

I SUPPOSE YOU'RE WONDERING WHY I'VE CALLED YOU ALL THESE "GENTLEMEN" . . .

According to the SDS analysis the U.S. functions in such a way that democracy is a sham, freedom and equality are non-existent. The analysis deals with the machinations of the system on two levels. On the structural level we blow apart the liberal concept of pluralism and introduce the idea of an economic/political/social superstructure (ie. the ruling class) which, in fact, determines the course of the U.S. and the American people on the international, national, state and local levels. This superstructure also affects decision-making on the individual level by manipulating people through the major institutions and the media so that they internalize the values which perpetuate the status quo (ie. false consciousness). Individual decisions are extremely rare in this country yet people sustain a belief in their individual freedom by making choices out of a limited range of alternatives. The family, educational, legal (etc.) structure, reinforced by mass propagandization, generates the type of unquestioning consciousness which allows illegitimate authority to dominate every aspect of American life (from work, to sex, to leisure, to political views).

We reject this system and the false consciousness which reinforces it. We are struggling for liberation from both physical and psychological oppression for all people. We know, however, that it is not enough to struggle against oppression; we must at the same time conceptualize a form of political economy and a way of life which incorporate freedom from oppression. On the economic level we want decentralized socialism. On the governmental level we want decentralized democracy. On the individual level we want the freedom of self-determination, with the stipulation that the direction be non-exploitative. Our goals are good. Whether or not they are grossly idealistic and unrealizable remains to be determined. We do not know that the system we advocate will be functionally operative.

Shouldn't we be finding out?

SDS as an organization reflects the tragic irony which characterizes the radical movement as a whole. Our group is predicated on a revolutionary consciousness; we share common and revolutionary objectives. IN, IN THEORY we are revolutionary both in origin and end. But operationally we are bourgeois as hell, falling into all the traps (both structural and individual) of the system we united to struggle against.

We advocate decentralized democracy -- does it work in SDS? We saw it failing last quarter so we immediately jumped on the ameliorative measure of representative democracy: hence, the troika and representatives from the collectives. While criticizing the American people for not seeking out the fundamental source of the problems in this country (ie. corporate capitalism), we hypocritically glossed over and refused to seek out the source of the problems in SDS. I would suggest the possibility that SDS has its own "ruling class". Keeping in mind Fred's criticism of radicals who speak of the ruling class in conspiratorial terms, I am hesitant to try to analyze the motives of the SDS Establishment. Neither do I feel that this group-behind-the-group is a concrete and inflexible body; the parallel with the American ruling class extends to the inclusion of new people into the leadership. Also, a certain amount of pluralism exists within this smaller group; decision-making is not monolithic in origin but rather develops from a number of minor controversies within that group.

On the other side of the coin is what Willard Wyman has called "the silent majority of SDS." This larger group is not without power or influence, just as the American voters retain the nominal power of the vote. They also have the power to raise issues and to influence decision-making. Generally, however, they will accede to most suggestions presented by the "leaders"; only in extreme cases will group opposition be raised.

Beyond the structural factors (ie. who calls the meetings, determines the agenda, selects the chairman, redirects discussion away from opposing issues, etc.) there is a more subtle explanation for the perpetuation of this inequalitarian system. That is, the dominance/submission roles have been internalized to the extent that the "leaders" may not know that they are ruling the group and the silent majority may be wholly unaware that they are being led. Perhaps few people in SDS ever question the reality of the democratic and collective principles SDS claims to be built on.

The false consciousness of SDS members is extremely complex -- very subtle and hard to analyze. But from my own position I can say that the dynamics of an SDS meeting are (to grossly understate the issue) personally intimidating. I used to think that my being shouted down when I raised questions or posed suggestions for issues and actions was a function of male supremacy. But men are shouted down, too, and men form a large block of the silent majority. I have also noticed that many of the people who are consistently silent at general meetings are very vocal in smaller groups; they have a much better political understanding, radical analysis, and creative thinking than is ever apparent in meetings. Why then do these people not speak up in meetings? Are they in reality never opposed to the decisions which are made at meetings? Not true. I've talked with too many members who are unhappy with the decisions and who are perfectly able to substantiate their opposition to me afterwards (and even during meetings).

Speaking for myself (Mao might have said that self-criticism is a good thing), I have often refrained from expressing my views at meetings, partly out of frustration from previous attempts, partly because of lack of opportunity (ie. structural reasons), and partly (this is the most serious) out of fear that my statement will not be well-received. My hang-up. Unfortunately I think it may be the hang-up of a lot of people in SDS. Speaking at a meeting is like laying your soul on the table for everyone to dissect. If you make a suggestion you have to be ready to stand up under attack and be able to fit the suggestion into an overall analysis and justify it down the line. You take the risk of being called stupid or (worse) a liberal! You risk making enemies because your suggestion may contain an inherent criticism of another person's proposal which he may interpret as a personal attack. Then are we going to realize that we are political, but our politics are not the totality of us?

As I see it, the basic outcome of SDS meetings is to reinforce the hang-ups which we, as radicals, should be working to overcome. For the silent majority this means other-directedness, achievement-orientation, and passive submission to authority with a corresponding loss of faith in our own capabilities. (For the dominant members the reinforcement is equally insidious, for it prevents them, too, from developing the ability to work collectively.) How often I have heard the statement, "if Fred Cohen didn't dominate meetings, SDS would have folded a long time ago." That's bullshit. At least I hope so, because if people really believe that, we can forget the possibility of a revolution in this country. For democracy to work, everyone has to accept responsibility for decision-making, has to be open to new ideas, has to be willing and able to express his own views. Let's not play those competitive achievement games about who has the best analysis, the most critical thinking, the quickest reflexes, or (for God's sake) the strongest commitment and dedication. All that does is make us feel inadequate and guilty. As we lose our self-confidence we retreat into silent passivity more and more. And there's no such thing as a passive revolution.

Be careful. When you don't say anything because you can't articulate a complete analysis to back it up; when you don't say anything because you might offend someone; when you think to yourself, "Why didn't I think of that?"; when you have

an idea and you start thinking of ways that you can get (ie. manipulate) people to accept it; when you begin to think of the people in SDS as the enemy -- be careful! When we allow ourselves to dominate or be dominated, we fall into the trap the system was setting all the time we were growing up in an authoritarian society. If we aren't careful, the system is going to win -- and it won't be through overt repression but rather through subversion of the movement from the inside.

Look -- we learned how to assert ourselves collectively when we stormed into the trustee meeting, when we stayed in Lytton Plaza after the Man told us to leave, when we turned in our draft cards, when we told our parents not to interfere in our lives. These actions represent our rejection of the dominance/submission structure of our society. But we negate that struggle for liberation when we allow the same authoritarian structure to superimpose itself on a revolutionary organization.

We have to struggle collectively for psychological liberation, too. Right now perhaps the biggest obstacle to effective action is our individualism. Think how much time and energy we waste because of our iconoclasm. At meetings we don't share our ideas. We go around the room and people present their own individual opinion and try to convince everyone else that it's the best. We go in circles because people are afraid to steal an idea from someone else and build on it. But in a revolutionary organization there should be no such thing as my and mine. All ideas belong to the group, so why not put them together or modify them or reject them on the basis of what is best for the group?

If we functioned collectively we would be incredibly more efficient and effective. Collectivity and group consciousness allow for a true division of labor and abilities. The context in which we are working is more realistically approached from a broad range of perspectives. Some people are better at some things than at others -- we can't expect to be experts in everything we do. Some of us are good at relating to the people in the community; we can help to determine what actions or programs will be effective. Some of us are good at communicating our plans to the community; this is essential in mobilizing and, moreover, the feedback we get can be important in determining future actions. Some of us can work effectively on issues other than imperialism and the military/industrial/university complex (eg. student-initiated courses, free hospitalization and contraceptives for students, a day school for children of students and employees, departmental organizing, etc.). We have to distinguish between liberal reform which dead-ends and reform which furthers the revolutionary cause by raising broader issues or generating an environment in which free thinking is possible. SDS should be a clearing house for reform issues of the latter sort, not a blockade which prevents action.

The most important thing to realize is that we learn from doing, not only from reading books. The ability to make tactical decisions, for example, is experiential; no book will tell you whether it is better to wage psychic guerrilla warfare or an educational campaign in your specific situation. One probably won't help us much on the Stanford campus. If we are really concerned with revolution, then we are in a state of total warfare, because the system is a totality which affects every aspect of life. We must attack on all fronts -- the psychological and the structural at all levels (from international to Grove House or the Poli Sci department to the individual psyche). One individual can't do this; his energy is effective when concentrated on only one or a few fronts. We can wage total warfare only as a collective, as a group which maintains a many-faceted revolutionary perspective.

We'd better get ourselves together or WE'RE GONNA LOSE

-- Gini Linsley  
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