

Hippies Confront New Left

...at Old Left Conference

Frank H. Joyce

On June 16, 1962 a group of students stimulated by the burgeoning protest movement of black young people in the south, met at Port Huron, Michigan.

After much debate they approved a long statement analyzing “the state of the society which they were inheriting.” Known as the Port Huron Statement, the document served as the organizational base for Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). The Port Huron meeting is generally considered to be the beginning of the “New-Left.”

Five years later, to the day, at the Circle Pines Camp near Denton, Michigan the “New Left,” or at least the old new left, met again.

It was a historic meeting. Most of the SDS elders were there, including Thomas Hayden, Paul Booth, Richard Flacks, Rennie Davis, Todd Gitlin, Steve Max, Douglas Ireland, along with SDS youngsters National Secretary Greg Calvert and current President Carl Davidson. Also present were Ivanhoe Donaldson from SNCC, Arthur Waskow, Robert Wolfe from “Studies on the Left,” John McDermott, editor of “Viet Report,” Andrew Kopkind and Hamish Sinclair.

The mood at the reunion varied between optimism and delight that some have survived for so long, and despair and frustration that the country is clearly in worse condition, less free, more obviously racist and more and more impossible to change than it was five years ago.

The five years seemed a very long time. Some people were over 30, most were over 25. Few if any were still students. Many had gotten their BAs and MAs and PhDs. Small children, the issue of movement marriages, were much in evidence.

Were it not for the appearance of a newer force on the American scene it would have been a routine, abstract, and verbose weekend. But from Haight-Ashbury came Emmet Grogan and Peter Berg of the Diggers. And from the Communications Company in the East Village were Jim Fourat and Abbie Hoffman. Both Fourat and Hoffman are civil-rights and Mississippi veterans who have dropped out into the hippie culture.

Annoyed by the hostility and defensiveness of the old new left, Grogan and Berg, who were accompanied to the meeting by “Realist” editor Paul Krassner, departed after an emotional, shouting pushing confrontation which lasted through Friday night until Saturday morning.

The East Village representatives stayed to pick up the pieces, and make at least semi-converts out of the politicians who were able to listen to what they were saying.

“Don’t play the politics game, don’t play the University game, don’t play games. You are faggots sucking the cock of the establishment,” said Grogan.

The hippies struck again and again at the self-admitted weak points of the Movement. You talk of “Counter-communities” and we have them they said referring to the Love communities springing up in every part of America. You talk of mass movements and we have thousands of young people dropping out to join us. You talk of change and nothing changes. They thrive on your existence, your “radical” politics give legitimacy to the establishment. See the protests, see the demonstrations, the magazines and the articles, the dissent, see the free country we live in. That is what our boys in Vietnam are fighting for.

Most of the politicians reacted like white liberals being attacked by an angry black man from the ghetto. It’s not us they said. We didn’t do it. We are the good people. Some of my best friends are hippies. Tell us what we should do. Drop out. Change yourselves.

And mostly they were right, the hippies. “Collectively, at least, we know everything there is to know about this society. But we don’t know how to change it,” said one leftie at the meeting.

There never was an America before. The forces which have created the hippies are unprecedented in human history. Marshall McLuhan tells us that the advent of mass communications, particularly television makes for at least as momentous a change in human history as did the invention of the printing press. Hippie poet philosopher, anthropologist Gary Snyder speculates that mankind is on the verge of a transition as important as the change from Neolithic to paleolithic.

Mass affluence, mass advertising, mass consumption, mass transportation, mass communications and totally destructive weaponry systems are unknown in other places and other times.

There must at some point be a merger. The hippies have the vision, they may have the forces, their intuitive political understanding of the necessity of non-cooperation with the enemy (dropping-out) is superior to that of the lefties and the importance of building the revolution as one goes—seen however imperfectly in the Haight and other places—could come straight from Chairman Mao or Che Guevara. The hippies know who to love—we must begin with ourselves and each other.

The lefties know who to hate, and why. They have the analysts and some of the skills. They have the social awareness which the hippies are begging to acquire after a long period or attempting to individually rid themselves of the corruptions which this society imposes on all of us.

Perhaps and maybe, if the hippies stop acting like hedonists and the lefties like white liberals we will make a revolution yet.



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