children should learn to play baseball on the playground before they play it on the screen, that one should learn to love a real person before getting involved in the fantasy of a chat room. But an analogy with the automobile might be instructive. When automobiles were new, anyone who could see over the wheel and reach the pedals could drive one. As we acquired more automobiles, and more roads, it became an accepted fact that a certain level of experience—that generally acquired by age 16—was required to get a license, and that only after many hours of instruction.

While it may be neither practical, nor sensible, to follow Stoll out to the edges of his argument and do away with all electronic communication, his—and Rheingold’s—cautions should be taken seriously. To the extent that the Internet fosters communication, it is a good thing. But when the Internet becomes a substitute for real human interaction, questions should be raised. If human interaction decreases, and virtual communication becomes the norm, reality will begin to recede, and we as a nation will be vulnerable to whoever controls the Internet.

Although Stoll’s book is the more readable, Rheingold’s book is probably the more balanced. It contains a great deal of information about the Internet and its workings and is a good general introduction for those who are curious about the new technology. Both books have indexes. Rheingold’s book also contains an extended bibliography.