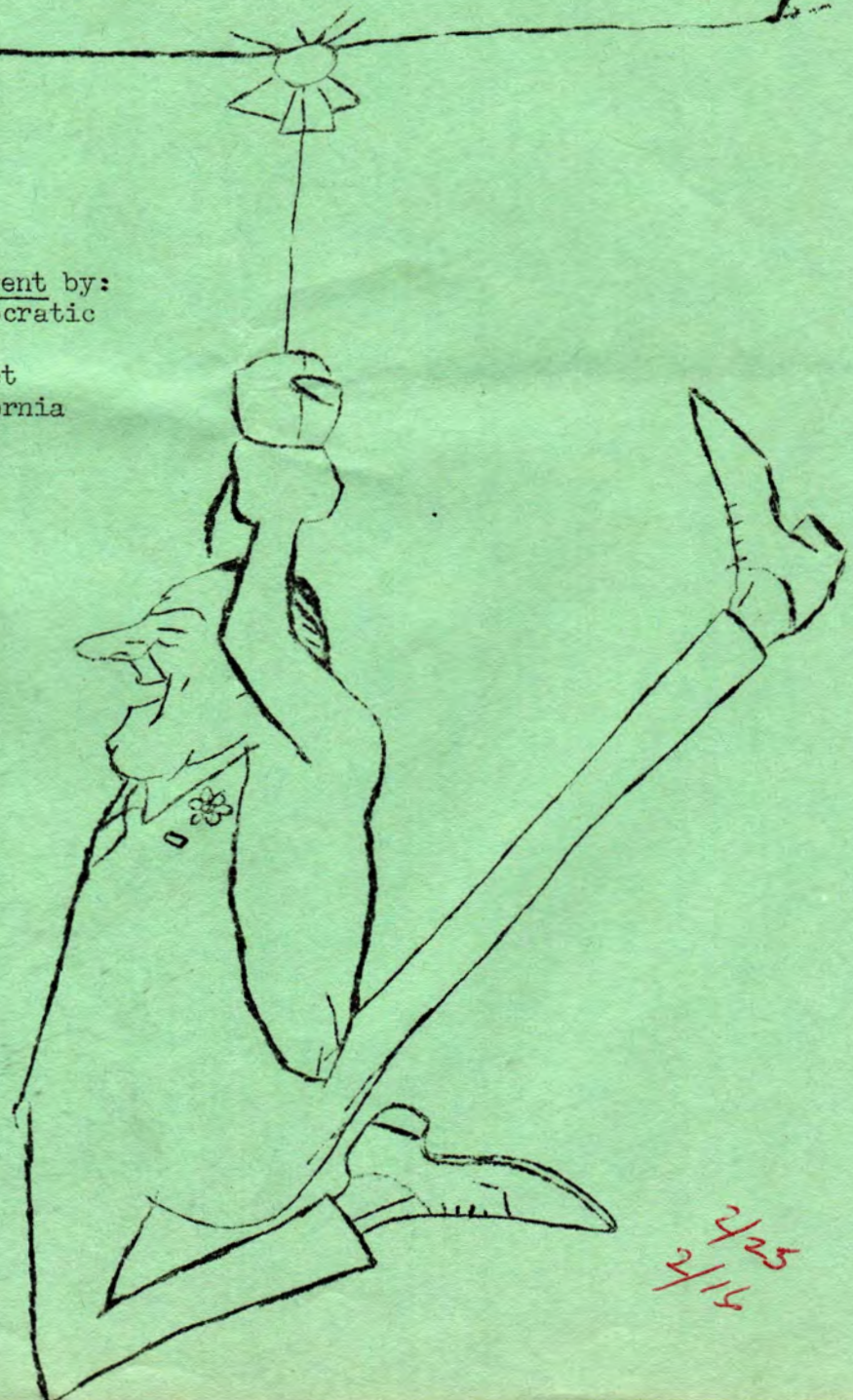


the new radicals & "PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY"

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THE NEW RADICALS AND "PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY"

For some time after the Students for a Democratic Society in 1962 coined the term "participatory democracy," it was received with more humor than respect by civil rights workers in the South. The concept has become important this past winter, for two reasons. First, a number of SDS leaders have left college and are seeking to apply the idea in Northern ghettos. Second, many members of the staff of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee have begun to look beyond voter registration to what SDS, in its Port Huron Statement, called its

two central aims: that the individual share in those social decisions determining the quality and direction of his life; that society be organized to encourage independence in men and provide the media for their common participation.

A new style of work, fusing politics and direct action into radical community organization, is emerging in both SDS and SNCC.

Those in SNCC most interested in the SDS concept as a guide to their own work in the South are mainly stationed in Mississippi. This adds significance to their sense of the future, for Mississippi has been the place where the emphasis on voter registration, dominant in SNCC since 1961, has been most fruitfully developed. Why should activists who have just finished so successfully founding the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party now find themselves questioning conventional politics as a desirable agency for social change.

One could see the new emphasis growing in Mississippi last summer. Bob Parris, personally, has always intensely distrusted leaders who prevent the growth of a capacity for responsibility in others; he is famous for sitting in the back of meetings, avoiding speeches, and when obliged to speak standing in his place and asking questions. His is the philosophy of the anarchist leader during the Spanish Civil War who, discovered at the rear end of a long lunch line and reminded of his importance to the revolution, answered, "This is the revolution." As "freedom registration" went on in Mississippi last summer, SNCC staff workers and volunteers at many places in the state began to ask questions, in the spirit of Parris' concern, about the process of political organization they were engineering.

It was necessary, for example, to hold precinct meetings of the FDP so as to duplicate fully the steps through which the regular Democratic Party selected delegates to the Atlantic City convention. Such meetings, with perhaps ten to fifty persons in attendance, were something quite different from the mass meetings at which charismatic orators harangue an audience on the eve of direct action. The Southern mass meeting is modeled on a church service. The minister, or his functional substitute, the civil rights worker, remains firmly in control despite the vocal participation of the congregation; decisions made in advance by a small group are translated to the rank and file in an emotional setting. The FDP precinct meeting appeared to offer a setting in which members of the rank and file could be drawn into the expression of their ideas, in which the anguished back-and-forth of decision making familiar to SNCC staff could become the experience of the Negro masses too, in which the distinction between rank and file and leaders could be broken down. Should not the precinct meetings be continued for other purposes? some asked. Others began to experiment with block meetings and ward meetings, conversations outside churches, in a neighbor's living room, at which thinking began about local problems, programs, candidates.

Meantime the Freedom School component of the Mississippi Summer Project offered something of a model to those working in voter registration and pondering new approaches to the political process. In the schools 2,500 Mississippi Negro youngsters miraculously found voice, in poems, in plays, in newspapers, in the honest asking of questions about their society. Early in August, each of the Freedom Schools sent delegates to a Freedom School Convention. The delegates brought with them political programs hammered out in every school in response to the challenge: If you could elect a Mayor, or a state legislator, or a Senator, what would you want him to do? By the second day of the convention the delegates were confidently rejecting adult participation in their workshops or plenary sessions. The convention, and the atmosphere of free and intimate discussion from which the convention was precipitated, left seeds in the minds of participants.

Then came Atlantic City. However successful the FDP challenge might have seemed to television viewers, for those who were there the experience was traumatic. Clearly, starkly, the result of an enormous months-and-years labor of preparation, the Negro people of Mississippi themselves brought to the attention of the nation their political exclusion. As seen by their SNCC collaborators, what they received was a piece of public relations, the offer of a deal which would not add to their power. Hardened SNCC veterans wept. Bitterness at those national civil rights personalities who urged acceptance of the compromise on grounds of political expediency - Martin Luther King, Bayard Rustin, Joseph Rauh, as well as Walter Reuther and other erstwhile allies - was indescribable. Three months later, Bob Parris told a New York audience:

They told us to be responsible because the destiny of America was in our hands. We learned that it is not in our hands. We will pursue our own goals, and let the chips fall where they may.

Surely for Bob Parris and for others in SNCC the trauma of Atlantic City brought to the surface, not only a growing awareness of the positive possibilities of participatory politics, but also certain ambiguities imbedded in the FDP challenge from the start. The challenge as a strategy had not been created by the Negro people of Mississippi, but by a handful of leaders. The strategy required the demonstration that the FDP was more loyal to the national platform of the Democratic Party, and to President Johnson personally, than the regular Democrats of the state. It led to a focus of attention on Washington which, no matter how one sought to involve local people by delegations to the Capital, enfeebled civil rights activity at the grass roots. Precisely as the FDP succeeded, it began to develop a hierarchy of its own. Seeking to escape from issueless politics and charismatic leaders, the FDP in its own work emphasized personalities - that is, the seating of individual challengers - rather than program. In each of these ways the institutional thrust of the FDP as it developed ran counter to the new notions about people and politics which the summer had also produced.

The old politics and the new confronted each other once again in Selma. SNCC was the first civil rights group on the ground there. This winter, in step with new thinking in the organization, it began to develop ward meetings and a youth group in which local Negroes could learn to manage their own destinies. Then, by agreement with SNCC but nonetheless traumatically for the SNCC workers in Selma, Dr. King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference moved in. SCLC's focus was the passage of national legislation, not the political maturing of persons in the Alabama Black Belt. Ward meetings, stimulated at first by the new activity, stopped as the pattern of demonstration intensified and each evening had its mass meeting as each morn-

ing had its march. SNCC had seen that pattern before, notably in Albany, Ga., where SNCC workers Charles Sherrod and Cordell Reagan had been displaced by Dr. King and his assistants and the upshot, for the people of Albany had been disillusion, a great weight of court costs, and bitterness on the part of local whites.

Concerned that the obstacles to voting be torn down but concerned also that institutional progress go hand-in-hand with a quickening of the people's capacity for self-direction, SNCC could only experience Selma with mixed feelings and considerable frustration. The "march" of March 9, when Dr. King led people to a confrontation he knew would not occur and then accused the police of bad faith for exposing his hypocrisy, must have seemed to those in SNCC a symbolic summation of much that had gone before.

The concern to involve plain people in the decisions which affect their lives crops out elsewhere in SNCC's activity this winter. An educational conference in Mississippi in November threw away a prepared agenda to encourage open-ended discussion among the participants. A fear, muted last summer, lest masses of white volunteers inhibit Southern Negroes from developing their own leaders, led to scaling down the Black Belt project planned for 1965. Meeting in Atlanta in February, SNCC planned instead to organize "peoples' conferences" in states of the Deep South, at which new Freedom Democratic parties, directed from the beginning by local leaders, could take root.

Also in February 1965, indigenous leaders drawn from SDS ghetto projects in the North met at Cleveland with some Negroes activated by SNCC work in the South. In SDS as in SNCC, workers seek to apply the participatory philosophy to their own organizations, asking that central offices be abolished, leaders rotated, and executive committees curbed by general staff meetings. In both groups, the elite of the New Left, the theory and practice of participatory democracy grow.

What is the strategy of social change implicit in the concept of participatory democracy? What is its reaction to older philosophies of the Left: socialism, non-violence, anarchism?

One aspect of participatory democracy is the idea of parallel structures. The FDP is a parallel political party, prompted by the conclusion that registration of Negroes in the regular Democratic party of Mississippi is presently impossible. Freedom Schools are parallel schools, although delegates to the Freedom School Convention decided they would return to the public schools and seek to transform them rather than continue into the winter a parallel school system. In the North, neighborhood unions organized by SDS represent parallel antipoverty agencies, challenging the legitimacy of the top-down middle-class "community organizations" sponsored by urban renewal and antipoverty administrators.

The intent of these structures is still unclear, even to those involved in organizing them. There is a spectrum of possibilities. At one end of the spectrum is the concept of using parallel institutions to transform their Establishment counterparts. Thus it would follow that when Mississippi Negroes can register and vote, the FDP would wither and fade away. At the spectrum's other end is the conviction that in an America whose Establishment is inherently and inevitably hostile, existing institutions cannot be transformed, participation will always mean co-optation and merely token successes, hence parallel institutions must survive and grow into an anti-Establishment network, a new society.

For the moment participatory democracy cherishes the practice of parallelism as a way of saying No to organized America, and of initiating the unorganized into the experience of self-government. The SNCC or SDS worker does not build a parallel institution to impose an ideology on it. He views himself as a catalyst, helping to create an environment which will help the local people to decide what they want. Recognizing himself as a part of society's sickness, the organizer inclines to regard the unorganized poor as purer than himself. There is an unstated assumption that the poor, when they find voice, will produce a truer, sounder radicalism than any which alienated intellectuals might prescribe. In the meantime, the very existence of the parallel institution is felt to be a healthier and more genuine experience than any available alternative. It seems better to sit in the back of the room in silent protest against the bureaucrats up front than to seek to elect a man to join the executive committee.

In form, parallelism suggests a kinship between participatory democracy and Trotsky's conception of the Soviets as a "dual power," or Gandhi's concern to preserve the Indian village Community. But thus far the new movement does not feel itself a part of either the Marxist or anarcho-pacifist traditions. What is most clear at the moment is the call reminiscent of the Radical Reformation to "come out of Babylon." "Let the teacher leave the university and teach in the Freedom Schools; let the reporter quit his job on a metropolitan daily and start a community newspaper; generally, let the intellectual make insurgency a full-time rather than a part-time occupation. As the Russian radical movement grew from Tolstoyism and the Narodnik's concern to dress simply, speak truth, and "go to the people," so participatory democracy at this point speaks most clearly to the middle-class man, daring him to forsake powerlessness and act.

I for one believe that participatory democracy, even thus vaguely conceived, offers a growing point far more alive than conventional coalition politics. At the same time, it is incumbent upon new radicals to explain how they propose to answer the problems which conventional politics purports to solve. How will participatory democracy feed and clothe the poor, as well as stimulate and involve them? If voting is a snare and a delusion, what is not? Unless in time these questions can be answered, participatory democracy could become a subtle, even if heroic, form of self-indulgence.

Employment appears to be the Achilles heel of parallelism. From time to time, SNCC workers have sought to organize producers and consumers cooperatives, and the leather-working business in Haywood and Fayette counties, Tennessee, has had considerable success. But one cannot imagine such economic beginnings becoming, like the free cities of the Middle Ages, the "germ of a new society within the womb of the old." In Mississippi the movement has hardly been able to provide for Negroes fired as a result of civil rights machinery and the displacement of farm labor; and what provision there has been, has come, not through the creation of a new economic base, but from charity.

It would seem, therefore, that in the area of economics participatory democracy cannot provide a full alternative to established institutions except by capturing and transforming them. By pressure it can democratize the distribution of income, as SDS does in boring-from-below against antipoverty programs; as SNCC does in demanding the participation of Negroes in local committees sponsored by the Department of Agriculture. Perhaps radical community organizers can use symbolic direct action to dramatize the need for that massive public works program which the March on Washington called for (and then forgot). But can we not agree that participatory democracy, understood as a movement building new institutions side-by-side with the old, cannot provide bread and land? Failure to face this problem realistically will re-

suit in the poor turning for help to those who can provide it at least in part, and the cooptation of protest movements by the Establishment.

A similar perspective is suggested by turning to the theorists of existential radicalism in other countries. Let us use the term "socialism" to designate the movement for a planned publicly-owned economy which, in Europe as America, preceded the newer radicalism of "participatory democracy." If one examines carefully the formulations of the latter tendency in Europe (and I believe much the same thing would appear from a scrutiny of Africa), one finds it articulated as a partner in dialogue with socialism, as a humane affirmation constantly necessary to correct (but not to entirely supplant) bureaucratic institutions and political action. Thus in Silone's Bread and Wine, the protagonist, like Thoreau, asserts that the social action needed above all is individual lives displaying morality and truth. But Silone adds:

He had not forgotten that the social question is not a moral one and is not resolved by purely moral means. He knew that in the last resort the relations established between men are dictated by necessity and not by good will or bad. Moral preaching did not suffice to change them. But there came a moment when certain social relations revealed themselves as outworn and harmful. Morality then condemned what had already been condemned by history.

This formulation which has not yet created an impassable gulf between itself and Marxism could be rendered, more woodenly to be sure, as an assertion that when "objective" conditions are "ripe" for change, the "subjective factor" becomes all important.

To much the same effect, Martin Buber in Paths in Utopia takes public ownership as a matter of course, arguing that the crucial question is: "what sort of Socialism is it to be?" The relation between centralization and decentralization, between bureaucracy and community is, says Buber,

a problem which cannot be approached in principle, but, like everything to do with the relationship between idea and reality, only with great spiritual tact, with the constant and tireless weighing and measuring of the right proportion between them.

This is to say of popular participation much what Howard Zinn has insisted regarding nonviolence, that to ignore its limitations invites hypocrisy and, ultimately, a tendency for it to turn into its opposite.

Even Camus - so far as I can judge the strongest intellectual influence on the thinking of Bob Parris - does not quite turn his back on the Marxist "logic of history." Rather, he writes in "Neither Victims Nor Executioners":

Since these forces are working themselves out and since it is inevitable that they continue to do so, there is no reason why some of us should not take on the job of keeping alive through the apocalyptic historical vista that stretches before us, a modest thoughtfulness which, without pretending to solve everything, will constantly be prepared to give some human meaning to everyday life.

Others of us, then, will continue to address ourselves to structural changes, to

socialism. In the words of the Port Huron Statement, the founding document of SDS, "a truly 'public sector' must be established," and the new left should include socialists "for their sense of thoroughgoing reforms in the system."

In itself, however, this formulation papers over a difference rather than resolving it. What could be more sterile than a movement with two predefined wings, a left one and a right one (we could argue endlessly about which was which)? If "some of us" were committed to one traditional concept and others of us to another, would it not be another version of coalition politics, frustrating and dead?

Some common ground, some underlying vision needs to be articulated which genuinely unites socialism and "participatory democracy," which challenges each to transcend itself. Here one strikes out into unexplored territory which can only be adequately clarified by experience. A helpful starting point may be the concept of "community." "Politics," affirms the Port Huron Statement, "has the function of bringing people out of isolation and into community." And A. J. Muste writes, correctly I think, of the civil rights movement:

No one can have a fairly close contact with the civil rights movement and the people in it, including the young people, without feeling that in spite of all contrary appearances and even realities in the movement, deep near its center is this aspiration for a blessed community and the faith that this is what they are working for and already in a sense realizing now.

Community was what one Freedom School teacher meant who wrote to me: "The summer project presented itself to us as a potentially lifeendangering situation, and so we all worked our fears out together, which gave coherence to our group. We had temporarily put aside our human fears and were accepting a responsibility which was ours and we were doing it together."

Lest this seem maudlin utopianism, let us begin with the most hard-headed meaning of community to a new radical movement, the political. How can one build a political campaign, or a political party, without sacrificing the shared intimacy experienced in a direct action "project"? If it be true that both peace and civil rights activists must turn toward politics to cope with the economic problems which confront their movements, can it be done without losing the spiritual exaltation of the direct action years?

I think a clue here is to begin to think of politics as administration. Political representation was devised as a mechanism to obtain consent for taxation. It is an institutional process peculiarly appropriate to an economy in which production is in private hands, and the state takes money from the citizen to spend it on a separate category of public activities. In a communal economy - by which I simply mean an economy wherein men share the fruits of their labor in the spirit of a family - many functions, now centralized in private hands, would be centralized in the hands of the government; but also, many functions now locally privatized would at once become neighborly responsibilities. Consider urban renewal. If land were publicly owned and building a public function, slum clearance would really become a process in which the people of a site participated at each stage. Nation and city-wide considerations would enter in, of course: but much that now happens in public and private offices on upper floors could then be left to the collective discretion of neighborhood meetings.

In centering its attention on grass roots participation in urban renewal and anti-poverty programs, rather than on running candidates, SDS appears instinctively to recognize the communal opportunities of public economic administration. As more and more candidates begin to run for public office on a movement platform, so also new forms of direct action will be improvised to democratize administration; and as regional and national coordination takes form in the one area, so will it in the other, too. Thus entrance into politics need not mean an abandonment of direct action demonstration, nor of its spirit.

The local project can grow from protest into administration; if necessary it could also be the building block for resistance to more extreme forms of repression, for protest against Fascism. Like a biological cell it can take many forms, responding in a variety of appropriate ways to alternate stimuli from the environment.

But for this to be so it becomes necessary to think of a project from the beginning, not merely as a tool for social change, but as a community. The community is made up both of people from the neighborhood and of staff persons who, on a long-term basis, so far as they can become part of the neighborhood. The spirit of community, as opposed to an organization, is not, "we are together to accomplish this or that end," but, "we are together to face together whatever life brings.

The experience of Utopian or "intentional" communities suggests certain ground rules which all groups seeking to live as brothers should consider. One is: It is important to be honest with each other, to carry grievances directly to those concerned rather than to third parties. Another is: The spiritual unity of the group is more important than any external accomplishment, and time must be taken to discover and restore that unity even at the cost of short-run tangible failures.

If indeed, as Marxism affirms, mankind will one day enter a realm of freedom that will permit men to guide their behavior by more humane and immediate criteria than the minimum and maximum demands of political programs, the work of transition can begin now. The need for structural change (socialism) should neither be ignored nor overemphasized. Provided we do not deceive ourselves as to the bleakness of our society's prospects for hopeful change or the catastrophic dangers of nuclear war and domestic totalitarianism, perhaps it is not unreasonable to look for a more firm and definite strategy to develop as the collective experience of the movement unfolds.

In sum, then, participatory democracy seems to be driving toward the "live-in," the building of a brotherly way of life even in the jaws of Leviathan. It is conscientious objection not just to war, but to the whole fabric of a dehumanized society. It is civil disobedience not bust by individuals, but, hopefully, by broad masses of alienated Americans. Like the conscientious objector, however, the participatory democrat has unfinished business with the question: Is what's intended a moral gesture only, or a determined attempt to transform the American power structure?