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LETTER TO THE MOVEMENT:



Re-Creation: Self Transformation and Revolutionary Consciousness

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Suppose the reasons people join the movement are not what we think they are, or even what they think.

Two different sets of reasons

I come from an upper middle class background. I joined the movement in 1963, and I know, without a doubt, that it was the civil rights movement that got to me. For me it was the discrepancy between what I had been taught—equality, beauty, justice—and the reality of life for Blacks in Cambridge, Maryland, that tripped me up, turned my intellect around, made me say (with a voice schooled in civics texts): “People should have the power to make the decisions which effect their lives. The civil rights movement is right. The Vietnamese should control Vietnam. We have no business in

Vietnam.” This last changed later to “They (the US government) have no business there,” and still later to: “All power to the NLF.” By then I thought of myself as a revolutionary and an activist. I even knew enough to say: “I, too, cannot be free without a revolution. As long as one man is in chains, no man is free”

Last week I listened to a man named Doug, the son of a housewife and a laborer explain how he came to be a radical. It began, he said, when he found his father’s iron-handed discipline intolerable and unjust. He wanted to go to college. His father said no, and refused to sign requests for scholarships. Later, at college, the administration played an equally authoritarian role. It fired six of the teachers who interested him. His father, naturally, sided with the school. The cop who still later arrested Doug for speeding travelled 20 mph over the limit all the way to the jail. . . . Discussions about the war and the draft and the black movement salted these experiences. In my case they had been the meat of the argument. In Doug’s case, they were only the seasoning.

Six months ago I would have said Doug and I had gotten to the same place but by different routes dictated by our different class origins. But in the last year my life has imploded, its structure finally overcome by the vacuum in its center. As I begin to put the pieces back together—or rather to fashion them into something else—I find that I had not yet reached his place at all. It was not until the pain of vacuum caused me to curse my lot and politics helped me find causes in the structure of society that I no longer had to look to the chains of others to find my own un-freedom. Only then did my reasons for revolution become as innate and as genuine as Doug’s, and only then did I really begin to understand revolution.

I am concerned, then, when I describe the nature of my own oppression that you will pass it off lightly. I do not mean to say that it is as painful—if the pain could be compared—as that of Blacks, or of those who grind out their lives to the rhythm of a machine. I mean only that it is enough to drive me to hate the state and to want to transform it, and that I will want much the same changes as others who are oppressed.

It is as if the relations at any level of societal organization projected themselves up and down onto every other level: The structure of the corporate world, ruling giants ruling others, is projected up into the international context as imperialist/colonial relations between western countries. It is projected down through each corporation as hierarchical boss/worker relations, down to the family of each corporate member, where it becomes manifest as man/wife, oppressor/oppressed relationships.

I found myself playing oppressor in this last locale. I am sure I could have continued to do so, and suffered much less than those whose lives I manipulated and dominated. That is not to say, however, that I would have been happy. I do not need to elaborate on the bareness of relationships between men and women which result from the domination/submission game. It should be equally clear that relationships with men—rival aggressors—were, by definition, lacking in love. It is one of the ironic facts of my class-race-sex position that my oppression is part and parcel of my role as oppressor:

Integrate into this compulsive domination a self-image centered on intellect: to be strong is to know what you think. Intellectual content is what to look for in writing, in activity, in other people. Remove any suspicion that there might be another kind of strength, or that in fact such reliance on intellect might be a form of weakness. You then have the bare outlines of the pattern in which I had been trained. Its elements compounded each other. I am quite sure I had feelings then and that I did want to act on them. Since I could not admit they were important, I had to find intellectual reasons, usually political ones, for doing whatever I did, or I had to make others make demands on me which I could then give into in order to accomplish my original, emotional intent.

On its simplest level I could trace these patterns back to my childhood and label my parents the pattern-makers. Their divorce, and their demands on my brother and me to share their hatred of each other, clearly drove me to run from all emotions. In my endless figuring out of how I should behave may lie some of the roots of my intellectualization. I certainly took care of my brother in the same ‘helpful,’ protective, dominating fashion I now try to adopt with others as an approximation of friendship and love.

I cannot do it yet, but I think that in time I will be able to trace back the major patterns of my parents’ lives to their parents. Eventually, from its diverse origins in Scotland and Spain several centuries ago it should be possible to sketch the reflection and refraction of familial, character shaping patterns. I think it not at all unreasonable for me to damn this western state and this capitalist culture for no other reason than that it allowed families—such corrupted, in-bred, blind, helpless, drifting barks of culture that they are—to continue to exist.

The capitalist state is hardly an idle bystander. It trained me, and other men for ‘work,’ and women for house and children, and so whittled down the basis for any common, sharing life. I encouraged my worldly ambition and aggressiveness, and discouraged hers. It taught me emotions were foolish, girlish things, that it was intellect which ruled.

My high school education tried to put the finishing touches on the job. It was a finishing school for men and it was meant to teach the sons of the rich how to rule the empire. I was no radical at the time, but I did think I had outfoxed them. I ran most of the extra-curricular activities—debating, newspaper, press club, drama workshop—and hustled my way out of classes and required athletics. Only later did I see that it was I who had been hustled. I learned how to cheat and cut corners, how to manipulate and manage, how to cut through the system in order to make it run better. I learned the hustling game. I am afraid that when my ideas shifted allegiance from nuclear physics to the Blacks and the Vietnamese that at first I shifted *en masse* all my ways of operating. I organized my corner of the movement the way I had organized the newspaper: top down, with regard for ideas and product but not for emotions and people: with structures that looked democratic but let hustlers with my traits, chiefly other men, rise to the top.

Damn it all: family, school, and state, and damn the circus too. All helped to do me in so I would do in the Blacks, the Vietnamese, those who labor, women, and, in the end, myself.

Once I had come to feel that I was a revolutionary in my own right, in my own cause, my understanding of revolution deepened and changed. If we—for I think this society has produced a subculture with traits like those I have described—if we are a legitimate social force, containing a propensity out of our own needs to move in the right historical direction, then we can take what we feel more seriously, and act upon it. The range of permissible targets broadens. From factories and corporations, the presumed loci of the oppression of others, we can move to schools, families, and the courts. It is because there is untapped, revolutionary energy in us that a target which seems distant and somewhat abstract—Hoffman's court in Chicago—can become the target for a demonstration of 15,000 in Boston. Not more than 500 from Boston went to Chicago in August, 1968, less than 4% of the 15,000. What drove us to the streets on TDA was not any direct connection, but a sense of ourselves as a movement, with Hoffman, Nixon, Bettelheim as its antagonists.

In the same manner a sense of our own legitimacy recasts many tactical debates. What of burning down a bank or breaking State Street windows? Once the argument is out of the range of 'good or not good' for the revolution, and our flare-ups are given as much legitimacy in our eyes as the revolts of Blacks, the question may not be answered, but at least it is set in more real, manageable terms.

Before I began to understand the nature of my own oppression, revolution meant a change in structures, a change in which class held state power, and a change, thereby, in culture. Since I now feel that my exploitation has been at least in part to have been made over in some microcosmic image of an oppressive state, then revolution must mean a change in myself as well. The most important change to come out of my altered consciousness is that, in short, I have become one of the objects of my own revolution.

The reaction of radicals to the need for self-transformation is partly determined by how they have been shaped by the culture.

Some deny self-transformation is necessary. More accurately, they never consider it. They bring into the movement the operating modes of their class background. This has meant a mode in the new left that is male chauvinist, subtly racist, authoritarian through democratic forms. These people on the movement a burden which may deny to it most of its goals.

Others seek to transform themselves into their image of some other, usually more oppressed, strata. Thus PL denies the legitimacy of our own oppression, and requires a transformation of self into some ersatz image of the working class. Since self-transformation is too 'bourgeois' a term for their lexicon, it is usually referred to as 'discipline' or 'not being anti-communist or anti-working class.' The motive invoked for the change is not need growing out of the conditions of the lives of those who are asked to change, but guilt over being bourgeois or middle class and therefore counter-revolutionary (anti-working class). Guilt works well, for it is one of the principal ingredient families and the state-culture use to shape these same people to be its internally-disciplined functionaries. The image toward which this change is asked is itself warped by the state-culture: the real working class is not anti-racist, anti-male chauvinist, consciously democratic,

nor disciplined. The image is a projection, typical of a group caught up in the intellectualizations which are the marks of its class origins.

In each case members of a sector of relative privilege—white middle class students—sense their misshapen values and seek to transform themselves, but only into an idolatrous image of some pre-revolutionary, more oppressed sector. This kind of worship survives only because of a double blindness. First it is a blindness to their own oppression. If recognized, it would legitimize creation for their own standards of self-transformation. Second, it is blindness to the not-too-obscure proposition that one's transformation should be aimed at some revolutionary form, not some form created by the capitalist state—the working class—or by the imperialist system—the third world colony. Oppression, like oppressing, corrupts and is internalized, and if one has a choice, one chooses to be neither.

These blindnesses are themselves part of the oppression which the system builds into its oppressors. Their existence is at once proof of the need for self-transformation and a barrier to its accomplishment.

Except for the object of the imagery, which changes from the 'working class' to a combination of 'street youth' and third world revolutionary peasant, Weatherman is in the same trap, powered by the same sort of guilt, projection, and intellectualization. I like to see VIETCONG WOMEN CARRY GUNS painted on the walls of US banks; but I know that it is wrong for women of this country who want to be liberated to assume that Vietnamese women are the model. Both in the North and in the liberated zones of the South they suffer under the domination of Vietnamese men.

Finally, understanding the nature of my own oppression made it easier to see how other people in other strata might perceive theirs. Most of our images of oppression are material: the arm with a whip, the landlord with his purse and thugs, the boss with his power over work and money. Poverty. Prison. Slavery. My awareness of my own oppression came first out of the non-material side of the reality which these things represent, out of perceptions of the quality of my relationships with people around me. Our material pre-conceptions notwithstanding, this is the reality for many people.

Doug is among them. It is not the harshness of factory conditions that are the first basis for his sense of oppression. His father, school administrators, and police make their impression before foremen do.

In general, for all members of all classes, the internalization of oppressive mechanisms by large segments of the population means that oppression is deepened, its points of contact with each individual multiplied, the possible locales of politicalization increased, and the terms of first consciousness rendered more psychological, more internal. There is reason to believe that the areas in which I first perceived my own oppression—in my relations with others and with myself—may be the arenas in which many others, many members of other classes too, first perceive their oppression.

Feeling as I do that people join the movement for these

reasons, I want to argue for some changes in the way we work.

First we have to broaden our definition of oppression. We have to admit that emptiness or distortion in our relations with each other—man/woman, father/son, sisters/brothers—and with ourselves can be reason to want revolution. In our public rhetoric we must make this clear. Many more people will quickly see our relevance to their lives.

Second, equally publicly, we must admit to the complexity of oppression, that all of us, oppressors and oppressed, are remade in the state's image, and that we must change ourselves. Since this truth is now felt but not formulated by many outside the movement, the simple act of its articulation will indicate our relevance.

Third, and most important, we must consciously shape our movement so that it can reshape each of us: openly, consciously, even before the first traces of state power are ours, in the direction of socialist men and women.

I do not mean that we should abandon any of what we are doing, or that these changes can take the place of, or be completed before, changes in control of the institutions of culture and government. As we change ourselves we will be more able to seize and make use of power; if we use power with these ends in view, we will enable ourselves to move on to the next level of struggle.

These changes seem to me both momentous in their implications, and yet almost too simple to describe in practice. On the *Old Mole*, the paper on which I work, we should, and do try, to:

—Criticize each other's political and technical work. We all read all the submitted copy, and try to criticize its content and style. Each piece is assigned an editor, so that at least one other person goes over both aspects carefully. What is simple to say has been very difficult to do: it is easier just not to bring things up. When we can, it is immediately apparent that the effect is to cement relationships between ourselves, by creating trust, and to help each other change. With one act we re-create our relationships and ourselves.

—Examine our roles with each other. Since the essence of democracy is content, not form, it is impossible without constant examination of the way decisions are actually made: who brings things up, who participates, who uses what kinds of arguments. When we can do this, the same two things happen: we increase the level of honesty among ourselves, and begin to change the way each of us relates to the others.

—Measure what we do and how with standards besides efficiency. Just as far as putting out a paper goes, we might be more efficient to have some people do all the writing, and others all the typing. We share the work. In this case we prevent some from getting stuck with alienating labor. In other cases—trying to make everyone take photos, or making everyone represent us at meetings with other political groups—we broaden the range of each of our skills. In the long run this practice is preferable even on some 'efficiency' scale, for the long range task is not propaganda but a revolution, and what is needed is not a newspaper but revolutionaries.

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