**Squeezed between the economic élites of the Right and the cultural élites of the Left, the common people must look to themselves for their tribunes**

# Ten Years After the Free Speech Movement: Reflections of a Participant

Dale Vree

When I arrived at Earlham (a Quaker liberal arts college) from graduate study at Berkeley, a sincere young man from the student newspaper came knocking on my office door asking for a confessional account of my past political sins. That was a first for me. I tried to accommodate the young man as best I could, all the while feeling slightly uneasy. The story in the first edition of the year ran under the blazing headline, "Former Marxist Joins Political Science Department."

This is part of one man's story who, from a religious upbringing, desired earnestly to find a coherent expression of the Christian ethical life in the social realm. It seemed to me that a Christian society would necessarily be a socialist society. Further, it seemed that the only feasible way of achieving that goal would be through Marxism—given the inability of the utopians, anarchists, and social democrats to realize any kind of socialist society. All this was undergirded by a bias in favor of the common man, the workingman, and an aversion to the rich. The four grandparents of this "Former Marxist" were poor immigrants from Holland who settled in the Midwest, and finally on the West Coast. The ancestors were peasants, workers, adventurers, and small merchants. It was my father who planted in me a primitive "proletarian consciousness," a consciousness he inherited from his father, who began his working life as a mechanic and sheet-metal pressman. My father taught me to respect the common man, his culture and his trade unions, and to distrust the "high and the mighty."

As it turned out, my father married a Dutch-American girl who had anything but a proletarian consciousness. The daughter of a house painter/wallpaper hanger, to be sure, but very much upwardly mobile. Seeking escape from the ethnic "ghetto" and its stigma, she was the first female in our little world, an intensely patriarchal subculture, to go to college. Largely through her ambition my immediate family rose from lower-middle-class status to upper-middle-class within a decade. From my mother I received an emphasis on getting ahead, on respectability, on advancement through education. These values coexisted uneasily with my father's basic mindset, which I retained—a gut sympathy for the common man and his culture. Because of my mother I went to college; because of my father, once I got there I was ripe for Marxism.

In the fall of 1964 I was a senior in political theory at Berkeley. That was the time of the Free Speech Movement—the movement that ignited the recent student movement and gave substance to the theories of the emerging New Left. I was ready for it. The previous summer I had traveled in Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union. Prior to that I had been a civil rights activist and a member of the "Old Left" social democratic group, the Young People's Socialist League. But the trip had "radicalized" me, and I came to see that Marxism-Leninism was the hope of the laboring class. Only in this way could it emancipate itself both from capitalist exploitation and from an effete and decadent bourgeois culture.

What a pleasant surprise, then, to return to Berkeley and move right into the circle surrounding the nascent Free Speech Movement. When classes started, according to William Petersen, "out of the more than 27,000 students at Berkeley, perhaps 200 to 300 radicals were primed for rebellion." I was one of that small group. Arrested on December 3 for sitting-in at Sproul Hall and resisting arrest, I was paying my dues. Locked up for a day in the Santa Rita Rehabilitation Center, I returned to campus feeling

DALE VREE is Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Earlham.

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very much like a soldier returning from foreign wars.

On campus I discovered a general strike in progress; thousands of the heretofore uncommitted had suddenly joined the cause. The FSM had seemingly been transformed from a minoritarian into a majoritarian movement. I was told that the sight of police arresting students on campus had activated moderate opinion. I could not comprehend why such a sight should generate such overwhelming sympathy, not for the cops who were enforcing innocuous laws, but for those of us who were breaking them. The laws we had broken were not considered by anyone I knew to be immoral or unjust.

Of course I was roughed up and intimidated when arrested; what does one expect? The sight of masses of cops on campus did not strike me as a violation of sacred turf, as it apparently did strike others. Later it occurred to me that the sight of physical coercion might be intrinsically abhorrent to the educated upper middle class, especially when it is perpetrated by untutored, sleazy, working-class cops.

When the dust settled and the FSM emerged largely victorious, people of all sorts were groping to explain what had happened. It was, all agreed, "unprecedented in American university history." In retrospect, free speech was a surface issue. I for one certainly wasn't interested in free speech as a general principle. According to Jack Weinberg, leading figure of the FSM Steering Committee, the roots of the FSM "go much deeper. The free-speech issue has been so readily accepted because it has become a *vehicle* enabling students to express their dissatisfaction with so much of university life. . . ." Classes were too large and impersonal; professors were too involved in research and thus relegated teaching responsibilities to graduate assistants; too much of the learning experience was nullified by the routine of cramming for exams and jockeying for grades; too much emphasis was placed on preparing for vocation or graduate school and not enough on self-discovery. As Sheldon Wolin and John Schaar put it, students "come to college in search, not merely of knowledge, but of salvation."

But the malaise went even deeper. The dissatisfaction with the university (the "multiversity") reflected a more general alienation from industrial society. The salvation the student missed inside the university was not to be found outside either. According to our leader, Mario Savio, "The most important concept for understanding the student movement is Marx's notion of alienation. . . . The students are frustrated; they can find no place in society where alienation doesn't exist, where they can do meaningful work." Savio characterized society as a "chrome-plated consumers' paradise" without challenges and, most important, "simply no longer exciting."

"Alienation" can cover almost anything. Lewis Feuer writes that for over the last century alienation has been "the catchword of the romantic intellectuals with their personal drama of temporary estrangement in an industrial civilization." Perhaps the concept of alienation speaks to intellectuals and budding intellectuals because they have a will to impose their designs on society and feel especially "alienated" when society declines their enlightened leadership. Marx and Engels were preoccupied with alienation when they began their career. They soon discovered that workers were unmoved by their laments about alienation; they could be moved by charges of economic injustice. As they drew closer to working-class life and its problems they discarded their talk of alienation.

The FSM militants raised the cry of "alienation," not the cry of "exploitation" of the working class. At the time, FSMers were deeply involved in a civil rights struggle which could be construed as an economic struggle on behalf of the Negro proletariat. But even Weinberg confessed that "Students have turned to the civil rights movement because they have found it to be a front on which they can attack basic social problems, *a front on which they can have some real impact*" (italics added). Civil rights activity was gratifying, not necessarily because of what it did for Negroes, but what it did for students.

Alienation is a psychocultural, not a socioeconomic, concept. People may be "alienated" when they are exploited, but the more precise issue is exploitation. The student point of reference in politics was not so much "objective" social problems but "subjective" personal ones (which were *social* problems only because of the increasing number of students).

The university was limited in what it could offer students. It could not promise students that society would listen to them. The university, however, could listen to the students and indulge some of their wishes. In the wake of the FSM the Berkeley campus was bubbling with recipes for "meaningful educational experience" and "student power." Here was another "front" on which students could "have some real impact." The students loved it, and I began to lose hope for the social revolutionary potential of the movement. The student movement seemed increas-

ingly afflicted with a bad case of narcissism, or hypochondria, or both.

The truth is I was perfectly happy in the University. I was neither grasping for meaning in life nor rebelling against industrial civilization. "Participatory education" was just a placebo, a distraction from the primary task of revolutionizing society. And it was a Red revolution that I wanted. I had not joined the Communist Party. It was too tame. Neither was I a Maoist. I was never convinced that Asiatic peasants had much to teach Occidental workers. I gravitated toward the Progressive Labor Movement (now a "Party"), which was founded by former Communists who had been expelled from the Party for resisting de-Stalinization. I considered myself a hard-line Communist, if not something of a neo-Stalinist. P.L. had the singular virtues of being revolutionary, eager to establish links with the working class, serenely indifferent to the narcissistic impulses of students, and disdainful of adolescent urges to outrage the average American by flaunting bohemian attitudes toward sex, drugs, appearance, and work. In short, P.L. was tough—and serious. The Trotskyists were active too; but Trotsky never appealed to me because, unlike Stalin, he was not able to incarnate socially the idea of socialism. Despite his crimes, Stalin was at least able to safeguard socialist property relations in the face of formidable challenges.

To my astonishment my fellow students were not interested in building a revolutionary workers' movement in America. They were moving on to the (long-since forgotten) *Filthy* Speech Movement, and then on to marijuana, LSD, free universities, sexual experimentation, new hair and clothing styles, and a new era in folk and rock music. I wondered whether their interest in social causes was subordinate to their interest in self-gratification, self-expression, and alleviating personal psychological stress. (During the semester of the FSM the number of students admitted for treatment to the University's psychiatric clinic—normally ranging between 8 and 10 per cent of the student body, and increasing each semester—suddenly declined for the first time since 1954.)

I assumed America was a "sick" society, but to discover our movement mirroring the sickness was a letdown. The normlessness and frivolity of the upper reaches of society were not confronted but magnified by the movement. As Raymond Aron said about the politics of the French students during the abortive 1968 revolt, student politics was the politics of psychodrama. "The result," noted Robert Brustein, "is not revolution but rather theatre—a product of histrionic personalities and staged events. . . ."

Just before graduating from Berkeley I got married. My wife was neither a student nor an activist, and certainly not a "revolutionary." She was, mercifully, uncomplicated, and we married for the distressingly nonideological reasons of love. Of mixed Filipino and Mexican-American parentage, she had an intuitive sympathy for the common man. It did not take long for our political and cultural views to coincide. Finding hope neither in our country nor in its supposed antithesis, the movement, we decided to leave both the country and the movement.

We inquired into Cuba, but soon became suspicious of that option. Cuba was immensely popular with precisely those movement people we could not take seriously. We had no desire to spend our time touring Cuba, cutting cane, and playing ping-pong with Fidel. Cuba was too glamorous, too chic. We were ready to begin a new life in a new land. We wanted a society where we could settle down, raise a family—and participate in the world revolution. It would be better, we speculated, to go to a socialist society that was more mature, a society where romanticism would not distort our understanding of what life under socialism is really like. China, it seemed, suffered from the same defects as Cuba. The Soviet Union seemed too remote, too big, and too much taken with peaceful coexistence with imperialism. Yugoslavia was obviously out of the question; it was probably not even a socialist society.

We wanted a mature Communist society which was still militant but not the object of idolization by the domestic New Left. Why not East Germany? Walter Ulbrecht was one of the last "hard-line" Communist leaders in Eastern Europe. East Germany was quite militant, given its conflict situation with West Germany and NATO, and was still a pariah in international politics. It was not a glamor symbol of the New Left, and it wouldn't be difficult to learn German.

Going to the German Democratic Republic is not like going to, say, France or West Germany. One does not just show up and start doing whatever one wants. Since we didn't want to negotiate with East German officialdom from a distance, we thought the solution would be to travel to West Berlin, establish it as our base of operations, and then negotiate with the officials directly.

On our first day in East Berlin we pounded doors at this ministry and that, finally winding up at the Ministry for Higher Education. We had been told that the German Democratic Republic does not have "foreign workers" as West Germany has. Thus it was not possible simply to move into a flat and take a job. On the other hand, the GDR does not welcome people who come and stay indefinitely while doing nothing at all. So we had to do *something*. It was agreed that we should become "students." We were told that our "application" for study in the GDR would be forwarded to another ministry (never identified) and that the procedure would take quite some time. We should get jobs in West Berlin while our "application" was being processed.

It did not occur to us at the time that we might

present something of a security problem. Every other week we were to enter East Berlin for a "rendezvous" with certain Party officials. One official was from the Ministry of Higher Education and attached to the American-GDR Friendship Society. Another official was supposedly just a "friend" of the first, but clearly acted as the first man's superior. We never learned whom he represented. The ostensible purpose of these meetings was to show us the sights of East Berlin. The real purpose, which we did not suspect, was to find out if we were for real. We were told later, by other East Germans, that our interracial marriage probably did more than anything else to reassure the security officials, since in their minds interracial marriage was anathema to CIA operatives.

For five and a half months we worked and waited in West Berlin. Among my jobs there one brought me into close contact with a British security unit that was monitoring activities in the "Soviet Zone." (The apparent casualness of British security procedures was both fetching and, from the "Allied viewpoint," alarming, but that is another story.) We were finally told that we would be admitted to East Berlin, but only for four and a half months. "The struggle," they said, was back in America, and we would eventually have to return there. It was hard to argue with seasoned and successful Communists. Besides, we were delighted at the prospect of a new, albeit temporary, life in a real workers' state. (Many years later we learned that the probable reason we had been treated to an all-expenses-paid stay in the GDR was that the security service thought we could be useful agents back in the States.)

We were to be students in the Philosophy Faculty at Humboldt University (formerly the University of Berlin). It turned out to be not the usual student life. For one thing, we entered during the middle of the term—hardly the way to go about studying philosophy. Then, when we went to the university for our first class, we were met with an empty classroom. Classes had been canceled because all the male students were out on military maneuvers. Classes didn't pick up again for about another three weeks. That left only a month or so of classes before vacation. We did not learn a great deal in the classroom.

The one thing we thought to find in the GDR was a new kind of human being. In a society based on private ownership of the means of production most people could not help but be selfish and hedonistic. In a society based on the collective ownership of the means of production and the inculcation of Communist morality, we hoped, people could be selfless and courageous. We discovered that the human beings of East Berlin were no different from those of West Berlin or America. East Berliners, whether Communist or not, whether young or old, were interested in themselves, their incomes, their possessions, their vacations, their personal luxuries, and their careers.

One young Communist functionary, who worked for the Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee and who enjoyed his own chauffeured limousine and private secretaries, was simply ecstatic abot a ballpoint pen he had brought back from a recent trip to Budapest. On the outside of the pen was the picture of a girl. Turn the pen upside down and she appeared nude. That ballpoint seemed to arouse much more enthusiasm in him than the question of Vietnam or international politics. Was this the new socialist man? We were looking for a new quality of life. For East Germans socialism meant a new quantity in life—the promise of a standard of living even higher than that of West Germany. A laudable goal, perhaps, but hardly what we envisioned as the essence of socialism. After all, if socialism was simply about abundance, countries like America obviously had no need of it.

Party members explained to us that "nothing is too good for the worker." We suggested they were trying to turn the heroic worker into an effete idler. They, in turn, accused us of seeking to promote a *Proletkult*—something which had been tried and discarded in the Soviet Union. We asserted that workers should be able to enter the finest restaurants in their work clothes instead of the required coat and tie. We were Prolekultists, they said. We thought it unsocialist for some celebrities and professionals to get paid so much money that after having bought a country villa, two cars, vacations to Paris, and caseloads of American whiskey they still had more money at their disposal than they could think how to spend. We were Proletkultists.

In short, we expected socialism to be the embodiment of working-class culture. I don't think we were opposed to the improvement of the material conditions of the working class. What we dreaded was for the working class to covet the lifestyle of the rich, not only their possessions but also their mentality. Like Sorel, we wanted the working class to struggle against the bourgeoisie, not imitate it. We didn't want the next generation of East Germans to look like the kids at Berkeley.

Most people who quit communism still agree that communism would be a nice ideal but are queasy about the methods employed to achieve it. That was not our experience. Dictatorship and censorship did not bother us greatly. What did sour us was the prospect that communism was bent on universalizing Beverly Hills, Hollywood, and Searsdale (as well as Berkeley). What was uninspiring about communism was not the means but the end—to make *everybody* rich. Higher standards of living, as such, did not seem a goal worth dedicating our lives to. Equally important, it did not seem to be a goal that *only* socialism could achieve.

In quitting communism we did not become militant anti-Communists. We just became rather indif-

ferent to communism. The communism-versus-capitalism issue seemed to be of less than paramount importance to the average man. Communism might benefit him in one place, capitalism in another. It became more and more apparent to us when we returned to the USA that the real foes of the working class were not so much the factory owners as the people we had previously encountered at Berkeley, the radical students and intellectuals. When they routinely excoriated American workers for being materialistic, we were unmoved. It simply did not seem realistic to expect anything else in other than extraordinary circumstances. In addition, it seemed a bit disingenuous for the privileged (no paragons of pure spirituality themselves) to scold the less privileged for wanting a bigger slice of the pie.

Although I quit communism, I am not sure I have quit Marxism. Marxism can mean many things: (1) an eschatological vision of how society ought to be, based largely on the metaphysics of dialectical materialism (obviously that vision no longer persuades me); but (2) it can be a way of looking at society scientifically. Here Marxism is not an ideology of human fulfillment but a method of analysis, an heuristic device. As a method it directs us (a) to look for a division of society into basically two classes, the rulers and the ruled, and (b) not to take ideological statements about politics at face value. Ideologies are rationalizations of interests and desires, not scientific descriptions of matters of fact. In this methodological sense I suppose I am still something of a Marxist. Finally, (3) Marxism can mean entertaining a fundamental sympathy for the common man. Although many individual Marxists lack this sympathy, Marxism nonetheless teaches that any decent political movement which finds no room for the working class is a fraud. In this sense, too, I hope I am still something of a Marxist.

Returning to the States in 1966 we discovered the radical movement was getting bigger, more radical, and more comprehensive in its critique of American society. At Berkeley (where I returned to do my graduate work in political theory) the momentum of the FSM was such that it was doubtful whether moderates and conservatives were still enjoying the right to free speech. I remained at Berkeley for the next six years, until I earned my Ph.D. I maintained a strict aloofness from the movement. It was a lonely position to be in; and a curious position to be in, since one reason for my aloofness was precisely the vestigial Marxism I continued to carry with me.

It was obvious that the movement had learned nothing about the American worker and his way of life; in fact, the productive classes were often held in open contempt. To be sure, the movement was able to sympathize with *certain* lower orders—Vietnamese peasants, Cuban workers, American Indians on Alcatraz, welfare recipients, convicted criminals. But never with the indigenous Caucasian worker.

The movement did not bifurcate the world into the rulers and the ruled, the élite and the mass, but rather (as Tom Wolfe has hinted) into the hip and funky on the one hand, and the drab and dreary on the other. Thus the issue of class struggle was sidestepped. With this worldview Vietnamese peasants *and* students at élite universities, welfare recipients *and* with-it philanthopists, convicted criminals *and* opulent entertainers all stood shoulder to shoulder on the same side of the great chasm; they were all funky. On the other side of the divide stood the average man, that square lump, who, taken in the aggregate, constituted the great inarticulate mass.

Some observers see movement activists and intellectuals locked in a power struggle with the business and professional classes (whose hegemony over American society is presumably endorsed by the working class). Because of equality of opportunity there is supposed to be a healthy circulation of personnel, tastes, and attitudes between the working class and the business and professional classes. This picture is probably more accurate than most; however, there is greater affinity between movement activists and the business and professional classes than is supposed.

It is generally recognized that radical kids do not come from conservative lower-middle-class homes, from the homes of blue-collar workers, but from permissive upper-middle-class homes, from the homes of businessmen and professionals. The class variable is stronger than the generational variable. Even before the counterculture hit us, we knew it was not true that the affluent are conservative and the less privileged liberal. There are different kinds of conservatism and different kinds of liberalism. The working class is usually more liberal than the affluent on *economic* issues. But on *social, cultural, moral,* and *lifestyle* issues the working class is usually found to be more conservative than the affluent.

During times of economic well-being, social and cultural issues rise to the fore, displacing economic issues in the public mind. In times of economic stability, such as the last decade and a half, conservative causes (opposition to acid, amnesty, abortion, busing; support for law and order, patriotism, prayers in public schools, capital punishment) are championed by the average man. "Leftist" views on these issues are promoted by the privileged (especially by their sons and daughters). The general theory held very well in the case of the FSM.

The late Paul Goodman, in commenting on the FSM, said: "At present in the United States, students—middle class youth—are the major exploited class." Many FSMers were flattered by this characterization. The truth of the matter, however, was and is exactly the opposite. According to W. Lee Hansen and Burton A. Weisbrod, students at the

public University of California (all campuses) "are largely children from well-to-do family backgrounds. Students from families with incomes above $25,000 are four times as likely to be eligible [for admission] as are those from families with incomes below $4,000."

The higher education system in California is triple-tiered, with each tier catering to different classes of students. In the mid-1960's the average family income for students at junior colleges was $8,800, for students at state colleges (now state universities) $10,000, and for students at the university $12,000. Since there has been no tuition in California's higher education system, each student receives a subsidy, which is the difference between the tuition and the cost per student of operating the education system. Since the state invests more money in the university than in the state colleges, and more in the state colleges than in the junior colleges, the subsidy is unequal. The university student, who has the highest family income, receives the highest subsidy ($5,000). The state college student receives $3,000, and the junior college student $1,000. The young person who does not go to college and joins the work force (not always because of poor grades) gets *nothing at all.* So who is being exploited?

This pattern is not untypical of public institutions of higher learning nationwide. And roughly three out of every four students in America attend public institutions. Furthermore, lower-income families in California pay a greater percentage of their income in taxes in support of higher education than do higher-income families. When one adds to all this the fact that those who pursue higher education can expect to earn much more money in their careers than those who don't, one can understand Lewis Feuer's comment: "By economic criteria, college students as a group probably extract more 'surplus value' from the workers than any in the nation."

Consequently it is not possible to perceive the student New Left at public institutions (not to mention private institutions) as a populistic movement, either in the sense of being a movement *of* common people, or in the sense of being a movement which champions the opinions (or even sometimes the economic interests) of the common people.

As for *ideology*, most liberals and radicals fervently believe that what they are doing is on behalf of all "the People," *both* the hip and the dreary. But according to regular polls on the subject in 1970, the majority of the American people does not support the protections of the Bill of Rights. What such findings suggest is that it is precisely those who demand all power for the people who would suffer most severely if the people did somehow get all power into their hands (and in the process strip the Supreme Court, probably the most aristocratic political institution in the country, of its ability to uphold the Bill of Rights).

Any thoughtful radical realizes that "All power to the people!" cannot be meant literally. Yet many radicals seem to continue to see that slogan as a real panacea. People like Herbert Marcuse realize that behind that slogan there must be a hidden assumption, namely, the élitist notion that the masses are bewildered by false consciousness and thus must be led by their noses until they are ready to share in power. With this assumption, of course, anything may be done to the people as long as it is done *in the name of* the people.

Much of the ideology of the movement functions on two distinct levels: It is as an attractive myth capable of seducing the gullible, and it is as a sophisticated formula for disguising and licensing the power ambitions of a small group of privileged radicals. But this urge to "raise consciousness," to "enlighten the unenlightened," and to "force people to be free" is also found in more subtle form among liberals—most poignantly in the busing phenomenon. They know that busing is really in the best interests of the people. But since the majority of the people (both black and white) don't seem to know that, liberals must fall back on the élitist notion that the people cannot separate their apparent "wants" (as expressed in opinion polls) from their real "needs" (which only the clairvoyant liberal can intuit). Then, with the aid of the aristocratic Supreme Court, they are able to impose their benevolent designs on a recalcitrant people.

Yet the idea persists among radicals and many liberals that they are "populists." John Lindsay said he was a populist; so did George McGovern. The Left assumes that by simply championing the economic interests of the people and promising a redistribution of income it is populistic. It is a remarkably mechanical and condescending attitude toward people. A true friend of the people does more than throw tax money their way. That may be a way to start, but it is no place to finish. What the people desire, I suspect, is to be taken seriously. Taking them seriously means responding to their material needs, but also responding to *all* the aspirations which make up their particular ways of being human. Majority beliefs about national defense, race relations, law and order, tolerance of dissent and deviance are often sharply at odds with "enlightened" opinion. It may be impossible for the Left to sympathize with the people on these scores. If so, the Left must forfeit the (seemingly honorific) title of "populist." An authentic populist is a champion of the people's economic interests *and* social values.

Ten years after the Free Speech Movement it is clear that the Left has forfeited its claim to be a movement of and for the people. Squeezed between the economic élites on the Right and the cultural élites on the Left, the common people must look to themselves for their tribunes.