

Toward a post-scarcity society: the American perspective and the SDS

Radical Decentralist Project, Resolution No. I

Murray Bookchin

Contents

The process of social breakdown	3
The role of SDS	4
Conclusions	6

The twentieth century is the heir of human history - the legatee of man's age-old effort to free himself from drudgery and material insecurity. For the first time in the long succession of centuries, this century has elevated mankind to an entirely new level of technological achievement and to an entirely new vision of the human experience.

Technologically, we can now achieve man's historical goal - a post scarcity society. But socially and culturally, we are mired in the economic relations, institutions, attitudes and values of a barbarous past, of a social heritage created by material scarcity. Despite the potentiality of complete human freedom, we live in the day-to-day reality of material insecurity and a subtle, ever-oppressive system of coercion. We live, above all, in a society of fear, be it of war, repression, or dehumanization. For decades we have lived under the cloud of a thermonuclear war, streaked by the fires of local conflicts in half the continents of the world. We have tried to find our identities in a society that has become ever more centralized and mobilized, dominated by swollen civil, military and industrial bureaucracies. We have tried to adapt to an environment that is becoming increasingly befouled with noxious wastes. We have seen our cities and their governments grow beyond all human comprehension, reducing our very sovereignty as individuals to ant-like proportions - the manipulated, dehumanized victims of immense administrative engines and political machines. While the spokesmen for this diseased social 'order' piously mouth encomiums to the virtues of 'democracy,' 'freedom' and 'equality,' tens of millions of people are denied their humanity because of racism and are reduced to conditions of virtual enslavement.

Viewed from a purely personal standpoint, we are processed with the same cold indifference through elementary schools, high schools and academic factories that our parents encounter in their places of work. Worse, we are expected to march along the road from adolescence to adulthood, the conscripted, uniformed creatures of a murder machine guided by electronic brains and military morons. As adults, we can expect to be treated with less dignity and identity than cattle: squeezed into underground freight cars, rushed to the spiritual slaughterhouses called 'offices' and 'factories,' and reduced to insensibility by monotonous, often purposeless, work. We will be asked to work to live and live to work - the mere automata of a system that creates superfluous, if not absurd, needs; that will steep us in debts, anxieties and insecurities; and that, finally, will deliver us to the margins of society, to the human scrapheap called the aged and chronically ill - desiccated beings, deprived of all vitality and humanity.

The process of social breakdown

The debasement of social life - all the more terrifying because its irrational, coercive, day-to-day realities stand in such blatant contradiction to its liberatory potentialities - has no precedent in human history. Never before has man done so little with so much; indeed, never before has man used his resources for such vicious, even catastrophic ends. The tension between 'what-could-be' and 'what-is' reaches its most excruciating proportions in the United States, which occupies the position not only of the most technologically advanced country in the world but also of the 'policeman of the world,' the foremost imperialist power in the world. The United States affords the terrifying spectacle of a country overladen with automobiles and hydrogen bombs; of ranch houses and ghettos, of immense material superfluity and brutalizing poverty. Its profession of 'democratic' virtue is belied daily by racism, the repression of black and white militants, police terrorism, Vietnam, and the prospect of Vietnams to come.

Is it surprising, then, that a basic, far-reaching disrespect and a profound disloyalty is developing toward the values, the forms, the aspirations and, above all, the institutions of American society? On a scale unprecedented in American history, millions of people, especially among the young, are shedding their commitment to the society in which they live. They no longer believe in its claims. They no longer respect its symbols. They no longer accept its goals, and, most significantly, they refuse almost intuitively to live by its institutional and social codes.

This growing refusal runs very deep. It extends from an opposition to the Vietnam War into a hatred of political manipulation in all its forms. Starting from a rejection of racial discrimination, it brings into question the very existence of hierarchical power as such. In its detestation of middle-class values and life-styles, it rapidly evolves into a rejection of the commodity system; from an irritation with environmental pollution, it passes into a rejection of the American city and modern urbanism. In short, it tends to transcend every particularistic critique of the society and evolve into a generalized opposition to the bourgeois order on an ever-broadening scale.

What we are witnessing is the breakdown of a century and a half of embourgeoisement and an erosion of all bourgeois institutions at a point in history when the boldest concepts of utopia are realizable. And there is nothing that the present bourgeois order can substitute for the erosion of its traditional institutions but bureaucratic manipulation and state capitalism. This process is unfolding most dramatically in the United States. That revolution is envisionable in the United States is due precisely to the fact that the process of de-mythification, of de-bourgeoisement, of de-institutionalization began earlier and is occurring more decisively here than anywhere else in the world. Whether this process will culminate in revolution or in a disastrous form of fascism will depend in great part on the ability of revolutionaries to extend social consciousness and defend the spontaneity of the revolutionary development from authoritarian ideologies, both from the 'Left' and the Right.

The role of SDS

SDS and the youth revolt

As historic processes bring us increasingly closer to the threshold of a classless society, we are faced with the decomposition of the culture and institutions that emerge from class society. The elemental demands of the youth revolt for uninhibited sexuality, community, and mutual aid, spontaneity, indeed for communism, and its rejection of the commodity relationship, the work ethic, the patriarchal family, the degradation of women, the existence of hierarchy, and the use of coercion - all of these demands do not emerge accidentally. They prefigure culturally the possibilities opened by the development of a post-scarcity technology, however intuitive and inchoate these demands may seem. And it is precisely from the fact that these demands are intuitive and inchoate that we know we are dealing, here, with elemental social forces - forces that emerge not from books and formulas, but from the very social development itself.

If SDS chapters are to play any role in this youth revolt, if they are to contribute to its extension and consciousness, there should be a reconsideration by every chapter of its structure, aims and internal relations. It is patently absurd to believe that a chapter structured along bureaucratic lines and dominated by an elite of 'politics' can have any relevance to the youth culture that is percolating in this country. Either the chapter will develop the revolutionary post-scarcity forms of relations within themselves - the relations of brothers and sisters, not merely of ideological

'associates' or 'comrades'- or they will isolate themselves completely. Either they will place a new emphasis on life style or they will ossify along bureaucratic lines.

There is no formula for achieving these internal changes. The atmosphere and structure of a chapter is ultimately determined by its goals. If the chapter is occupied entirely with the conventional political issues of the Old Left, it will become an Old Left organization: elitist, bureaucratic, and centralized in structure, held together primarily by conventional programmatic issues. If, on the other hand, political issues are organically combined with life-style issues, the internal relations within the chapter will change accordingly.

SDS is above all a youth movement, and particularly a youth movement on college campuses. If the measure of its achievement is the influence it exercises on youth and students, it has failed miserably. For all the talk of a 'student-worker alliance,' we have not even won over a substantial number of students, much less youth generally. In with drawing into a hardening sectarian shell, we will be well on the way toward losing whatever influence we have exercised in the past on campuses.

To avoid this deadening stagnation, we believe that chapters should try to deal with campus issues in all their forms, to carry on a struggle whose essential goal is to convert the campus into a liberated space for students and the community. Together with the issues of racism and concrete expressions of American imperialism, our chapters should also deal with the authoritarian nature and structure of the university, the idiocy of grading, bourgeois ideology masquerading as education, the right of students to form their own classes (with teachers merely as consultants), the determination of campus policy by student assemblies - and ultimately to transcend the university, converting it into a liberated space, a community center in the fashion of the Sorbonne and particularly of Censier in the French revolt of May-June 1968.

SDS chapters should also become an organic part of the youth revolt both on campus and off. The ties established between students and street people in Berkeley over the People's Park issue are in many ways, a model of the kind of development chapters could follow in breaking out of the sectarian shell that has enveloped them. Similar possibilities undoubtedly exist throughout the country, and off-campus youth involve not only street people but also high school and vocational school youth, ghetto youth, and young workers. Few if any of these young people will be drawn to SDS because it has the 'correct transitional program on imperialism:' they will be drawn to SDS only if it expresses their drive for life and articulates their detestation of deadening middle-class and proletarian values.

SDS and the community

SDS should follow the paths of least resistance in its struggle against an archaic society that is decomposing unevenly but still retains a tremendous inner strength at its core. By 'paths of least resistance' we do not mean that we should compromise our principles, modes of struggle or goals, but simply that we should devote our main efforts to those sectors of the population that are most susceptible to radicalization. If these are minority groups or workers or sectors of the middle classes, the energies of the chapters should be distributed to those sectors. To preconceive issues in advance of a struggle, to straitjacket reality by formulas borrowed from the past, would be a grave error. The revolt of our time cuts across virtually all class lines.

It goes without saying that there can be no successful social revolution in the United States without the full and active participation of the industrial proletariat. The May-June events in France in 1968 provided almost a paradigm of how the revolutionary process can develop today in an advanced industrial country. If we do not try to learn from these events, we will learn noth-

ing. The French students approached the workers at the factory gates without pretensions about their position as students. They did not pretend they were workers - and the French workers acknowledged them for what they were: students. The alliance between workers and students was possible precisely because both recognized each other as distinct but oppressed strata - oppressed in different ways by the same social enemy.

SDS and the Third World

The best way we can help the Third World is by changing the First World. To declare that the main priority of SDS is to create an anti-imperialist 'front' is to guarantee that imperialism will have no problem from SDS in shaping public opinion in the United States along imperialist lines. If imperialism is presented in abstract terms, its concrete manifestations - which can have a profound effect upon the social development in the United States - will float in a limbo. To the vast majority of the American people, the word 'imperialism' is an abstraction unless its concrete manifestations are clearly and decisively fought. The casualty figures in the Vietnam War have meanings; conscription has meaning; a youth overshadowed by the prospect of military service has meaning; the bombing of villages and the killing and maiming of people has meaning; the repressive way of life in military units has meaning; even the wholesale destruction of Vietnamese forests by defoliants and fire has meaning. As revolutionary internationalists, it is our responsibility to explain and fight imperialism in all its manifestations - its sinister day-to-day exploitation of the Third World as well as the military barbarities it inflicts on the Third World. But these features of imperialism must be presented concretely to the American people, with a clear emphasis on how it also victimizes them. Only in this concrete way will it be possible to mobilize the American people against the social system at home that produces these barbarities abroad.

The struggle going on in the Third World is a struggle within the domain of unavoidable scarcity. China, Vietnam and Cuba are struggling not only to retain their independence, but also to industrialize. They are confronted by tasks that were overcome years ago in the United States and Western Europe - hence the organizational and political forms they adopt. To attempt to emulate these forms in the United States, to borrow the hierarchical, centralized political organizations adopted in varying degrees by the ruling elements of China, Cuba and North Vietnam, would literally amount to a turning back of the historical clock. We must take our point of departure from the sweeping material opportunities provided by technological developments in the United States and Western Europe. The First World has problems and possibilities that differ qualitatively from those of the Third World and from those of the past. We fight on the most advanced terrain in history - a terrain that opens the prospect of a post-scarcity society, a libertarian society - not a substitution of one system of hierarchy by another.

Conclusions

The revolution we seek is centered around the elimination of man's domination by man. Domination is not a problem of social structure alone; it is also a human condition. The poison of domination is fed to us almost at birth - in the family milieu, in the games we play, in schools and universities, in the army, in jobs, in the market place, in periodicals, books and the mass media, in religion, in organizations of all kinds, ad nauseam. Rarely are we conscious of the extent to which domination flows into us from our entire sensory apparatus and reveals itself in the way

we think, talk and even walk. Unless we begin to remake ourselves, unless we begin to alter our life styles and values, domination will mold all our concepts of social change, our estimates of what constitutes 'effectiveness' and 'efficiency.' Life-style is related as intimately to revolution as revolution is to life-style. This is not a tautology; it is an interplay, a dialectical relationship which must be resolved. A 'revolutionary' movement that fails to take account of this relationship - indeed, that fosters the spins and reality of domination by its structure, theories, strategies and tactics - is destined to achieve only one kind of 'success:' counter-revolution.

In seeking to function within the youth revolt of our time, we seek also to rid ourselves of all the elements that so often betray the revolutionary to the very society he is fighting. We seek to make our own movement the liberated space that we strive to achieve in society as a whole. The revolution that ushers us into a post-scarcity society must be a complete revolution or it will be no revolution at all. It must eliminate not only the exploitation of man by man but also the domination of man by man, the splits between man and nature, town and country, work and play, mind and physical activity, theory and practice, reason and sensuousness, survival and life. If we do not overcome and transcend these splits, if we do not decentralize our cities into ecologically balanced communities, if we do not produce for human needs instead of profit, if we do not restore the balance of nature and find our place in it, if we do not replace hierarchy, the patriarchal family and the state by genuine, open, human relations, social life itself will be annihilated.

Our movement should attempt to reflect in its own structure and human relations the kind of society it is trying to build. It should decentralize so that it will not dominate the future society but rather will dissolve into it. It should leave the power with the people in the only sense that is meaningful: it should dissolve power so that every individual will have control over his everyday life. It should decentralize for tactical as well as strategic reasons: each chapter should be free to evaluate local issues without 'directives' from above, for it alone has the closeness of contact with an immediate situation that allows for a proper determination of priorities. Either we will understand that we are living in a period of general breakdown, a dissolution of bourgeois society as a whole, with a multitude of issues that cut across virtually time-honored social strata, or we will remain blind to events, their victims rather than catalysts of consciousness and revolutionary change.

May 1969

* Excerpt from a mimeographed leaflet, Chicago, May 1969.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Murray Bookchin

Toward a post-scarcity society: the American perspective and the SDS
Radical Decentralist Project, Resolution No. I

http://pacad.pitzer.edu/anarchist_archives/bookchin/sds.html

Originally, this article was a statement for the fourth faction active in SDS during its final days.

This faction is often overlooked by historians, who typically only emphasize the other three
factions (i.e., Progressive Labor Party, RYM I and RYM II).

theanarchistlibrary.org