On "Containment and Change"
1966 and 1972

Richard Shaull

A conversation between Richard Shaull who wrote Containment and Change at the beginning of 1966 and the Dick Shaull who is trying to find his way in the confusing situation at the end of 1972.

rs72 I've just read your section of Containment and Change and I must say I feel uneasy about it. Especially what you say about an emerging new community, the "formation of a dynamic leadership" for radical change and the "rediscovery of our American revolutionary heritage." What ever led you to expect anything like that?

rs66 My experience in Brazil in the early sixties certainly had a lot to do with it. I became convinced that the creation of a more just and human society meant necessarily a change of systems, of the whole "complex of attitudes, institutions, relations and power alignments" which were represented by the established order. I was also tremendously impressed by the response to this situation on the part of many of the most sensitive and capable members of a new generation. When I returned to the States I was surprised and excited to find these same two elements. And in both situations I saw a great deal of evidence that the major institutions of society were incapable of solving the problems they faced or of satisfying the needs and hopes of large numbers of people. All this led me to affirm that revolution was indeed a "contemporary option."

rs72 It may have looked that way in 1966. But it certainly doesn't today.

rs66 I'm afraid you're right. But where was I mistaken? Was I wrong in my wager that a more hu-

man future for all of us depended upon fundamental changes in the structures of our economic, social and political institutions? I wonder about that sometimes, when I see how many of my former associates have now settled for working for the establishment in the terms it sets or are content with political acts which will perhaps bring a few small changes here and there.

rs72 No! On this point I think your perception was right. All I have to do is to look at the newspaper any day to see new evidence that our present system is not working and apparently cannot change in a decisive way. Or at my own situation in the institutions in which I am caught. But I am afraid you did not understand how strong the structures of power in our society are. They may not be able to solve our major problems, but they still keep going. And when they are threatened they resort to repression and count upon the support of frightened people even when they themselves are being victimized by the dominant system.

rs66 I wonder why I did not see that earlier. Even in '66 it was happening in Brazil. I must have been too impressed by the apparent success of early efforts at protest and confrontation and by the crisis of our institutions which these actions exposed.

rs72 I can see how that happened. But I would like to get at what is for me a more important reason why you and others misjudged the situation. You wanted to bring about radical structural change, but you did not realize what that involved. In other words, you were not radical enough; you did not get to the roots.

rs66 What do you mean? I affirmed the necessity of changing the economic order so that society could control the economy and use our tremendous productive capacity to meet the real needs of people, the

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need for new patterns of economic and political relations with the Third World, and effective participation of people in the decision-making process in those institutions which determine their future.

Dans I certainly have no quarrel with those goals; I too would like to see us moving toward them. But such changes do not get to the heart of the problem. We could move from a capitalist to a socialist economy and still be dominated by the basic logic of an industrial and technological society, by the drive constantly to produce—and consume—more, as well as to compete with each other. To broaden participation in the structures of power changes very little when the problem is that of how power operates within modern organizations and how bureaucracy functions. If we begin to make room for these factors, we are pushed to recognize that fundamental change in our society today may be a question of a radical shift in our values and goals and in the patterns of human relationship which are now taken for granted.

Dans I'm not sure what you're getting at. You may have a point, but you sound too much like pietistic preachers who have been telling us such things for a long time. I'm concerned about the fact that people are dying in Vietnam; that we continue to exploit the nations of the Third World; that there is poverty, unemployment and misery in the slums and other places in our country. I want to do something about that now.

Dans So do I. But I can do very little indeed to change that situation. What disturbs me more is to face the possibility that, even if my efforts succeeded, they would contribute very little to the type of social transformation I really want to bring about.

Dans What I hear you saying is that you have no political options for bringing about radical change. So you give up on politics and turn your attention elsewhere.

Dans No! To conclude that there are no political options available at the moment does not mean to abandon the political struggle. Wherever I see a chance to do something to bring pressure for change, I want to be involved in it. At the same time, I am compelled to redefine what politics is all about today and let that determine my priorities.

Dans What are you getting at by that statement?

Dans Usually politics means organizing people to achieve certain goals within a given process and structure. Sometimes it calls for changing a particular structure which no longer serves the needs of a society: e.g., to replace a monarchy with a democratic government; to move from a capitalist to a socialist economy. But there are rare moments in history when the crisis of institutions is closely linked to a crisis of the process by which people make sense out of their life and work in society. Goals offered by that society are not attainable; when they are achieved, their promise turns out to be empty. The most basic values which undergird people's lives lose their power; nothing makes sense anymore. In such moments, the struggle for radical social change has to do with the development of new processes by which people break the hold of old values and ways of life, discover new reasons for living as well as a form of struggle to make such a new life possible.

The white industrial worker has been nourished on the American dream. Now he finds it less and less attainable, his hopes for reaching it threatened by the blacks; the dream itself often repudiated by his own children and other young people. For this man to participate in the politics of change means for him to be part of a process of transformation of his values and ways of life which gives him a new understanding of what is important for him, a vision of a new society and his place in it, a new experience of being alive and finding life worthwhile. Something similar has to happen for many white middle-class professionals I know who are stuck in frustrating and unfulfilling family and work situations and see no hope for their society; for students and youth who have lost faith in the American dream but are overwhelmed by chaos and confusion.

Dans Maybe this is more important than I had thought. But I have one problem with it. I find it very hard to understand how this represents political action. Isn't it what all sorts of counterculture groups and alternative communities have turned to after they have given up on politics?

Dans Of course, this is happening all over the place. But I am after something else: a process by which people who can't take it any longer begin to change their values and their way of life precisely in relation to the structures in which they are caught and are creating groups or communities which participate in this struggle for liberation, a struggle which is at one and the same time personal and social. One of the major failures of the New Left movements was that they did not work hard enough at such a process. As a result, little change occurred and they were not equipped with the resources for a long and tough struggle. Politically conscious communities of the type I am talking about will, I believe, provide the basis for a new radical politics. If they are lucky, they can provide the context for a deeper understanding of, and continuing reflection on, a changing historical process, for the discovery of new sources of energy, for the invention of new models of social organization and for continued questioning and subversion of the established order.

Dans If I understand you correctly, you want people to participate in a political struggle without having any answers to our most urgent social problems;
more than that, you are insisting on a process of transformation which is also very vague.

ns72 You are quite right. I wish the task before us were not so difficult. But it is, and I think we can help each other to find ways of working which will keep us moving toward the future and even offer us some experience of fulfillment along the way. I think this is possible especially for those of us who are in some way connected with a religious tradition, even though we find ourselves on the fringes of the institutional church.

ns66 Now you are getting around to something I understand and which should be just as important in the situation you are describing as it was when I wrote my part of *Containment and Change*. In fact, my main purpose in that essay was to show how some of the central elements in our Christian heritage could contribute to and sustain such a revolutionary struggle. I emphasized especially an eschatological view of life and history, a certain type of messianism, and the power of Christian symbols of transcendence both to break open a closed situation and to provide resources for a critical stance in the midst of a revolutionary struggle.

ns72 Do you think you accomplished what you set out to do?

ns66 What I said was very sketchy. It was intended to propose a direction for further exploration, which I hoped others would pursue and which I could continue to work on. But I confess the response was not too encouraging.

ns72 That is certainly true, and I think I know why. You called attention to certain elements of the tradition and tried to express them in contemporary terms. Among your readers there were many for whom the old terms still had meaning. Most of them were not committed to working for radical change, and reading your theological reflections did not lead them to change their stance. Some were moving toward a form of Christian political radicalism, but I suspect that many of them were not too happy with what you had to say. They did not like your free way of choosing a few aspects of the tradition rather than putting everything together in order to say: This is what the Gospel is. Nor did they like your insistence on the need to reinterpret and transform this tradition. For them, Arthur Gish's *The New Left and Christian Radicalism* was much more appealing.

ns66 That may be clear to you. I certainly did not see it that way in 1966. But you have not mentioned another group of people, the very ones I was most anxious to reach; those from a Christian background who had opted for revolutionary change but found no meaning in their religious past.

ns72 Your desire to speak to this group was a noble one. I don't think it succeeded. You did not understand that their alienation from a broken-down tradition had reached a point where your attempted reinterpretation of the old theological language no longer appealed to them. If you want to make the resources of that heritage available to them, then you must be concerned to recreate the reality of which that language spoke, to offer a new experience of it in the present situation. For example, it does not help much to explain the meaning of biblical eschatology even in the most relevant contemporary terms. What you have to do is make an eschatological approach to life visible in community: a community in which men and women allow the future to break open the present, live a process of transformation in the midst of chaos, find meaning in a struggle in which they have no clear political options and no answers. As we go about such a task of creation, a new language may emerge which will give expression to that reality. We may find ourselves making new connections with the Bible and with our theological tradition.

ns66 I think I had at least some sense of that in 1966. Or perhaps I should say that the process in which I was involved was moving in that direction.

ns72 That may have been the case. But what you wrote did not offer many clues to that process. Rather you presented us with the conclusions to which you had come at that particular stage of it.

ns66 You may be right. But have you found a style of communication that presents a process rather than conclusions?

ns72 If you have to ask that question at this point, the only thing I can say is, I'm still trying.