

A RESPONSE TO LEONARD SIEGEL'S A LIMITED OVERVIEW

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I will attempt to respond to some problems I had in reading Siegel's paper and then suggest an overview of my own.

Educational Work- Siegel suggests that "educational work is like investment. Often one must wait a long time to cash in." Further, "despite our correct line, we cannot expect people to radically increase their commitment for abstract reasons." Many of our problems on the Left derive from such a constricted notion of education; most education does not have a pay-off, a concrete value. To force this meaning upon the process of education results in indoctrination which is nothing more than believing you have the "correct line" and teaching it to others. I don't know what Siegel means by "correct line," and for my purposes its substance is not primary. I would just warn that this conception of education is more than a little arrogant and reflects the instrumental emphasis of knowledge which many on the Left are opposed to.

Organizing- I continued to be surprised by the large scale failure of University radicals to keep informed of the concrete conditions on their own campuses. Their conception of "felt problems" is usually primitive and widely detached. 1) TA salaries must surely be seen as a failure of the University to govern itself (as Lyman said, "departmental autonomy run wild."), as an indication of how close to financial collapse are "private" institutions in this country, as an example of powerless constituencies (undergraduates) are used by others struggling for power, and another case of the prevailing forces responding to certain threats, avoiding crisis, and coming out virtually untarnished. 2) The tired rhetoric over grades and grading ratios just doesn't fit the situation here anymore. This sort of analysis collapses in the

face of SES recommendations. Further, it is not even relevant to the SES statement that all curricular changes should be in the direction of teachers teaching whatever they want to teach, and students learning whatever they want to learn. How many of us have stopped to consider how the "University," and "education" and "knowledge" are being redefined on our own campus? 3) If we are concerned with "felt problems" then smog and rush-hour traffic should be decried as something other than the "necessary outgrowths of monopoly capitalism in America." There are literally hundreds of people on this campus concerned with conservation, population-control, etc., and they are attempting to solve these problems. We must ask ourselves if we, too, want to end these crimes or just prove that our "analysis" is correct?

Direct Action- It is here that I find Siegel's arguments most uninformed. The functions of direct action are not to focus on issues or to exercise power. The latter is merely synonymous terminology and the former should be a pre-condition of direct action though it is usually (and at best) a by-product. Siegel's emphasis indicates why direct action has been so counter-productive for us at Stanford; rather than aimed at changing concrete conditions, it has been used as a recruiting tool, a proof of one's seriousness, and a display of power. For me, these three functions are assumed when I act and to mix them up with other priorities leads to those fatal distortions of fact and integrity which haunt us long after the direct action is conceived and carried out. I would argue that no direct action is successful unless those who engage in it have seriously focused on the issue for some time and see direct action as an outgrowth of that commitment, not proof of it.

Siegel argues that "it is ~~important~~ imperative that we use such opportunities to correctly analyze the issues," This is an example of our previous errors; issues must be understood before direct

action. The focus of Siegel's entire argument is seen when he writes, "Of course, there ~~as~~ comes a time when the function of direct action is no longer to convince those who do not yet hold power, but to coerce those who do." Direct action should always be to achieve the latter and only secondarily should we hope the former will transpire. The Issue- In the last part of his overview, Siegel turns to the SDS demand about SRI and attempts to justify it in terms of the movement here on campus and the conditions for revolution throughout the world. I want to quote from his argument a few statements which are central to it, discuss them, and then move on to another perspective from which we might engage in more dialogue. "If we can identify with oppressed peoples around the world, then moderation is ridiculous." And, "Ethically, the demand makes sense. We are struggling for the self-determination of peoples' whose oppressive conditions grow out of exploitation. True, we must convince others that this is what the world is really like, but once our facts and interpretations are accepted, our stance is highly moral."

First, I don't think we are yet able to "identify with oppressed peoples around the world." Second, we have not been able to convince too many others that "this is what the world is really like." Third, we have recognized these two failures and in our resulting failure frustration have blended the two together in the hope of success. That is, we have assumed that in order to increase our facility for identifying with the oppressed people of the world we must show ourselves what the "world is really like." There is nothing wrong with this unless you confuse the oppression of a Bolivian tin miner with the oppression of a Stanford coed or the "real world" of Saigon with the "real World" of Palo Alto; and we have done just that. Such confusion is reflected in the arguments Siegel makes in his "Overview," but its origin is in our refusal to make important distinctions in our

analysis and follow out these distinctions and their implications for action. Some helpful distinctions that we need to consider are:

1. What "the world is really like" does not mean that objective conditions will be similar in all parts of the world.
2. Likewise, the nature of oppression will vary throughout the world. Phenomena such as alienation, exploitation, impotence, frustration, imperialism, and repression are not synonymous with each other (though perhaps with oppression) and should not be used carelessly.
3. If these distinctions are valid, then the implications for bringing students to consciousness and having them "identify with oppressed peoples" are important. The process of developing political consciousness will not be of one sort only nor should it be directed at identification with only one type of oppressed people.
4. Despite purist protests to the contrary, not all politicizing results in the same kind of consciousness--nor should it.

This small list of suggestions is offered as a background for thinking about organizing here at Stanford. Now into my fourth year here as a graduate student, TA, and some-time member of the Left, I think I can make the following generalizations about our situation on reasonably secure ground. It is unclear what the "felt problems" of a Stanford student might be. His "world" is usually secure and fairly stable. If there were no war or draft there would probably be no such thing as the Left if it had to draw its members from those who had "felt problems" here at Stanford. We assume there are "problems" because of the atmosphere of malaise, of melancholy boredom. I would argue that most of us are not in fact objectively oppressed. Our oppression is subjective--the consciousness of having to find or create a meaningful existence in this world. This is an oppression no less real than that of an objective nature, but it is the by-product of ease and influence rather than repression or exploitation.

The failure to recognize this important difference causes us in our search for meaning (the end of oppression) to act in such a way as to negate anything that we hope to achieve. We turn to those who are objectively oppressed, identify with them, and seek to change the conditions which cause their oppression. While this makes for good theory,

it usually fails in practice. Why? Because, I think, our means of identification, our notions of thought and action, our conception of radical change is distorted by the peculiar origin of our own oppression. We think and act as powerful, important, influential, upper middle class persons (which we are). We project and extend from our existences. Never fully understanding the character of objective oppression, we seek to close down Standard Oil of California rather than collecting enough capital to purchase a single service station and operate it cooperatively for the benefit of a few. Rather than making school tolerable for 30 students in one classroom by teaching in the public schools, we strive to change an entire county school system. We conceive of change not in terms of those who are oppressed, but from our personal sense of power and influence. Thus, we often find ourselves in the reprehensible position of refusing to work with or for certain groups which could change conditions of the oppressed because those programs are being initiated for the "wrong" reasons, or because "The poor are being used."

These examples are just to suggest that ending "our" oppression may not always lead to the end of oppression for other "oppressed peoples." Too, they give emphasis to the point of our own selfishness and impatience and petty frustrations that are reflected in the fantasy worlds of confrontation, mobilization, and "education" we have created for ourselves. Lastly, the examples (and this entire argument) reflect the need for much serious thought by the Left at Stanford. Being at a University we tend to perceive the separation of thought and action as a separation of thought from action and forget that it can also be the separation of action from thought.