

In White America: Liberal Conscience vs. Radical Consciousness

The following speech, given by Gregory Calvert, national secretary of SDS at the Princeton Conference of February 1967, marks a new approach of the student movement to radical activity inside the university, the concept of the 'new working class' and the wider problem of false consciousness.

—The National Guardian, March 25, 1967

By Greg Calvert

Let me begin by telling you a story which I recently heard. It is a story about the guerrilla forces in Guatemala and about how they work. I do not know what image you might have in your head about the mode of operation of Guatemalan guerrillas. I am not even certain about the accuracy of this story. But in any case, it makes sense to me and it speaks to me about who we are—the new radicals.

It is said that when the Guatemalan guerrillas enter a new village, they do not talk about the “anti-imperialist struggle” nor do they give lessons on dialectical materialism—neither do they distribute copies of the *Communist Manifesto* or of Chairman Mao’s *On Contradiction*. What they do is gather together the people of the village to the center of the village and then, one by one, the guerrillas rise and talk to the villagers about their own lives: about how they see themselves and how they came to be who they are, about their deepest longings and the things they’ve striven for and hoped for, about the way in which their deepest longings were frustrated by the society in which they lived.

Then the guerrillas encourage the villagers to talk about their lives. And then a marvelous thing begins to happen. People who thought that their deepest problems and frustrations were their individual problems

discover that their problems and longings are all the same—that no one man is any different than the others. That, in Sartre’s phrase, “In each man there is all of man.” And, finally, that out of the discovery of their common humanity comes the decision that men must unite together in the struggle to destroy the conditions of their common oppression.

That, it seems to me, is what we are about.

The movement for radical social change in America is going through an important period of self-reexamination which is reflected in a myriad of ways: the often compulsive concern with ideology, the desperate attachment to militant tactics, the frustration, pessimism and despair in the life of fulltime activists. This crisis has its roots in a very important failure—the failure of the Southern-based movement in the black community to mobilize a sufficiently powerful mass of people to alter the American system in any significant way. As a friend of mine, a longtime SNCC staff member put it: “We thought we could move enough people to move America, but America turned out to be incredibly more rigid than we had ever expected. We were on the move, but America just wouldn’t budge. I look back now and wonder what sort of simple ideas we must have had in our heads to have ever believed in that possibility.”

If we face up to this crisis honestly, if we look American reality hard in the face, two things emerge, First, we have to admit that—like it or not—we live in urban industrial capitalist America, in white America and not in the rural South. We owe SNCC a deep debt of gratitude for having slapped us brutally in the face with the slogan of ‘Black Power!’, a slogan which said to white radicals: “Go home and organize in white America which is your reality and which only you are equipped to engage.” Secondly, we are thus forced to ask ourselves whether in white America there exists the possibility for organizing a truly radical, an authentically revolutionary movement for change. Finally, we must face the fact that unless such a potential exists, then the basic arguments of the Progressive Labor Party or other Third-World oriented groupings bear serious reading. If a mass movement cannot be built in white America, then individuals with revolutionary hopes and perspectives must orient themselves toward Third World revolutions and develop those methods of activity which will maximize the impact of peasant-based revolutions on the structure of the American imperialist monster.

The problem is a search for a constituency, for an agent of social transformation, for “the revolutionary class.” If no such constituency can be developed, then our only hope lies with external agencies, with revolutionary developments in the Third World.

A Dehumanizing System

Let me say that I am not overflowing with optimism regarding the possibility of building such a movement. There are two things which go through my mind: 1) American corporate capitalism is an incredibly brutal and dehumanizing system, whether at home or abroad, but, 2) it is also fantastically adept at masking its reality at home.

Some have called it “benevolent fascism,” and there lies a key to its operation: it operates domestically by intimidation, regimentation, and conditioning, and prefers not to use overt repressive force. Why? Because to do so is to reveal itself for what it is, and to open the possibility of rebellion. The importance of American aggressive imperialism for the development of a domestic movement, the importance of Vietnam and the Vietnams-to-come, is that it reveals America to America, that the liberal facade is shattered and the American expansionist system reveals its brutality and aggressiveness and its dehumanizing horror in all its nakedness.

I am going to speak today about the problem of consciousness in American society and about the possibility of developing radical or revolutionary consciousness. I approach the problem of organizing from this viewpoint because 1) the objective conditions of oppression in America seem to be manifest and 2) because those objective conditions are not perceived, and 3) because the major problem to which organizers must address themselves in this period is the problem of false consciousness.

Let me posit a first principle: All authentically revolutionary movements are struggles for human freedom.

Contrary to what was suggested here last evening, revolutionary mass movements are not built out of a drive for the acquisition of more material goods. That is a perversion and vulgarization of revolutionary thought and a misreading of history.

Revolutionary movements are freedom struggles born out of the perception of the contradiction between human potentiality and oppressive actuality. Revolutionary consciousness interprets those social, economic

and political structures which maintain the existing gap between potentially and actuality as the objective conditions of oppression which must be transformed. Revolutionary consciousness sees the transformation of those oppressive conditions as the act of liberation and sees the realization of the previously frustrated human potentiality as the achievement of freedom. The bonds of oppression are broken and the new reality is constructed.

What is fundamental to this process is the mass perception of the contradiction between potentiality and actuality. In a given historical situation that contradiction may take the concrete form of economic deprivation in the face of the possibility of material abundance and the struggle for liberation may take the form of a drive to eliminate the conditions which prevent the achievement of that abundance. In a situation of economic abundance the drive for freedom will rest on different perceptions and will set different goals. But the struggle in either case is a struggle for freedom, the form of which depends on the given stage of historical development—that is, on the level of development of human potentiality.

There is only one impulse, one dynamic which can create and sustain an authentic revolutionary movement. The revolutionary struggle is always and always must be a struggle for freedom. No individual, no group, no class is genuinely engaged in a revolutionary movement unless their struggle is a struggle for their own liberation.

The point which is important to understand is clearly illustrated by the difference between radical or revolutionary consciousness and “liberal” consciousness. The profound gap which separates a liberal reform movement from a revolutionary freedom movement is revealed in the dynamics of the participants.

Liberal reformists (including revisionist social democrats inside and outside the CP) react out of guilt motivation, that is the contradiction to which they address themselves—the contradiction between what they have (comfort, goods, security) and who they are (which they posit as the universally human) on the one hand, and what others (the poor) do not have (the poverty and lack of opportunity of the poor) and what others are (the immediacy of satisfactions in underclass life perceived as uncivilized behavior). Their conscience reveals to them the injustice of their unearned position and their own self-image, as universally valid for humanity, is

challenged by the life-style of the underclass. Their response is to close the gap, to resolve the contradictions and the accompanying psychological tensions by means of activity to “raise” the underprivileged to their own socioeconomic level and to draw them into the same nexus of relationships in order to impose on them their own image of humanity.

The liberal reformist is always engaged in “fighting someone else’s battles.” His struggle is involved in relieving the tension produced by the contradictions between his own existence and life-style, his self-image, and the conditions of existence and life-style of those who do not share his privileged, unearned status.

The liberal reformist accepts and defends his own self-image, his own vision and experience of humanity, and generalizes it to all men. He wants everyone to be “white, happy and middle class.” Should those toward whom his good work, are directed (e.g. SNCC with its statement of Black Power) ever challenge his view of the human-universal; he reacts by rejecting them, however subtly or brutally.

The liberal does not speak comfortably of “freedom” or “liberation” but rather of justice and social amelioration. He does not sense himself to be unfree. He does not face the contradictions between his own human potential, his humanity, and the oppressive society in which he participates. To deal with the reality of his own unfreedom would require a shattering reevaluation of his subjective life-experience. Liberal consciousness is conscience translated into action for others. It may or may not include alienation or a sense of the meaninglessness of one’s experience. When these latter elements are present, they are interpreted in a personalistic fashion (as personal guilt), and the solutions envisioned are privatized (e.g., a trip or a trip to the psychiatrist). Liberal consciousness is rarely consciousness of persona oppression, and, therefore, interprets oppression in the society as based on “misunderstanding” or “irrationality.” Individual therapy or cultural liberalization and education are seen as the means of correction.

Radical or revolutionary consciousness perceives contradiction in a totally different fashion. The gap is not between oneself, what one is, and the underprivileged, but is the gap between “what one could be” and the existing conditions for self-realization. It is the perception of oneself as unfree, as oppressed—and finally it is the discovery of oneself as one of the

oppressed who must unite to transform the objective conditions of their existence in order to resolve the contradiction between potentiality and actuality. Revolutionary consciousness leads to the struggle for one's own freedom in unity with others who share the burden of oppression. It is, to speak in the classical vocabulary, class consciousness because it no longer sees the problem as someone else's, because it breaks through individualization and privatization, because the recognition of one's own unfreedom unites one in the struggle of the oppressed, because it posits a more universally human potentiality for all men in a liberated society.

The problem in white America is the failure to admit or recognize unfreedom. It is a problem of false consciousness, that is, the failure to perceive one's situation in terms of oppressive (class) relationships. Only when white America comes to terms with its own unfreedom can it participate in the creation of a revolutionary movement.

When we have talked about the "new radicalism," about the "freedom movement," with a passionate conviction, we have been talking about a movement which involves us, you and me, in a gut level encounter with, disengagement from, and struggle against the America which keeps us in bondage. It may have begun in a very personalistic fashion, out of a private sense of our individual alienation from the U.S. corporate-liberal capitalist monster and from "the bomb" which was its logical but unthinkable conclusion. But, it has and must move beyond the level of our own bewilderment, confusion, and despair about America. It moves to the final realization of our common oppression.

We should realize that Marx was quite correct when he said the true revolutionary consciousness was class consciousness. What he meant by that was that in order to change society people must realize that they are united in common struggle for their own liberation from objective conditions of oppression. Like the Guatemalan guerrillas of whom I spoke, he was saying to people that their struggle was the struggle of unfree men—not for individual salvation—but a struggle for collective liberation of all unfree, oppressed men.

What has held the new radicalism together, what has given it life and vitality, has been the conviction that the gut-level alienation from America—the obscene and dehumanized—was a sincere and realistic basis for challenging America. What has often left the new radicals impotent and

romantic is their failure to understand the dynamics of the society which produced their gut-level alienation, that is their failure to understand that what seemed humanly and emotionally real could be understood in terms of a fundamental and critical analysis of American corporate-liberal capitalism. There was a crying out of their own being against America, but a failure to understand why that revolt was authentically related to the necessity and the possibility of revolutionizing America.

That situation has begun to change. The new radicals are beginning to produce an analysis of America which enables them to understand themselves and the greater reality of American society in a way which authenticates their own revolt as a realistic basis for understanding the way in which we can be freed. It begins to relate the anarchist demand, "I want freedom," to the revolutionary socialist analysis which points the way to collective liberation. If the analysis is correct and if false consciousness is the major obstacle to organizing a revolutionary movement, then it would seem to follow that our primary task at this stage of development is the encouragement or building of revolutionary consciousness, of consciousness of the condition of unfreedom. A question immediately arises however—"To what extent is consciousness of unfreedom subject to the influence of variables which are independent of the question of economic remuneration or consumption level?" That is to say, since the society can buy people off with goods, are there other sufficiently potent radicalizing experiences apart from economic deprivation which radicals can work with? This is an important and complex question. It is perhaps the failure of the old left to arrive at a satisfactory answer to that question which was responsible for its fervent attachment to the concept of the inevitability of the collapse of capitalism—the catastrophic event which would reveal both the objective contradictions of the system and create the proper subjective response on the part of the exploited.

New Left vs. Old Left

Without necessarily ruling out the possibility of such an economic cataclysm in the capitalist world, the new left is hardly notable for its faith in the inevitability of the event. Thus deprived of the *deus ex machina* which the old left was certain existed in the wings, we new leftists have been driven by a special urgency which gives rise to a variety of inventive

activities designed to reveal to people their unfreedom and to offer them alternatives and hope. Certainly the organizing of the new radicals has been one of their most characteristic features.

In the end, however, our ability to organize and to radicalize in an effective manner depends on more than our sensitivity to individual human beings. It requires the kind of careful analysis and conceptualizing which has produced the so-called Port Authority Statement (I hope you realize that the intent of the title was humorous!). The whole notion of the “new working class” provides a powerful tool for understanding the present structure of advanced industrial capitalism.

First, it breaks through the “myth of the great American middle class.” Not only are millions of Americans held captive by that notion, but it has also been a major psychological obstacle for most radicals. If white America is mostly middle class, and if being middle class mean not being oppressed, then there is no possibility for finding the resources upon which a radical movement can be built in white America. What we have come to understand is that the great American middle class is not middle class at all. None of the 19th century definitions of the bourgeoisie apply; not the upper bourgeoisie—the owners of capital: not the petty bourgeoisie—the owners of small property; not finally even the professional bourgeoisie, which in the 19th Century meant those favored few whose education gave them within the economic system. The vast majority of those whom we called the middle class must properly be understood as members of the new working class: that is, as those workers who fill the jobs created by a new level of technological development within the same exploitive system.

Secondly, it enables us to understand the special role of students in relation to the present structure of industrial capitalism. Students are the “trainees” for the new working class and the factory-like multiversities are the institutions which prepare them for their slots in the bureaucratic machinery of corporate capitalism. We must stop apologizing for being students or for organizing students. Students are in fact a key group in the creation of the productive forces of this super-technological capitalism. We have organized them out of their own alienation from the multiversity and have raised the demand for “student control.” That is important: because that is precisely the demand that the new working class must raise

when it is functioning as the new working class in the economic system. It is that demand which the system cannot fulfill and survive as it is. That is why it is potentially a real revolutionary demand in a way that demands for higher wages can never be.

Thirdly, we can see that it was a mistake to assume that the only radical role which students could play would be as organizers of other classes. It is still important, vitally important that student organizers continue to involve themselves in ghetto organizing, in the organizing of the underclass. That work is a vital part of the movement and it is first from ghetto community organizing that the demand for control was clearly articulated. But it is now important to realize that we must organize the great majority of students as the trainees of the new working class. We must speak to them of the way in which the new working class is created—of the meaningless training which is passed off as education and of the special coercive devices like the Selective Service System with its student deferments designed to channel them into the multiversity.

Finally, we must be sensitive to those places in the social strata where false consciousness is being broken down, where the middle-class myth is crumbling, where groups are beginning to struggle for their own freedom. In terms of the concept of the new working class, certain groups have begun to respond: social workers, teachers, and the medical profession. All of these are service groups, it is true, and, interestingly, there is in all these areas a characteristic contradiction between a high level of articulated aspiration and increasingly oppressive conditions. We need radicals in all those areas in order to articulate more clearly the political ramifications of the demands for control and meaningful work. Though there has as yet been no mass organizing on the part of engineers, it is encouraging to note that an engineering student at Iowa State University (the cow college of the Corn Belt) was just elected student body president on a platform calling for student control which brought nearly 10,000 students to the ballot boxes.

We must be sensitive to the fact that a mass movement in America will take time to develop and that it requires the involvement of a broad range of social strata, old and new working class, students and underclass. What counts is that America is beginning to break up, that the myth of the great American middle class is crumbling, that white Americans as well as

Black Americans are beginning to recognize their common oppression and are raising their demands for freedom which can be the basis of a movement which could revolutionize America.

each and every aspect of their capitalist content should be formulated. To make it easier, a beginning group may want to go through an introductory Marxist study group for a week or two.

While the content of some courses will be easy to criticize and expose, many others will be quite difficult, especially when recalling that most campus radicals have not been noted for coherency or clarity in their political thinking. However, for the new left to be capable on not only fighting revolutionary battles, but also on winning them, this problem must be solved.