

From the Other Side of the Tracks

Julius Lester

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1968 was the year in which the momentum of the past eight years reached a climax. From the first day of that year, everyone could feel that this year was the year for a series of confrontations which would expose the enemy more and more. Columbia, Chicago, the Black Panthers and much more happened—and the enemy was exposed to those who were predisposed to look and some who were not.

1969 has come. The enemy is exposed and no one seems to know quite what to do about it. Many of us are suffering from a mild “depression,” which is perhaps nothing more than a momentary weariness of the spirit. But, perhaps it isn’t. For along with that depression has come a feeling of frustration which is more and more causing us to fight among ourselves—to squabble, to disintegrate into factions.

A lot happened last year and yet, the empire still stands with bombs bursting in air and the flag still there. Not only was Rome not built in a day, but it didn’t decline in a day. It is one thing to expose the enemy in the streets of Chicago. It is another to destroy him. It is the former that much of our activity and thought has been concerned with. It is the latter we must be concerned with now.

“The movement” has reached a critical stage. It must move from an action-oriented movement which was, in the main, concerned with single issues, (the war and/or the universities) to a broad-based, multi-levelled movement which will change the political and economic structure of the country. Whether or not this particular “movement” with its myriad groups, attitudes and viewpoints, can do so is uncertain. It may be that we have done all that it was possible to do at this point in history, given who we were and where we came from. If that, however, is to be the fate of the organizations now existing, it must not be the fate of a significant minority of individuals who have been involved during the past eight years. However, even those individuals who have a total commitment will be caught in the backwash of frustration now upon us if there isn’t a serious understanding of the job before us.

Many became involved in “the movement” because of their outrage over the war in Vietnam. Once involved, they slowly became aware of the many ways in which they were oppressed. Their involvement in “the movement” brought about changes within themselves and presented them with the possibility of an alternative life style. There is no doubt that the overwhelming majority of people who have been involved in “the movement” are better people for it and unfortunately, it is going to end there for so many. Having gotten from “the movement” what they needed, they will now leave “the movement”, live better lives for having been involved and become a part of that vast body which will form the liberals of tomorrow.

At the same time, however, there are those whose involvement is total. They have reached that point where the pain of others has become their own and they have no choice but to continue unto death or victory. It is upon them that the responsibility falls to create what does not now exist—a revolutionary movement. For them, many dangers exist. As the numbers in “the movement” dwindle, they will become more exposed, on one hand, and more isolated, on the other. They may find themselves increasingly frustrated and discouraged as this situation develops. The experience may make them bitter, and embittered people do not make good revolutionaries.

The question is being asked: what do we do in 1969? Unless one asks the right questions, one cannot get the right answers and the question is what do we do, what do we want to achieve, what can we achieve, between now and

1972? After that question is answered, one tries to answer the question of what we do in 1969. For that minority of people who are committed, perhaps the over-riding necessity for the next four years is to broaden the base of “the movement.”

This means developing a cadre of organizers and then moving in groups of two or three into various medium-sized cities (100,000–250,000) long enough to know the problems and learn what the possibilities are for long-range organizing (which does not necessarily mean organizing people for demonstrations). Cities of this size can be organized. The metropolitan areas can only be harassed. They will fall from their sheer weight when the time comes.

Another necessity which should be on the list for the next four years is working and living in working-class communities. Labor will undoubtedly be in an accelerating crisis in the next four years, particularly if the Nixon administration carries through on its statement to increase unemployment to hold down inflation. It is a mistake to think that the working classes don’t know where it’s at. They do. They just don’t know how to deal with it, except by consuming. And it is quite clear that the tactics we have used up to now haven’t convinced them that we know how to deal with it either. As long as we deal only with the particulars of our own type of oppression, they will find us irrelevant. We can only be relevant to them when we know their oppression.

Perhaps some of the motion for breaking down the class barriers of “the movement” will come from the women’s liberation movement, one of the most significant developments of the past year. Women comprise the largest oppressed minority in the country. Any relevant political action coming from women can have much the same devastating effect on the country that the black movement has had. As prices continue to rise, it is not pipe-dreaming to think of women sending bricks through supermarket windows.

During the past eight years, we have so often depended upon the enemy to keep our “movement” going. Now it is up to us. And that means developing a movement which has leaders, not personalities; theory, not rhetoric; strategy beyond demonstrations. We must realize that no one blow will topple the empire. It will take hundreds of thousands of little ones. That can only happen when we consciously make each of our acts relate to furthering the revolution. This means everything from the way you say good morning to how you plan to rob a bank to finance your organization. In the revolutionary, the personal life and the political life merge and become one.

Above all, we must not feel that we are not successful if we do not repeat 1968. 1968 had its own demands. 1969 has different ones. Let us take what we can use from 1968 and leave the rest. This is 1969 and the empire still stands. That means there is work to be done.

fifth Estate

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