

From the Other Side of the Tracks

Julius Lester

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A student movement has its own built-in limitations, both in terms of how much it can do and how much it can understand. In some ways, a student Movement tends to be artificial, because the student lives in an artificial environment—the university. Thus, it is natural that a student movement generally concerns itself with issues that the majority of society has hardly any time at all to be concerned about. This is good to a point. Without the student demonstrations against the war, there would've been no antiwar movement. Without student consciousness of racism, blacks would be even more isolated and vulnerable to attack.

A student movement evolves to an inevitable point where it realizes that wars and racism are the manifestations of an inhuman system and if wars and racism are going to be stopped, the system itself must be stopped and another created. And it is at this point that a student movement reaches the boundaries of its inherent limitations. When this juncture is reached, the student movement finds its members becoming increasingly frustrated and the movement seeks to relieve that frustration through activism and/or by turning its attention to changing the students' immediate environment, the university.

A student movement which concerns itself with bringing about changes within the university is engaging in an act which can have all the appearances of being important, while being, in essence, quite unimportant. Regardless of how unending one's stay in a university may seem, the fact yet remains that after four years of serving time, the student leaves. The university is a temporary society for most who live within its -confines and as such, any radical activity aimed at it is of limited value.

Because the university is a temporary society, any movement coming from it is in danger of being temporary. The next student generation may have more traditional interests than the one which kept the campus in an uproar during the preceding four years. And while student movements are characterized by a great willingness to confront the reigning social authority, there is nothing inherent in a student movement that will insure its evolution into a radical movement once the students leave the university.

Perhaps the greatest liability of a student movement is that it is only able to speak to other students. While this is of limited value, the fact still remains that there is perhaps no group more powerless than students. Not only are students without power, the instruments of power are not even a part of their world. If all students went on strike, it wouldn't cause the society to pause in its step. The most that a student movement can do is to disrupt. The power to disrupt, however, cannot be equated with the power to make a revolution. A student movement is only a revolutionary force when it can act as an adjunct with other forces in the society. It is needless to say that such a situation does not presently exist.

When student radicals leave the campus, they can avoid coming into direct contact with other forces in the society by creating their own little worlds where they continue to live with each other, talk only to each other and remain unconcerned about the concrete problems which most people have to face. The student radical is never heard talking about a rise in the price of milk, new taxes, real wages or doctor bills. The student radical creates his own society in which money is not an overriding- problem and because it isn't, the student radical thinks that revolution is all about love, because he has time to think about love. Everybody else is thinking about survival.

No matter how radical a student may be, his radicalism remains virgin until he has had to face the basic problems which everyone in the society has to face—paying the rent every month. It is easy to be radical when someone else is underwriting it. It is all too easy to belittle the Wallace-supporting factory worker when one does not know the constant economic insecurity and fear under which that factory worker lives.

While the goal of revolution is the creation of the new man, people turn to revolution when that becomes the only means of satisfying their material needs. They do not become revolutionaries because of any ideas about the new man.

The student radical has to become an everyday radical before he can be totally trusted. He must know the concrete problems which face the everyday person. And while such issues as the war in Vietnam, the repression of Mexican students and the invasion of Czechoslovakia are important, revolution is made from the three eternal issues—food, clothing and shelter. The American system requires of its people that they exchange their lives and humanity for food, clothing and shelter. Our job is to show people that they are being robbed of their birthright for a mess of pottage and that that is not necessary.

As long as the movement is dominated by students, the movement will carry within it the seeds of its own death. As long as the student, upon graduation, carries his radicalism to an apartment three blocks away from the campus or to the nation's East Villages where a thousand others just like him reside, his radicalism will remain theoretically correct and pragmatically irrelevant, except as a gadfly forcing the system to make minimal reforms.

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