

From the Other Side of the Tracks

Julius Lester

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The very different nature of the problems facing the white and black communities necessitated a white radical movement and a black radical movement. In no organic way could these two movements merge, although they were both fighting the same enemy. That situation still exists, except the black and white radical movements have a common problem for the first time, a problem which can be more effectively fought if the two movements formally align with each other.

The black radical movement has always existed in the face of total suppression, if not destruction. The government has singled out some individuals within the black movement and made examples of them—Rap Brown, Huey Newton and Martin Sostre, to mention a few. The white radical movement has been able to operate with somewhat more ease, simply because it was not considered a threat to the existing social order. With Chicago, that changed. When the power structure is threatened, it is color-blind and will beat whites as readily and mercilessly as it will blacks. Any black who feels that whites are immune from the kind of treatment which blacks receive should examine the history of the labor movement and the IWW, to mention two examples. The power structure is not going to let itself be destroyed any more readily by whites than by blacks.

The 1968 election campaign is revealing just how threatened the power structure feels. “Law and order” is the primary issue, for it is an easily-recognized truth that without “law and order” the power structure cannot function. Thus, the power structure must defend itself from any and all attacks.

The white and black radical movements stand on the brink of being destroyed, because they have become so serious about their work. We are being young and romantic if we think that the power structure will not fight back with all at its command. We’ve enjoyed a period of liberality, where the right of dissent was generally upheld by the Supreme Court and by a sizable, though not majority, segment of the population. Now, however, the government is seeking to more explicitly define “dissent” and Spiro Agnew has even proclaimed that the “sit-ins” were outside his definition of dissent: His thesis is that the government has outlined the avenues of dissent—picketing and the courts. Anything else cannot be accepted.

It is clear that the activities that began in Chicago are going to continue. The movement is going to accelerate, thereby bringing ever-increasing forms of repression from the power structure. The question facing us is simple: how do we survive?

We have never faced real repression. Of course, people have been beaten, jailed and harassed. That is the power structure’s way of trying to discourage people, not destroy them or their movement. In most of the countries of the world where liberation forces are operating, the power structure is as intent upon destroying them as they are upon destroying the power structure. After Fidel Castro led the attack on the Moncada in Santiago in 1953 and was defeated, Batista instituted a reign of terror. Thousands were murdered without “due process.” Thousands more were jailed, without “due process.” Today in Spain, a strong liberation movement is operating under fantastic repression. There, a known student activist is not sent to jail for 30 days on a disorderly conduct charge. He is sent

for 30 years and the charge may be no more than “suspicion.” This is what is ahead of us—the knock on the door in the middle of the night. How will we deal with it?

Some will react with fear and run. Some will react with fear and recant their “youthful excesses” as they join the enemy’s forces. Others will seek to go “underground,” change the way of operating, and carry on. Those who are too visible to go “underground” will fight in the open for as long as they can, then be killed or go to prison. Most, however, will probably react with fear and attempt to slow the movement. If the movement does slow down, become conservative, then it deserves to die. It must continue to press the attack in the streets as long as that is viable, and in other ways when the streets become too dangerous.

However, the first priority of the movement is survival. If we don’t save each other, no one will. With a black-white alliance involving exchanges of information and coordinated action, our chances of survival are better. With each of us going our own little ways, we can be played off against each other by the power structure, thereby making us active participants in our own deaths.

We have felt that we have been making history. That is a premature assumption, for if we do not survive we will only be one of history’s many footnotes. If we do not survive and heighten the struggle, our children will say of us as we have said of our parents, “We wouldn’t have to do this if you had done your job.” And above all, we must do our job, no matter how difficult that may become.

The possibilities of getting that job done will be much better if the black radical movement recognizes that there now exists a white radical movement which is committed to the death of the present order and the creation of the new one.

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