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THE POLITICS OF "THE MOVEMENT"

My own disenchantment with American society was not caused by its racial bigotry, its warlike posturing, its supreme respect for money. All these might be understood as irrationalities which could be struck from the national character if only rational men were mobilized more effectively. But when events prove this assumption false, then disenchantment really begins: with the understanding that the most respected and enlightened Americans are among the most barbarous.

Take just two examples. There is a conventional notion that the Southern racial crisis is caused and prolonged by "white trash"—an isolated and declining remnant in our society. We are told that rational men are attempting, within the framework of due process, to educate these minority elements to a more progressive social outlook. But this picture is shattered every day by events in the Black Belt. There the murderers of civil rights workers again and again include men like Byron De la Beckwith, the respected downtown businessman who shot Medgar Evers in the back. They are middle class and enjoy the broad support of their local communities.

When this is pointed out, of course, we are told that respectable men are murderers only in places like Mississippi. By national standards, the Black Belt killers are not respectable. But is Mississippi an isolated part of America? If not, who at the national level is responsible for the state of terror in Mississippi? Part of the answer, I am afraid, is that leading Northerners buttress the Southern status quo. Without dozens of companies owned from the North, plus the billions provided by defense contracts and agricultural subsidies, Mississippi could not have survived the postwar period as a racist state. Mississippi Power and Light, for example, many of whose personnel are connected with the White Citizens Council, is owned and controlled by the same men who play leading roles in another corporation known for its enlightenment, Harvard University.

A second example: we are told that the United States is on the side of the new nations and the exploited and impoverished peoples

of the third world. But, once again, the facts have nothing to do with this happy picture—as the affairs of an American businessman like Charles Engelhard of New Jersey suggest. In his mid-forties, Engelhard is already renowned in business circles and has become an important political figure in the liberal wing of the Democratic party. He was sent by the President to represent the U.S. at occasions as vital as the celebration of Algerian independence. He was a friend of John F. Kennedy; Lyndon Johnson praises him as a “great humanitarian.” How did he become so famous? Presumably because he owns the controlling shares in the mines of the Republic of South Africa. But aren’t those mines a blasphemy against the values of the Free World? And is Engelhard an isolated and unrespectable member of that world?

This is civilized barbarism—pernicious, sophisticated, subtly concealed from public view, massively protected from political attack. The barbaric America is invisible to the majority of its people, who are lodged in occupations and social positions which form a desensitizing trap. They are at the bottom, or in the middle, of organizations whose official purposes are justified in abstract terms. Their views, inherited from their families or implanted by the school system, and fed every day by the mass media, permit them to screen out threatening information or alternative ways of seeing the world.

The usual way to “escape” the trapped condition of ordinary Americans is to ascend to higher levels of influence and knowledge in some key institution. But while an overview of society is gained from these positions, a new trap is waiting. For entry into higher organizational circles depends upon accepting their general design and purpose. This means that people in “responsible” positions are most often blind to immoral consequences of their work. Their blindness is intensified by the belief that they are close to people’s problems and that administrative remedies exist for whatever arises. This is the usual attitude among public servants, from police to administrators of the war-on-poverty.

II

This national trance depends upon one crucial assumption: that American society is being improved domestically. The legitimacy gained by the industrial unions, the liberal welfare legislation which was passed in the thirties and forties, and now the civil rights and anti-poverty reforms of the sixties—these are seen as part of a long sweep toward a society of economic and social justice. But there is, in fact, little evidence to justify the view that the social reforms of the past thirty

years actually improved the quality of American life in a lasting way. And there is much evidence which suggests that the reforms gained were illusory or token, serving chiefly to sharpen the capacity of the system for manipulation and oppression.

Look closely for a moment at the social legislation upon which the notion of domestic improvement is based. The Wagner Act was supposed to effect unionization of workers; but today the unionized labor force is shrinking with the automation of the mass-production industries, and millions of other workers, never organized, are without any protection. The social security laws were supposed to support people in distress, but today many are still not covered, and those with coverage can barely make ends meet. Unemployment compensation policies were supposed to aid men in need of jobs, but today many are still without coverage, while benefits represent a smaller and smaller share of the cost of living. The 1946 Full Employment Act was supposed to guarantee federal action to provide a job for every American who needed one, but today the official (understated) unemployment rate is close to six per cent. The 1949 Public Housing Act, sponsored by conservative Robert Taft, was to create 800,000 low-cost units by 1953, but today less than half that number are constructed, many of them beyond reach of the poor. The difficult struggle to enact even a token policy of public medical care, the hollow support for public education, the stagnation and starvation of broader programs for health, recreation and simple city services—all this is evidence for a simple truth. *the welfare state is a myth.*

Seen in the context of a history of unkept promises, the 1965 anti-poverty program should evoke no optimism. The amount of money allocated is a pittance; most of it is going to local politicians, school boards, welfare agencies, housing authorities, professional personnel, and even to the police; its main thrust is to shore up sagging organizational machinery, not to shift the distribution of income and influence in the direction of the poor. Some of the more sophisticated liberals understand that the "involvement of the poor" is essential to an effective program, but this is seen in capitalist-psychological terms, stressing the need to "repair" the defeatist self-image which supposedly excludes the poor from sharing in the enterprise system. A few people, including members of the Administration, see "involvement" in political terms as well. But this participation is frustrated by the poverty planners' un-deviating allegiance to existing power centers. In reality, then, the poor only *flavor* the program. A few are co-opted into it, but only as atomized

individuals. They do not have independent organizational strength, as do the machines and social agencies.

But the quality of the welfare state is best illustrated by the sluggish way in which it responds to pressure for civil rights reform. It required the slaughter of little girls, a near bloodbath in Birmingham, violence toward Northern whites, students and ministers, an outbreak of riots across the North, and the organization of an independent political party in Mississippi before the Administration began to move on the civil rights front. And that motion gives little hope of real progress. Indeed, the present (1965) voting rights bill actually shrinks the existing powers of the Federal government (as established in such codes as Section 242, Title 18, which provides for criminal prosecution of people acting under cover of law to violate others' constitutional rights). It leaves the decision to take action to the Attorney General; it involves complicated and time-consuming procedures for local Negroes; it provides no protection against intimidation for civil rights workers or local people.

In all these areas, from the Wagner Act to the newest civil rights legislation, my criticism has been narrowed to the question: did the legislation achieve, or does it offer some hope of achieving, its stated purposes? The tragedy, however, is not simply that these programs fall short of their goals. Rather, the goals themselves are far from desirable to anyone interested in greater democracy and a richer quality of social life. Welfare and public housing policies, for instance, are creating a new and public kind of authoritarianism. Public relief clients and tenants, lacking any protective organizations, are subject to the caprice and cruelty of supervisors, investigators, and local machine politicians. Similarly, labor and civil rights legislation creates tools for government intervention at moments of sharp social conflict, without really changing the tyrannical conditions in which millions of workers and Negroes live. The full employment and anti-poverty acts, along with the relief measures of the thirties, give the government power to cushion the economic situation just short of the point of mass unemployment. Programs such as urban renewal serve as the major domestic outlet for investment capital and, consciously or not, as a means of demoralizing and politically fragmenting the poor. The national government thus becomes the chief force for stabilizing the private economy and for managing social crisis. Its interests, institutions and personnel have merged with those of high finance and industry.

The traditional Left expectation of irreconcilable and clashing class

interests has been defied. Still assuming such antagonism, however, many Leftists tend to view each piece of social legislation as a victory which strengthens the "progressive" forces. They see a step-by-step transformation of society as the result of pushing for one "politically acceptable" reform after another. But it appears that the American elite has discovered a long-term way to stabilize or cushion the contradictions of our society. It does this through numerous forms of state intervention, the use of our abundant capacity for material gratification, and the ability to condition nearly all the information which people receive. And if this is the case, then more changes of the New Deal variety will not be "progressive" at all. Except for temporarily boosting income for a few people, this entire reformist trend has weakened the poor under the pretense of helping them and strengthened elite rule under the slogan of curbing private enterprise. In fostering a "responsible" Negro and labor leadership and bringing it into the pseudopluralist system of bargaining and rewards, a way has been found to contain and paralyze the disadvantaged and voiceless people.

III

Why have liberal strategies failed to secure substantial reforms over the last three decades? The answer can only be grasped by looking at the general organizing concepts of American liberal and labor leaders. These begin with the view that the American masses are "apathetic" and can only be roused because of simple material needs or during short periods of great enthusiasm. The masses most likely to move, it is said, are those who have gained something already: the unionized workers, registered voters, property owners. Those less likely to move are the people on the absolute bottom with nothing to lose, for they are too damaged to be the real motor of change.

From this rough description of the masses, liberals go on to argue the need for certain sorts of organizations. The masses need skilled and responsible leaders, they insist. It is best if these leaders have rank-and-file experience and operate within a formally democratic system. But this grass-roots flavor must not obscure the necessity for leaders to lead, that is, put forward a program, a set of answers that guides the movement. And because they monopolize leadership experience, it soon appears to these leaders that they alone are qualified to maintain the organization.

The perilous position of the movement, due to attacks from centralized business and political forces, adds a further incentive for a top-down system of command. The need for alliances with other groups,

created in large part through the trust which sets of leaders develop for each other, also intensifies the trend toward vertical organization. Finally, the leaders see a need to screen out anyone with "Communist-oriented" views, since such individuals are presumably too skilled to be allowed to operate freely within the movement. Slowly an elite is formed, calling itself the liberal-labor community. It treats the rank-and-file as a mass to be molded; sometimes thrust forward into action, sometimes held back. A self-fulfilling pattern emerges: because the nature of the organization is elitist, many people react to it with disinterest or suspicion, giving the leadership the evidence it needs to call the masses apathetic.

The pressures which influence these leaders come, not primarily from below, but from the top, from the most powerful men in the country. Sometimes bluntly and sometimes subtly, the real elite grooms responsible trade union and civil rights leaders. The leaders' existence comes to depend upon the possibility of receiving attention from the President or some top aide, and they judge organizational issues with an eye on this possibility. There is usually no question about the leaders' primary loyalty to the "national interest" as defined by the Administration, even though they always believe their judgments are independently made. Thus most of the civil rights leadership in 1964, fearing the Goldwater movement and hoping for civil rights legislation from a victorious Johnson Administration, called for a "moratorium" on mass demonstrations. The labor leadership performed the same function for the same reasons during World War II; the irony is that their critics in that period included A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, two Negroes who pushed for the 1964 moratorium.

A recent incident clarified the political role of this leadership and pointed towards the possibility of an alternative strategy. This was the challenge posed by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic party and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee at the 1964 Democratic National Convention.

Members of the FDP trooped into Atlantic City to argue for their rightful control of the Mississippi Democratic seats. They found substantial support from rank-and-file members of Northern delegations who favored their modest demand for at least equal treatment with the racist party at the convention. Here was a chance, it was thought, to end Southern obstruction of the Johnson Administration's program. But then the Democratic leadership let its position be known: the FDP was morally sound, but "illegal" and "not qualified." Support

within the delegations wavered. The FDP's last chance for success depended on rallying national liberal-labor leaders to support its demand for a floor debate, in front of the television cameras. But some Negro leaders worked against the Mississippi party, others took a vacillating position and no one would stand firmly with them. To do so, the leaders claimed, would jeopardize Humphrey's chance at the vice-presidency, strengthen Goldwater's hand, and split the FDP from its "allies" in the liberal-labor world. The FDP members decided that the fate of Humphrey and Goldwater depended in fact upon the same power structure that was determining their own fate. Not wanting the kind of "allies" and "victories" being offered, they went home. Their real allies were the poor people waiting in the Delta; and their real victory was in being able to maintain fidelity to those allies. This was a victory because it kept the movement alive and gave its members some real understanding of what was needed to change the national situation.

IV

The Mississippi Convention challenge points towards a new kind of politics and a new kind of organizing, which has at least an outside chance of truly changing American society. This stirring we call the Movement.

The Movement tries to oppose American barbarism with new structures and opposing identities. These are created by people whose need to understand their society and govern their own existence has somehow not been cancelled out by the psychological damage they have received. For different reasons such needs survive among the poor, among students and other young people, and finally among millions of other Americans not easily grouped except by their modest individual resistance to the system's inhumanity. It is from these ranks that the Movement is being created. What kind of people, more exactly, are they, and what kind of organizational strategy might they develop?

1. *An Interracial Movement of the Poor.*

The Mississippi sharecroppers are the most visible and inspiring representations of an awakening that is taking place among the poor in America. Their perspective centers on Negro freedom, of course, but they are committed deeply to the idea of a movement of all the powerless and exploited. In certain ways theirs is a radicalism unique because of Black Belt conditions. Their strength comes from a stable system of family life and work. Politics is new and fresh for them; they have not experienced

the hollow promises of an opportunistic liberal-Negro machine. Their opposition's naked brutality keeps them constantly in a crisis framework. The broadening of their movement into Arkansas, Alabama, Louisiana, Georgia, the Carolinas and Virginia, already underway, can be expected to challenge fundamentally the national coalition directing the Democratic party. Already the Democrats are trying to groom moderate and liberal politicians to provide an "alternative" to the segregationists and the independent FDP. Probably this effort will succeed, in the sense that political moderates will begin to compete for electoral power and leadership of the civil rights forces, mostly basing their strength in the cities, among privileged Negroes. The FDP, as a structure, may be absorbed into the national party, if only because it has no other, more effective place to go. But since the new Southern power structure will not solve the problems of poverty and race which have plagued the North for generations, there is very little chance that this movement of poor people will be entirely co-opted or crushed.

In the black ghettos of the North, the Movement faces heavier obstacles. There work is often deadening, family life distorted: "proper" political channels are sewers; people are used to, and tired of, party organizers exploiting them. The civil rights movement does not touch these hundreds of ghettos in any significant way because of the middle class nature of its program and leadership. However, the Harlem rent strikes and the activities of Malcolm X are clear evidence that there are in the ghettos people prepared to take action. Some of them are of Southern background; some are housewives with wasted talents; some are youth with no future for their energy; some are junkies and numbers men with little loyalty to their particular game. Different as the forms of their discontent may be, the discontent itself is general to the ghetto and can be the spring for action. Under present conditions, political movements among these people are likely to be based on a race consciousness which is genuine and militant—and which is also vital because of the failure of whites to act in favor of equal rights. The ghetto race consciousness, however, is intertwined with the consciousness of being both poor and powerless. Almost of necessity, the demands that the ghetto poor put forward are also in the interest of the white poor, as well as of middle class professionals who depend on the expansion of the public sectors of the economy.

But will white working class and poor people take up these issues, which the "Negro problem" by its nature tends to raise? The negative evidence is plentiful. Poor whites, such as those in parts of the South

who are truly irrelevant to the modern economy, tend to see their plight (sometimes with accuracy) as personal rather than social; a function of sickness, bad luck, or psychological disorder. Poverty is not seen clearly as the fate of a whole interracial class, but only as the fate of individuals, each shamed into self-blame by their Protestant ideology. Working class whites, on the other hand, are more likely to be conscious of their problems as a group, but they tend to defend their scarce privileges—jobs, wages, education for their children—against what they see as the onslaught of Negro competition. While “backlash” did not split the alliance of white working people with the Democratic party in 1964, it does serve as a barrier to an alliance with the Negro poor. But it is foolish to be rigid about these notions. Whites *are* being organized, on a mass basis, in areas of Appalachia where there exists a common culture and an industrial union tradition, and where the blame for misery can be laid to the coal operators, the conservative United Mine Workers, and the government. They also have been organized in Cleveland, where they face the “welfare situation” together.

But these organizing efforts were led by local people or independent organizers outside the structure of the labor movement. Today there are millions of workers trapped by the organizational framework of the AFL-CIO. Their unrest at times moves the international unions slightly, but the internationals are more dependent on government and business than on their own members, and, in addition, they seem to possess effective techniques for curbing shop revolts. It is not simply the “better objective conditions” which split the white from the Negro poor, but the existence of trade unions which actively distort the better aspirations of their members. Economic and social conditions, of course, are not improving and workers discontent is evidenced by the recent wave of rank-and-file revolts. But whether this discontent spurs a coalition of poor whites with Negroes depends, most of all, on whether a way can be found to organize workers independent of AFL-CIO routines. Concretely, that means democratic control by the workers of their union locals, and the entry of those locals into political activities and coalitions on the community level. It also means community action and organization among the millions of low-paid workers presently outside the labor movement.

The crucial importance of community work can only be grasped if one understands the sorts of ideas the American poor have about themselves. They operate with a kind of split consciousness. On the one hand, poor people know they are victimized from every direction. The facts of life always break through to expose the distance between

American ideals and personal realities. This kind of knowledge, however, is kept undeveloped and unused because of another knowledge imposed on the poor, a keen sense of dependence on the oppressor. This is the source of that universal fear which leads poor people to act and even to think subserviently. Seeing themselves to blame for their situation, they rule out the possibility that they might be qualified to govern themselves and their own organizations. Besides fear, it is their sense of inadequacy and embarrassment which destroys the possibility of revolt. At the same time, this set of contradictory feelings results in indirect forms of protest all the time: styles of dress and language, withdrawal from political life, defiance of the boss's or the welfare worker's rules and regulations.

There can be no poor people's movement in any form unless the poor can overcome their fear and embarrassment. I think the release comes from a certain kind of organizing which tries to make people understand their own worth and dignity. This work depends on the existence of "material issues" as a talking and organizing point—high rents, voting rights, unpaved roads, and so on—but it moves from there into the ways such issues are related to personal life. The organizer spends hours and hours in the community, listening to people, drawing out their own ideas, rejecting their tendency to depend on him for solutions. Meetings are organized at which people with no "connections" can be given a chance to talk and work out problems together—usually for the first time. All this means fostering in everyone that sense of decision-making power which American society works to destroy. Only in this way can a movement be built which the Establishment can neither buy off nor manage, a movement too vital ever to become a small clique of spokesmen.

An organizational form that suggests the style of such a movement is the "community union," involving working-class and poor people in local insurgency. Open and democratic, the community union offers a real alternative to the kind of participation permitted in civil rights groups, trade unions and Democratic party machines. It might take a variety of forms: block clubs, housing committees, youth groups, etc. The union's insistence on the relevance of "little people," as well as its position outside and against the normal channels, would create a rooted sense of independence among the members.

The problem of politics among the poor is severe. In the first place, their potential electoral power is low because of their location in gerrymandered political districts, their rapid movement from house to house, and the complicated and discriminatory electoral procedures in many

cities. Beyond these problems lies the obvious and well-grounded cynicism of the poor about elections. Given all these conditions, it is barely conceivable that a poor person could be elected to an important political office. Even were this possible, it would be on a token basis, and the elected official would be under strong pressure to conform to the rules of the game. Thus, the orthodox idea of politics is contradictory to building a movement. The movement needs to discover a politics of its own. This might be done by electing people who will see their office as a community organizing tool, letting community people participate directly in decisions about how the office should be used. This experiment is being made in Atlanta where a SNCC field secretary, Julian Bond, was elected in June 1965 to the State Legislature. Or what might be done is to contest the basic class and racial injustices of American politics, demanding that poverty areas be granted political representation, or running freedom elections to dramatize the lack of representation for the boxed-in poor. This sort of thing would probably mobilize more poor people than orthodox electoral activity. The mobilization would be "practical" from the standpoint of getting modest reforms; more important, it would point toward the need to rearrange American political institutions to fit the needs of excluded people.

2. A Student Movement.

If poor people are in the movement because they have nothing to gain in the status system, students are in it because, in a sense, they have gained too much. Most of the active student radicals today come from middle to upper-middle class professional homes. They were born with status and affluence as facts of life, not goals to be striven for. In their upbringing, their parents stressed the right of children to question and make judgments, producing perhaps the first generation of young people both affluent and independent of mind. And then these students so often encountered social institutions that denied them their independence and betrayed the democratic ideals they were taught. They saw that men of learning were careerists; that school administrators and ministers almost never discussed the realities the students lived with; that even their parents were not true to the ideals they taught the young.

It was against this background that young people became concerned about war, racism and inequality in the early sixties. By now, the empty nature of existing vocational alternatives has pushed several hundreds of these students into community organizing. Working in poor communities is a concrete task in which the split between job and values can be healed. It is also a position from which to expose the whole

structure of pretense, status and glitter that masks the country's real human problems. And, finally, it is a way to find people who want to change the country, and possibly can do so.

When a student comes into a community, there are countless obstacles in his way. He is an outsider, he is over-educated, he has nothing concrete to offer people, and often, he is white in a Negro ghetto. At the same time, however, he brings something with him: the very presence of students suggests to the poor that their more activist notions may be right after all. The student alone can say, "Look, I come from the world that says you are not qualified, and I know that is a lie. I come to you because you can teach me as much as I can teach you." Students can also make the poverty problem visible and threatening because they create resources previously unimaginable. Parents and universities become energized; money can be raised; contacts can be set up with other people's organizations around the country. Finally, students and poor people make each other feel real. What has flowed from this connection is most of the vitality of the civil rights and anti-poverty movements over the past five years.

Now it appears that students are finding ways to organize effectively around other problems too: university reform and peace. The Berkeley "uprising" and the April March of 20,000 against the war in Vietnam were major departures from the inconsequential student politics of the old days. On many campuses students are beginning to form unions of their own, as well as independent seminars pointed toward the eventual organization of a "free university." In addition, they are beginning to mobilize community action against the Vietnamese war—thereby encountering their friends already at work among the poor. These efforts may thread the several protest movements in the country into a grass-roots coalition.

3. *Middle-class insurgents.*

A centralized and commercial society wastes the talents and energies of millions of individuals. Some of these are women who are excluded from male-dominated vocations. Some are people with human values who cannot assert them effectively within organizations attached to the cold war consensus. Some were politically active in the thirties, but faded away when popular movements declined. Some are part of the postwar generation which missed the experience of a radical movement altogether, and who are lodged uncomfortably in publishing houses, universities, and labor bureaucracies.

The new movements are opening great possibilities for participation by such middle class people. Their activity often includes vital financial support, but it can and does go farther. Insurgency within American institutions is spreading: professors fighting their administrations, lawyers against the bar association, welfare workers against the political machine, muckrakers against the press establishments. This insurgency is bound to increase as the new generation of student activists graduates into the professions. And it is an insurgency which needs a movement of poor people, insistently demanding new social purposes from the professionals.

To summarize: the Movement is a community of insurgents sharing the same radical values and identity, seeking an independent base of power wherever they are. It aims at a transformation of society led by the most excluded and "unqualified" people. Primarily, this means building institutions outside the established order which seek to become the genuine institutions of the total society. Community unions, freedom schools, experimental universities, community-formed police review boards, people's own anti-poverty organizations fighting for federal money, independent union locals—all can be "practical" pressure points from which to launch reform in the conventional institutions while at the same time maintaining a separate base and pointing towards a new system. Ultimately, this movement might lead to a Continental Congress called by all the people who feel excluded from the higher circles of decision-making in the country. This Congress might even become a kind of second government, receiving taxes from its supporters, establishing contact with other nations, holding debates on American foreign and domestic policy, dramatizing the plight of all groups that suffer from the American system.

If it is hard to imagine this kind of revolutionary process in the United States, it might be because no previous model of revolution seems appropriate to this most bloated and flexible of the advanced societies. There may be no way to change this country. At least there is no way we can bank on. Both technological change and social reform seem to rationalize the power of the system to drain the heart of protest. The Movement at least suggests that we bank on our own consciousness, what there is of our own humanity, and begin to work.