

We often talk about decades—the Twenties, the Thirties, the Forties, Fifties, Sixties, and now (almost) the Seventies. It seems convenient to divide up our history so neatly, although we usually recognize that history is, more or less, a continuous flow of events. But with regard to the Movement our vulgar way of talking seems quite appropriate.

The Movement is dead. Its thrust through the civil rights movement, the student and antiwar movements, and the anti-imperialist/anti-capitalist movement has run its course. On February 1, 1960, four black students from North Carolina A&T College initiated the sit-in that sparked a whole decade of protest. Now at the end of the Sixties the Movement is divided into several factions, and several of them into mini-factions—railing at each other for harbouring “incorrect” ideas. And the organizations of the Sixties are either extinct or rapidly becoming so. Only the Black Panther Party, formed later than the rest, survives, though the government is currently engaged in an enormous and brutal battle to suppress it.

The Movement is alive. The GI movement and the women's liberation movement grow rapidly with the energy and vitality that once characterized the New Left. Black rebellion spreads widely throughout Afroamerica, and there is no sign of abatement. The same with the “cultural revolution,” which involves large numbers of white youth.

The paradox has an explanation. Organizational forms within the Movement proved incapable of sustaining the energies they had gathered and unleashed. So they atrophied. But the conditions for revolt remained, and rebellion flourished. Both the Panthers and SDS tried, and failed, to build national cohesion into a basically anarchic movement largely dependent for its vitality upon spontaneity. With the development of strong local leadership throughout Afroamerica, the black movement's leadership is increasingly decentralized. With the virtual demise of SDS as a national organization, the white sections of the Movement are left with many local organizations of varying strength and quality. So in a curious way the original impulses of the New Left towards a decentralized, anarchic movement have been reaffirmed.

I think it important that the current impasse of the Movement be analyzed to illuminate the reasons why our organizations withered away while rebellion spread deeply into Afroamerica and America. The RYM (Revolutionary Youth Movement-II, a faction of SDS) conference at Emory two weeks ago, with one significant exception, illustrated the Movement's degeneration. Yet Bob Goodman's report, though largely critical, professed to find “a few hopeful signs.”

I found only one—the women's caucus. And since that was elaborated upon at length last week by both Goodman and Sally Gabb, I shall not dwell upon it.

I want to consider four items: culture, elitism, the “national question,” and the question of the agency of social change.

**I. Culture.** There is almost no theory of culture in the Movement, and seemingly little understanding of it. Large sections of the Movement, encouraged by the *Guardian* and Liberation News Service, entertain an antipathy toward hip culture. Speakers at the RYM conference made disparaging remarks about hippies, stupid satirical references to *Easy Rider*, and comments on the “bourgeois” nature of rock-n-roll. Yet hip culture is probably the most widespread liberating influence upon white youth today.

Instead of trying to comprehend such an incredible social phenomenon, the Movement went chasing after “correct” political theory in the tomes of Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and Castro. Yet not a one of those esteemed men wrote about the advanced capitalist society in which we live. The one major Marxist theoretician of advanced capitalist society is Antonio Gramsci—and most Movement people have never heard of him, much less read him.

Briefly, Gramsci analyzed the dominance of ruling classes not simply in terms of their control of political and economic power, but also in terms of their ideologi-

cal hegemony, that is, the penetration and diffusion throughout society, in all its institutional and private manifestations, of a ruling class' way of life and thought. In order to counter that hegemony, a revolutionary party, said Gramsci, must establish its own intellectual and moral hegemony in place of that of the ruling class.

To me, in Amerika, that means that priority should be placed upon efforts to create a counter-culture capable of sustaining for a long period cultural and political opposition to the current regime. In that light, I think that hip culture and black culture are potentially viable. Both incorporate values and modes of living and thinking that are diametrically opposed to the dominant order, and that at the same time provide the vision for, and the seeds of, a new social order.

I think the attachment to organizational forms of another historical epoch illustrates only too well the present impotence of the Left.

**III. The “national question.”** That is a term used by RYM in reference to Afroamerica, the black nation in the US. RYM considers the fight against white supremacy to be worldwide, part and parcel of the fight against US imperialism, and not just a fight confined to Amerika. That is certainly true, and needs all the emphasis it can obtain. Not enough people are aware of the international character of white supremacy.

RYM, however, entertains two other related concepts of no particular value. One, less important, is the thesis that the Black Belt in the South is the homeland and thus the future geographical locale of Afroamerica.



## grym too

The Movement has been quite obtuse in this regard. It has persisted in separating politics and culture—to its own detriment. “Cultural revolution,” as Abbie Hoffman points out, “requires people to change the way they live and act....” If we are to create a socialist politics, we must begin to live our vision of society in our day-to-day lives. Our politics will grow out of the tension between our lives and those of our rulers.

**II. Elitism.** RYM and other Movement groups continue to prate about the “vanguard” party and pre-party organizational forms that will “concretely serve the people.” Now, I will grant that in Afroamerica those concepts, especially as applied by the Black Panthers, make some sense in view of the way in which much of the substance of advanced capitalist society has been denied to Afroamericans. But in white Amerika I do not think it makes much sense. It is too mechanical an application of Maoist theory.

Why should the world's “most privileged workers” (RYM's term) need a vanguard to “serve” them? Does not the whole concept seem absurd in an advanced capitalist society where conditions exist for a decentralized and very liberated political life? Why try to organize in such an incredibly elitist fashion?

At the RYM conference Charles Fulwood, formerly state minister of information of JOMO (see *Bird*, May 26), denounced the idea so effectively that it was not seriously discussed for long. Fulwood inveighed against whites having “the audacity to define what is the black nation,” and thus “denying black people their self-determination.” RYM's principal honcho Mike Klonsky tried lamely a bit later to defend the idea, but without much enthusiasm.

The other concept, that of “white-skin privilege,” is of more importance mainly because it is a concept widespread throughout the Movement. Typically it is stated in terms of “repudiating white-skin privilege.” Goodman in one of the best explications of the concept nevertheless indulges in much verbal and semantic contortion—his discussion of “negative” and “positive”—in order to rescue the concept of privilege.

Goodman says critics find the concept faulty because (1) “it is next to impossible to organize anyone around the concept of giving up something”; (2) white workers as well as blacks are exploited by imperialism; and (3) “repudiation of privilege is a moralistic, liberal appeal to guilt and shame.” He acknowledges the first criticism, but frames RYM's actions in a more positive light. Likewise, he acknowledges the second, but points

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out the differentials in material living conditions between blacks and whites. The third, he contends, is a straw man.

Unfortunately, that man is not made of straw. The concept of repudiating white-skin privilege has had great impact upon the white student movement precisely because it does appeal to the guilt and shame of middle class students interested in fighting racism. Take, for instance, the emotional statement of one New York RYM leader: "When I repudiated privilege, it strengthened me and gave me real contact with the masses"—a confession of guilt in a politicized form, thinly disguised—or, as Fulwood put it, "bleeding heart white liberalism."

More importantly, however, the concept of privilege is racist, that is, it accepts the definition of racism in terms propounded by the ruling class. It is our rulers who propagate the notions of privileges for whites vis-à-vis blacks. There is an enormous body of evidence indicating that white racism is a useful tool in subordinating all elements of the working classes. To organize against racism one must talk, not of repudiation, but of gaining strength through independence of and opposition to the ruling class. To define racism and white supremacy in terms of privilege is to accept the hegemony of Establishment ideology.

IV. *The agency of social change.* There was not much discussion of this crucial question at the RYM conference. Mostly there were banal calls to join/support "the struggles of the most oppressed people." How "the most oppressed people" relate to the means of production—a vital concern for a serious Marxist—was not discussed at the conference, nor have I seen much reference to it in the theoretical papers circulated by RYM. The emphasis on the struggles of the most oppressed conjures up Marx's lumpenproletariat and SDS's old ERAP projects which sought to build an interracial movement of the poor.

The question of the agency of social change desperately needs more sophisticated treatment. The relative importance of blue- and white-collar workers needs investigation. While the various factions of SDS call for organizing the white working class, i.e. blue-collar workers, the trends of the political economy seem to be eroding the importance of that group to the nation's productive apparatus. In fact, in a few years the number of blue-collar workers may begin to decline absolutely. What does that mean for traditional Marxist concepts? A few New Leftists, following the theory of Andre Gorz, have begun to elaborate a theory of a new working class of highly skilled white-collar workers. How applicable is that? What kinds of relations are there between that new working class and hip culture?

The disintegration of most of the organizational forms of the Movement gives us a challenge for the Seventies. Can we meet it? In spite of all my criticism, I remain optimistic. Black and hip culture appear to have the strength and vitality to sustain us for the long haul.

—steve wise

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