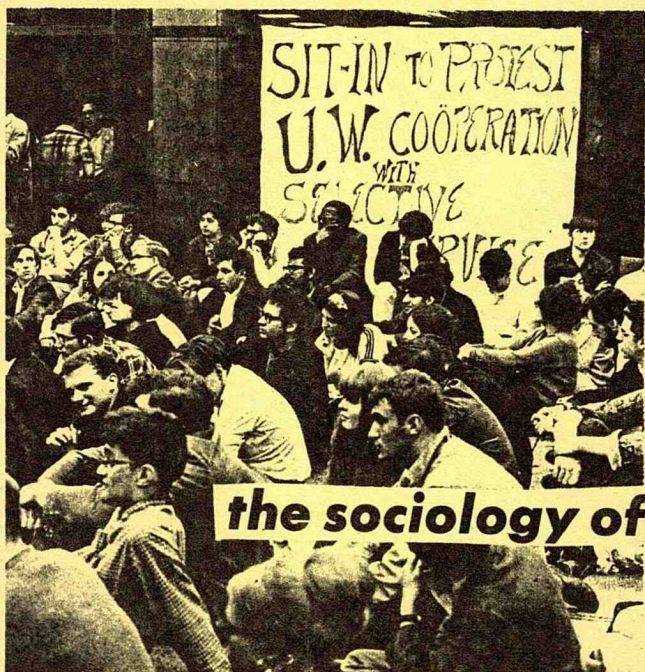


ALIENATION or PARTICIPATION:



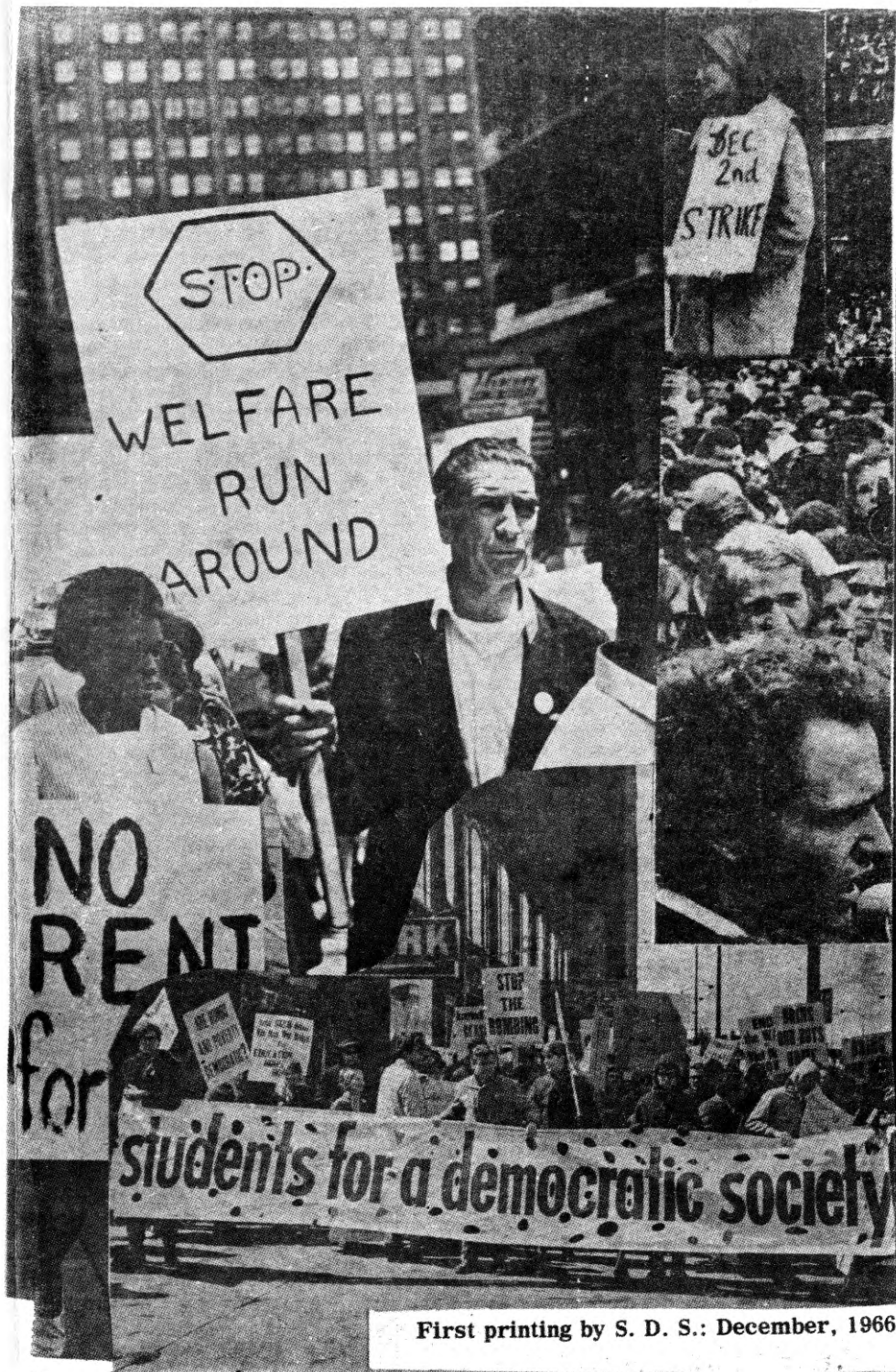
the sociology of

PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY



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I.

The history of industrialized, urbanized society is the history of man's increasing alienation from decision-making processes. As society has moved from village life to city, from closely-integrated primary groups in which one's relationship to all aspects of life was well-understood and well-regulated to a life in which individuals are no longer the captives of tradition, freedom has become possible. Yet freedom from tradition has not become freedom to decide the course of one's life, because modern life is organized, bureaucratic, increasingly centralized. The institutions which have freed Western Man from "the idiocy of rural life" at the same time have subjected him to organizational structures farther and farther removed from his immediate control. The factory, the school, government, religion, the media and even the arts are more and more subject to bureaucratic processes, and less and less open to communication from, much less, control by, those who work in them and are subject to them, except on the highest levels of the "power structure."

This dismal phenomenon has resulted in a new ideology, that of "alienation;" the concept has even replaced the older notion of class-struggle, and is at once evidence of wide-spread social frustration in terms of life's condition for many, especially intellectuals who work in bureaucracies, and a new rallying cry for those who used to look to working-class revolution as a liberating force in world affairs. At the same time that alienation has become the slogan of the trapped functionary, the limitations of democracy have been vividly portrayed -- in contemporary affairs, by the defeat of socialist revolutionism in the Soviet Union and Cuba, and in intellectual circles by the dismal writings of social scientists who talk of "the iron law of oligarchy," and the "organizational paradox." For a variety of reasons having to do with the nature of bureaucracy, it has come popularly to be accepted that some kinds of oligarchy (that is, a separation between leaders and the rank-and-file, between authorities that "know" and followers that "don't know", between exploiters and the exploited) are almost inevitable in all political systems. This view has been expressed by such well-known writers as Pareto, Mosca, Michels, Weber, Lasswell, Selznick, Lipset, and of course by various critics of Soviet developments such as Burnham, Djilas, Shachtman, and countless lesser-known observers. Such authors have frequently differed as to whether this trend is good or bad, inevitable or somewhat controllable by "countervailing powers," but the trend has been either trumpeted or bemoaned by all -- from Mosca to Burnham, from Kropotkin to Trotsky and Dwight Macdonald. 1

Today, alienation has become a symbolic enemy from which people want to be liberated. Participation, control over decisions that affect one's day-to-day activities, a demand that one be fulfilled, that work and play be relevant to one's sense of worth, are increasingly popular demands. This is so especially in the student generation, among those who find themselves on the road to relative financial success in large

bureaucratic organizations which somehow do not appear satisfying or worthwhile, within a society which mouths the slogans of democracy and freedom only to muzzle any real expressions of freedom either here or abroad. To become servants in such organizational life is hardly consistent with what life is or should be about, within the potentials created by 20th Century civilization.

The result is that anarchism, in the form of demands to control life at the immediate level, where control is relevant, is on the rise.

II.

Man's history of separation from power over his personal destiny is accompanied by his history of struggle to become free to make his decisions. The "new left" student movement is part of that continuous struggle, and "participatory democracy" is the conceptual focus of this concern. The remainder of this paper will attempt to describe the nature, historical antecedents, and problems of "P.D." as a viable "alternative to alienation" and as a challenge to the intellectual pessimism of those who see democracy as inevitably doomed to the iron law of oligarchy.

Today, four segments of the student movement share the "P.D." approach, and provide the data on which this discussion is largely based: The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the Canadian Student Union for Peace Action (SUPA), and the "free university movement." None, however, perfectly illustrate "P.D." in practice, and, of course, the organizations differ in many other respects.

The idea of "P.D." grew up largely in response to pragmatic, in-the-field problems confronted by SNCC and SDS during various organizing campaigns. Educational problems faced by Northern white volunteers in Mississippi's Freedom Schools in the summer of 1964 particularly helped to focus attention on the problem of students' reactions to authority figures, to whom they reacted in a hostile and negative manner, in keeping with their own life experiences. The failure of welfare agencies in the North to organize the poor through traditional agency practices also brought home the fact that new approaches were needed, as did the failure of slum public education. The increasing frustration of some college students with the mass-production nature of information-receiving, which passes for education in many institutions of higher learning, further augmented an experimental atmosphere covering the entire range of authority-dependency relationships—everything from management-worker to bureaucrat-client, to teacher-student and even parent-adolescent within the last few years. It should also be said that certain of the more pioneering efforts of the government's anti-poverty programs at one point showed receptivity to some new ideas, although that phase seems to be passe now. The movement's response was at once a technique and a philosophy of action.

Little of theoretical interest has been written about "P.D." Partly this is a problem of energies being applied to other issues, and partly it is due to a basic suspicion of theory in the first place within the student movement. But a failure to grapple with theory and history of the movement can cripple efforts to deal realistically with future problems; this essay is in part designed to begin to do such grappling, and stimulate thinking within the movement. A relevant charge, for example, has been that "P.D." has never been adequately defined, despite all the talk about it. This I shall attempt to deal with at once.

"P.D." involves the notion (a) that people are inherently capable of understanding their problems and expressing themselves about these problems and their solutions, if given a social context in which freedom of expression is possible, that is, a situation in which one is free of personal and political hang-ups; (b) that no real solutions to

problems are possible without the fullest participation of the people in these solutions, nor without the development of freedom from dependency on authorities and experts; and (c) for community-organizing types of groups, that cultural groups which differ in their value systems from the dominant culture cannot be organized unless a context of free expression is created; and (d) for education-oriented groups, that real education (as distinct from learning information only) cannot take place for anyone unless a situation is created in which the student is able to evaluate what goes on around him critically, without being hung-up on the judgements and values of persons in an authority relationship to him. Finally, of course, "P.D." is a way of functioning in groups so that those ideas are realized, for the purpose of helping to create a society in which everyone will participate in decisions concerning his everyday and long-range affairs to his fullest potential. The assumption is that the good society is one in which people will want to try to function to their fullest potential, and that, conversely, a society cannot be good unless this happens. Further, we must sow the seeds of the good society within the context of the bad, particularly within its movements for change, because the end is implied in the means, and a democratic society cannot be created by non-democratic agents of change. By the same token, the precise nature of the good society has to be determined by this same democratic process, which precludes our attempting to blueprint the future.

In practice, then, "P.D." involves such techniques as running meetings without agendas or presiding officers (or, at worst, rotating presiding officers); allowing officers minimal decision-making powers away from the general meeting; running meetings by consensus or "sense-of-the-meeting" decision-making; refusing to limit discussion or debate; letting as many executive-administrative decisions flow from the whole body as possible, without delegation of responsibilities to agents or committees; and encouraging the body to act immediately on decisions taken, that is, dropping the artificial division between meeting and non-meeting so that in the extreme the meeting is a community and the community a virtually constant meeting. "P.D.'s" basic effort is, therefore, to approach direct democracy as nearly as possible, and to discourage the development of a leader-follower dichotomy.

The basic approach of "P.D." is neither new nor unique. Among other approaches which share many of the same assumptions, have been these (and in each case the literature has much to contribute to the present movement): (1) small group sociology, which has studied the effects of democratic and non-democratic procedures on people and on getting tasks done, for a long time. (2) the psychological tradition of learning theory and the educationalist tradition of John Dewey, with their emphases on the importance of motivation, "readiness" to learn, and learning-by-doing. (3) the psychiatric tradition, especially existential and Rogerian therapy, which points up the importance of developing the freedom to make independent decisions in life; (4) the political traditions of anarchism, libertarian socialism, and left socialism, particularly in terms of the faith that working people have the ability to make decisions about the workplace (related to the concept of soviets and workers' control), and that socialism cannot be achieved from above; (5) Quaker and Gandhian non-violence, which assumes that all members of a group are worth hearing, that none should be overridden or beaten down, hence the practice of running meetings and other gatherings by means of a consensus rather than a parliamentary system.

In particular, (especially for those concerned with de-alienating the educational experience, say, at the college level) attention should be drawn to the work of Carl Rogers and his colleagues in psychology. This has assumed various labels closely

parallel to "P.D.": client-centered therapy, worker-centered management, student-centered teaching, and, more broadly, group-centered leadership, which is precisely what "P.D." is. Descriptions of the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Schools, and some 'free university' experiments, could be interchanged with those of Rogerian education, and perhaps a brief description of student-centered teaching might be of value to members of the student movement, situated as they are in an educational, or perhaps pseudo-educational context.

Student-centered teaching is designed to overcome the "authority hang-up" which interferes with both culturally-different and culturally-similar groups' learning to deal with themselves, each other, and the world around them realistically, critically, and in ways that will solve their problems as they perceive them. It is a technique that maximizes motivation to learn, improvement of self-image or self-esteem, more objective thinking, and the accomplishment of tasks seen as worthwhile by the class, by means of giving power to the class as a group, hence a de-alienating experience. The agenda for the class is set by the whole group, and not by the teacher. The class is unstructured by the teacher, who acts primarily as a resource person whose job is to help the group develop as a group. The teacher limits his participation, especially at the outset, in order to overcome the "authority hang-up." The teacher tries to be as sympathetic, open, and helpful as possible, and to believe in the worth of each individual. In short, student-centered teaching is self-determination in the educational setting, "P.D." in the classroom, and a powerful tool for subverting the "multi-versity's" emphasis on creating servicerment for the Establishment.

Another closely-related phenomenon which can contribute significantly to practitioners of "P.D." is the so-called "T-Group," or training group, an idea developed by the National Training Laboratories, a subsidiary of the National Education Association. The definition of a T-Group will illustrate why it is so closely related to "P.D.": "A T-Group is a relatively unstructured group in which individuals participate as learners. The date for learning... are the transactions among members, their own behavior in the group, as they struggle to create a productive and viable organization, a miniature society;" and again, "Democracy stresses the potential ability of people collaboratively to define and solve the problems they encounter in trying to live and work together. It posits that common problems cannot be well solved without the participation of those affected by the solution . . . (and) assumes a procedure of consensual validation as the final arbiter of the rightness of any collective judgement or arrangement . . . The democratic principle of 'consensus' assumes that group agreements can be wrong . . ."5 The "Soul Sessions" of a few years ago were a related phenomenon, as is the group therapy—but the emphasis of the T-Group is on the "here-and-now," on the group as it is and is becoming, rather than on the past or the unconscious. The T-Group (also called "sensitivity training"), unlike group therapy, furthermore makes no assumptions about the mental health of the participants.

The T, Rogerian, or "P.D."-type group, then, is a situation in which the dynamics of the group process help the participants learn more about themselves, about others (hence helping to break down stereotyped thinking), about relationships between people, and about the wider world, by means of sharing the experiences all bring to the group, and the experiences the group confronts, say, in social action. The nature of the process creates, optimally, a situation in which many of the less verbal gain the confidence to speak out, and the more verbal learn to listen. The lack of structured leadership (involving, sometimes, the conscious refusal of an assigned leader or trainer to become the authority that the group expects him to be) forces participants to think for themselves, become more critical, engage in direct decision-making, and thus become more self-determining and less alienated.

III.

Yet "P.D." is no panacea, no perfect formula for solving the crisis of the alienated in a mass society. To behave as if it were, to act as if all circumstances were equally amenable to solution by this method, would be to throw out valuable tools which can lead to better "P.D.", protected against abuse and assault by those who knowingly or unknowingly undermine it. It is perhaps necessary to look at "P.D." as a utopia, in the sense that it is not completely achievable, given various sociological and psychological limitations, but rather achievable in steps only, and certainly valuable as a tool in dealing with particular problems such as education, industrial democracy, organizing the poor, and giving people a strategy for self-determination. Qualified by this statement, then, what are some of the urgent problems to which advocates of "P.D." must address themselves?

Two broad problem areas are perhaps most critical: that involving the nature and limitations of small groups versus larger groups; and that involving the nature and problems of all organizations, democratic or bureaucratic alike (such as the problems discussed by the "iron lawyers" mentioned above). The first is a set of problems involving interpersonal relations; and second, impersonal, structural relationships (which involve people, of course).

A number of people gathered together in one place is not necessarily a group. The development of group consciousness and morale, including a set of norms about the way things are done in a group, and including a climate of acceptance for dissenting views, and for the non-verbal participant, takes time. The larger the number of people, the longer a time it takes, especially in a democratic group, because for democracy really to work we have already said we must have maximum participation, and the development of individual potential to contribute. We must maximize interaction and communication, to create what is in some senses a family, a fraternity in the true sense of that word. This cannot be done at one meeting. Furthermore, there are limits to the number of people that can effectively work as a democratic decision-making group. When we run over 25 to 30, there are limits to how much interaction there can be, regardless of how long the group works together. It is, therefore, clear that a one-shot mass meeting cannot develop a real spirit of "P.D.", not even if the leader of the meeting refuses to lead and there is a lot of free discussion. In a context involving short time and/or a lot of people, one does not become free of authority hang-ups. People with reputations are listened to in a different way than people who are unknown.

Under such circumstances, that is, when "group-ness" has not developed, the dissenter fears to speak out. First of all, if it is a consensus group, he will not like to block action and thereby risk unpopularity, especially when leaders with reputations are for an action. Or, in the attempt to maximize his own popularity and carry the decision (rather than educate a few, but lose), he will tend to become a demagogue. In this fashion a consensus procedure sometimes encourages demagoguery and non-democratic actions. In many ways, the procedural safeguards of a parliamentary system insure the rights of the dissenter, and promote the idea of speaking to educate (rather than to sway) much better than a "sense of the meeting" system.

In large groups, then, especially in the short run, hang-ups about authority are encouraged. Authoritarian types tend to dominate, because the pay-off for demagoguery is higher. Real democracy is not possible in such an atmosphere. This is the critical distinction between participatory and *plebiscitary* democracy. Ten thousand people waving their rifles and shouting "yes" is not "P.D."

Proponents of "P.D." thus must confront this issue: in large-scale society, how much decentralization will be possible and necessary to promote real democracy? Centralization and efficiency are not necessarily linked--nor are democracy and inefficiency. Yet in a modern nation tasks must be delegated. Direct participation is not always possible. The concrete problem of where to draw the line has still to be faced.

In addition, "P.D." groups share certain problems with all other groups that are created to carry out tasks in some organized way. As an organization comes to life, paradoxes are born which frequently abort the effort; and even when life goes on, contradictions become inherent in an organization's career.

For example: say an organization is created to further democracy. It involves cooperation among members. Yet all cooperation involves, also, delegation of some tasks so that there is a distinction between initiators of tasks, and those who carry them out. The former and the latter frequently have different sets of priorities. Agents learn skills that the others do not possess, and confront situations which the others have not foreseen, but which must be dealt with. Particularly if the organization is engaged in conflict, the tendency is strong for those with skills to maintain themselves in power, due to the "emergency" at hand.

Another paradox is that between the democratic content of a group, and the progress of the group towards a measure of power in the community. Too much discussion, and we stop moving; too little, and we are no longer what we were. To achieve a goal, we need unity, but to achieve unity it sometimes becomes necessary to compromise, to gloss over some very important issues--also when we make alliances. Which shall it be?

All formal organizations, no matter how democratically conceived, develop informal patterns based on prestige, friendships, cliques, personalities, and other subjective factors such as race and sex. These are all part of the paradox: to some degree they all help to undermine the democratic processes of the organization. In democratic organizations, particularly those that are set up to help create a better society, the ends are very much involved with the means--and organizational short-cuts can be dangerous. But organizations are composed of people, and people are never as pure as the goals for which the organization was created. 6

To put the matter in its harshest terms, he who says organization implies oligarchy, in much the same way that he who negotiates also must betray. There is no way out of this. It is the socialist's equivalent of original sin, and it must be lived with, acknowledged, confronted if we are to survive as a democratic movement.

In conclusion: "P.D." is a very positive synthesis of many earlier ideas concerning the need to involve people in decisions concerning their own destinies. The revulsion on the part of many people towards the increasing rate of bureaucratization of the modern world will likely lead to more experimentation, to the development of many more alternatives to alienation, of which direct decision-making is only one. The development of dual or parallel institutions, such as the "free universities" will probably involve experiments of the "P.D." kind, and in turn their "graduates" will take this concern into other institutions of our society. Yet there are serious problems connected with the practice of "P.D.". If we confront them honestly we shall progress.

Note:

This essay is based on a paper first read at the 1965 Meetings of the Pennsylvania Sociological Society. Another version was published in the Canadian magazine *Our Generation*, May, 1966. It was rewritten for S.D.S.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Dwight Macdonald, *The Root Is Man*, a collection taken from *Politics* magazine, remains an outstanding contribution to this kind of discussion.
2. See, for example, Hare, Borgatta and Bales (eds.), *Small Groups*, and other works of this kind.
3. Hal Draper's cogent "The Two Souls of Socialism," *New Politics*, v. 5, no. 1, is an essential statement on this.
4. Compare Carl Rogers, *On Becoming A Person*, ch. 15, with Florence Howe, "Mississippi's Freedom Schools: The Politics of Education," *Harvard Ed. Review*, Spring, 1965.
5. Bradford, Gibb and Benne (eds.), *T-Group Theory and Laboratory Method*, pp. 1, 34.
6. Two good sources (anthologies) on this are Merton's *Reader in Bureaucracy* and Etzioni's *Complex Organizations*.