

Shortly after the waitress had taken the order (for clams) I incredulously recalled that since childhood I have loathed clams in any form. "It's entirely possible," I remarked, "that someone has put something into our heads since we entered the restaurant."

What could cause Wilson Bryan Key to order something he hates? According to Key it was the placemat, which on the surface depicted merely a clam plate, but upon closer inspection, was found by Key to actually show "a sexual orgy, oral sex, and bestiality."

In his third book on the subject, *The Clam Plate Orgy*, Key once again tries to convince his readers that advertisers are hiding obscene images in their pictures, and that these images are "in direct communication with the brain's unconscious systems" and are capable of controlling the viewers' behavior without their awareness. According to Key the behaviors controlled include not only buying unwanted merchandise but also everything from alcoholism to "reproductive behavior (that is) shunted through masturbatory fantasies of bizarre and unrestrained sexual indulgence."

Near the end of the book, after "documenting" the existence and effectiveness of these "subliminals" or "subs", as he calls them, Key argues for the development of "counter-media intelligence." Consumers, he says, should learn to recognize "media-engendered hypes, fads, rip-offs, pseudo-information, fakes, pap, misrepresentations, and just plain lies." This is good advice, and perhaps this book should be read backwards, because it is exactly the advice that should be kept in mind while

reading the rest of the book.

No way exists to conclusively prove whether or not advertisers do in fact use "subliminals", and a thorough discussion of the evidence as to their effectiveness would require more space than is available. But whether or not Key is correct, the point remains that he relies on propaganda techni-

himselves with Socrates, could be summarized as: "All great ideas are disputed. My ideas are disputed. Therefore my ideas are great."

It's interesting that Key's explanation for all this opposition (besides his greatness, that is) is that academic psychology

here. If the existence of psychological studies that don't seem to support him is proof that he is correct, then so is the existence of studies that do.

And so he devotes one section to studies that he feels support his ideas. The interested reader is encouraged to look up these studies in the journals (many of

asked people to adjust the light level of numbers projected on a screen such that they could read them. Then, setting the light level somewhat below this "awareness threshold", they found that people could guess, more accurately than at chance, what the numbers were.

What was actually demonstrated then, was that more information was needed for a person to feel confident that he could read a number correctly than for him to guess (with imperfect accuracy) what the numbers were.

This is hardly surprising not to mention irrelevant. In the first place the "subliminals" to which Key refers (e.g. "orgys") are hard to see — if they are there — because they are hidden by other, more dominant information (e.g. the clams), while the numbers in this study were hard to see because of low light. There's no reason to believe that these two situations are comparable.

Second, in the study people were actively focusing their attention on the numbers: but the effectiveness of subliminals, says Key, depends on people *not* focusing their attention on them. And third, of course, guessing numbers is not exactly the same order of behavior as ordering clams. In short, it is a far cry from guessing the identity of dimly lit numbers to being induced into buying something you hate because little naked people are camouflaged as clams.

Are subliminals being used and do they affect behavior? Key has not adequately answered either of these questions in *Clam Plate Orgy*. All that he has done, it seems, is indulge in "masturbatory" fantasies of bizarre and unrestrained sexual indulgence."

In this study the researchers



Clam Plate Orgy By Wilson Bryan Key Prentice Hall Inc. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1980

By Debbie Bodinger

ques to make most of his arguments.

In a real coup of reasoning, Key cites the following as evidence in his favor: "for every (scientific) paper supporting the effectiveness of subliminals, there appear several denouncing the supportive evidence and the entire concept."

The reasoning here rests on a premise stated in an earlier chapter that "one test for significance has always been the degree of opposition the findings stimulate." This chapter, in which he actually compares

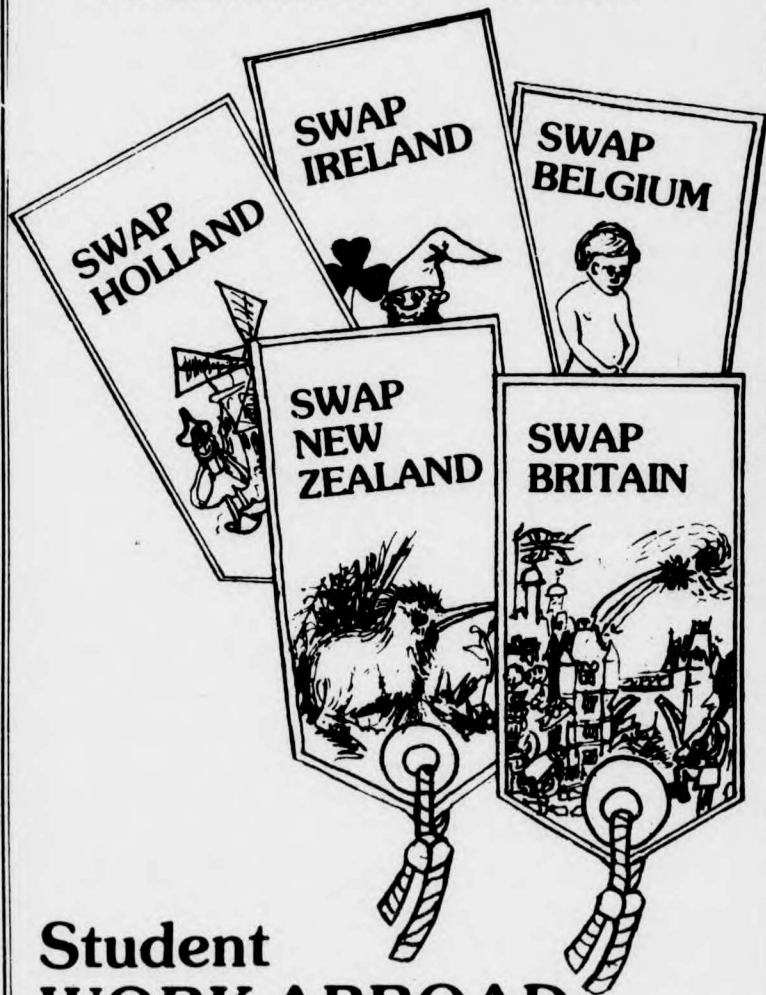
has a "strong predisposition to view human behavior . . . (as) derived from deterministic free will, and defined by consciously knowable criteria." He goes on to tell us that this predisposition exists because "behaviorism is the dominant school . . . in U.S. academic psychology." B.F. Skinner would no doubt be amused by this, considering how hard he and other Behaviorists have worked to eradicate the concepts of "free will" and "consciously knowable" from psychological thought.

But Key's "logic" doesn't end

which are available in Scott) and read both the originals and the criticism that has followed them. There is room here for only one example, which will indicate the sort of thing you are likely to find.

As evidence that "subliminals can affect behavior" Key cites one study in which the researchers concluded that subjects could guess at levels better than chance the identity of numbers that were presented at "subliminal" light levels. (Worthington and Dixon, 1964, *Acta Psychologica*, 22, pg. 338.)

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