

# THE PEOPLE:

## A MORMON STUDENT'S REACTION TO THE RADICAL MOVEMENT

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In the spring of 1968 a Mormon fellow-student, Bob Lemkau, and I attended sessions on nonviolence and revolution taught by radical students at U.C., Berkeley. Through four years of classes at Berkeley, and culminating in this course, I gained some understanding of what "The Movement" was all about. These are some of my observations of the people and the ideas of the New Left Movement, as seen through Mormon eyes.

Part one deals with people, the conversations, the feelings. Parts two and three are a response to the political movement criticized in terms of my religious views.

### I

As the first session of the class began, Gail, barefoot and dressed in jeans and a sweater, told us in quiet tones what the course would be like. She would assign no required readings. She intended to give all of us A's or B's if we simply showed up for class. She would appreciate everyone participating in class discussions. "We will be discussing various aspects of the move-

ment . . ." Her voice droned on in the background as my mind began to wander.

It was raining outside. Inside the room, which was an upstairs bedroom in an old house a few blocks from the Berkeley campus, were twelve or thirteen students sitting on the floor or on chairs. Some of the men were bearded. Most of the girls wore simple miniskirts and sweaters. Some wore sandals and shawls. One wore a button which said, "There's A Change Gonna Come."

Two cats played among the students. The little white kitten had two names. Some nights she was called "Whitey." Other times she was "Honky." The large, passive Siamese did not seem to have a name at all.

There were no beds, only mattresses with covers spread on the floor. On a small wooden table near the door Gail's roommate, Virginia, had placed a coffeepot and paper cups. The table was coffee-stained. The only thing on the wall was a chalk drawing of Virginia. There were two or three chairs and a small, dusty rug.

My mind came back to Gail. She was finished with preliminaries. We were discussing which times were most convenient for everyone to attend. The students spoke softly, using their hands in slow, expressive gestures to illustrate points. I noticed another button: "Hell No, We Won't Go!"

After lengthy debate we decided that 7:30 to 10:00 P.M. Tuesday nights was best for everyone. This accomplished, we adjourned until the following Tuesday.

This was my first intimate impression of The Movement. What would I learn here that I had not seen in the confrontations on campus, in the Free Speech Movement, in the Vietnam Day demonstration? What was The Movement? Who were these people?

My first impression of Gail was that she was, like many intelligent students I had met at Cal, disorganized in her thinking and somewhat ineffective as a person. This impression was due to her mannerisms and to the fact that it took us an hour and a half to decide which hours to set for class attendance.

But I think now, a year later, that Gail simply felt she was among equals and therefore bent over backward not to impose herself on the group. She was twenty-six, a graduate student in sociology, and experienced. She could have demanded more discipline without causing resentment. But her suggestions were timid; her eyes glanced back and forth from face to face searching for, sensing disapproval; she retreated at the first sign of disagreement and offered an alternative. Often she said, "It's up to you," or "It really makes no difference to me."

The weeks went by, and I learned about the others.

Gail's roommate, Virginia, had dropped out of school and had driven, in what she called a car, to Washington, D.C., where she had somehow obtained some funds from the government and had used them to begin a small poverty project in Berkeley. It was Virginia who made me feel at home the first night. She leaned over to me during the first session, nodded toward Gail, and whispered in my ear, "She likes to let these discussions ramble all

over the place. She knows I don't approve of that." Gail overheard this. She turned slightly, smiled, and turned back to the discussion.

John, with black hair hanging down over one eye, passionately hated the police. His conversation was salted with choice epithets describing the Berkeley police, whom he considered brutal and malevolent.

Mary, who usually sat in the hall because there was no room in the bedroom, reminded me of a horse. She spoke with gentle shakes of her head to emphasize each word. Her "bag" was passivism and nonviolence. She reacted in quiet agony to John's violent denunciations, and tried from time to time to get him to consider a different position; "I met a cop once in a non-stressful situation [she meant somewhere other than a riot] and he turned out to be a really nice guy." Her offering was turned down by John.

Janet was pretty. In conversation with me she described her father as a passionless college professor for whom she felt some lingering respect, but no emotional attachment. She told Bob and me one night, as we drove her home, that her father had always been "too logical," and had never really "felt" anything. Jan had finally become alienated and left home. She came to Oakland and lived with an impoverished black family there, stealing and selling the loot "to keep those poor children from starving." She attributed the plight of her adopted family to "an imperialistic, corrupt society."

It is difficult to make generalizations about students in this setting. They were from all over the country and brought with them a wide variety of experiences in student movements and attitudes about university life and society in general. But most of them discussed "the revolution" with ease. This was not, of course, the American or Russian Revolution, but "the revolution that's coming." I expected to see a lot of marijuana but did not, nor did I ever see anyone on a trip (perhaps I wouldn't know if I saw one). Most of the students were dedicated to peaceful, nonviolent tactics. Militancy and violence were definitely not in vogue. Nevertheless, they were in a state of anticipation about a vague "revolution." They seemed to accept this as fact, without discussion, and continually urged that they "discuss tactics."

Not being a dedicated revolutionary (but only the armchair, philosophical type) I usually objected at this point, stating that I was opposed to The Revolution and did not want to discuss "tactics." Until they found out, near the end, that I was both a Mormon and an ROTC cadet, none of them suspected that I was sincere in my objections. As time went on they began to consider me affectionately as a retarded radical, one of "them," who simply needed reassurance and guidance along the right paths.

Halfway through the quarter Gail suggested that we might be interested in "playing a game" next week. I had visions of the whole class getting up and playing at revolution by marching down to the Oakland Induction Center and lovingly bombing it down, taking turns dragging their retarded revolutionary along.

The following Tuesday night Bob and I arrived a half hour late (although the class was supposed to start at 7:30, everyone wandered in with coffee or Cokes at about 8:00). John had neatly arranged a hand-drawn map

of the Oakland Induction Center and the surrounding area of Oakland. On this map he had placed black and white chessmen. The blacks, he informed us, were the police, and the whites were the students (as I write this, a year later, I wonder if John's equating the evil police with the color black did not reveal a little of that "latent race prejudice," where white is good and black is bad, which is supposed to be lurking in all of us). The object of the game was for us to play various roles in a situation in which the students would attempt to "liberate the induction center" by preventing the induction buses from entering with their cargoes of draftees. The game would be played out on the map, using the chessmen. A visitor, a girl, would referee. Gail suggested that the liberation should last only an hour or two "to demonstrate to the middle class our opposition to the war." The object, as she saw it, was "to gain the sympathy and moral support of the middle class." John did not agree. Since students had tried this approach on several occasions, using peaceful tactics, and failed, he believed the time had come to use more determined tactics. Mary bristled at this and offered more virtuous alternatives. We argued for thirty minutes on whether sticking a long-stemmed flower down the barrel of a policeman's rifle was more or less effective than spitting in his face. Gail tried in vain to get the discussion back to the game. The visitor sided with John, interjecting her own provocative statements, and at last the whole class collapsed into an anarchy of noisy side debates and shouting matches, with Gail in the middle looking beseechingly at Virginia, who, I suppose, was thinking she had expected this all along. I rose to the visitor's bait and accused her of having a "pathological egotism" in trying to ram her political beliefs down people's throats by violent means. This had a greater effect than I had planned. The conversation stopped. The girl smiled a slight, sad smile, nervously flicked ashes from her cigarette, and then got up and walked out.

Gail did not let my indiscretion go unnoticed. When it came time for the students to choose roles for the game, everyone in the room wanted to play radical and no one wanted to play police. I volunteered to play police, figuring this would lend realism to the exercise, but Gail intervened. In a rare fit of decisiveness she announced, "No, Morgan has to play radical! It will do him good!" I decided it might, after all, do me some good.

A week later I finally asked, point blank, what was wrong with our present system, and why they wanted a revolution. From their widely diverse answers, I got a picture of their goal. It was similar to Jefferson's idea of the simple, agrarian life, free of bureaucracy, war, IBM cards, and race prejudice.

One of the group asked if such a life wouldn't result in a nation of small-town people, with the abhorred small-town, narrow mentality. I said that I thought the Jeffersonian life could result in a breed of nice people, but when I described the towns of Utah as the example I had in mind, the reaction was John's "Oh! But they're so prejudiced!" I replied that I had read a sociological study showing that Mormons were not abnormally prejudiced. But they dismissed my study with contempt.

It was that same week that Mary bumped into me one day on campus when I was wearing my ROTC uniform. At first she didn't notice who I was. But when she recognized me, she stared at my uniform, stunned. "Hi," I said, and smiled. She smiled weakly, then said, "What kind of a person are you, anyway?" Before I could answer, she had turned and was gone.

## II

The Movement is more than just people and confrontations and coffee stains and no bras. What is it that unites them all, despite their divergent attitudes? What is the philosophy of The Movement?

Its ideas are developed by such writers as Herbert Marcuse, Eric Fromm, John Kenneth Galbraith, Michael Harrington, Malcolm X, Thomas Hayden, and others. To delve into all of its implications is not my purpose here, but its outlines look like this:

It is a philosophy of "community." What is "community?" To Lyndon Johnson it was "a place where men are more concerned with the quality of their goals than the quantity of their goods," . . . where leisure would mean "a welcome chance to build and reflect, not a feared cause of boredom and restlessness," . . . where the city would serve "the desire for beauty and the hunger for community."<sup>1</sup>

To George Chang, a black revolutionary in Sacramento, it would be a society in which the people at the bottom rungs of the social ladder would "have some control over the decisions which affect their own lives." To student leaders it would emphasize "participatory democracy." Other ingredients would be a lack of regimentation and a minimum of bureaucracy. It would stress individuality and creativity. It would be a community based on love rather than a heavily hierarchical system based on power and economic interest.

I can not explain what all of these terms mean because they are slippery ideas, even to the New Leftist. They are almost more feelings than ideas. A recent article in *The New Yorker*, discussing the political activities of certain members of the Catholic clergy, said, "The theology of . . . the religious New Left precisely parallels the principles of the political New Left. Both are collectivist, pacifist, unstructured, utopian, verbose but anti-intellectual, obsessed with 'community,' centered on a style of life rather than on any systematic ideology . . . ."<sup>2</sup>

The spirit of this community is almost, therefore, an instinct rather than a philosophy. And it is this instinct which senses giant forces in society gradually spreading out to wash away whatever is left of "community" in American life.

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<sup>1</sup>Michael Harrington, *Toward a Democratic Left* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1968), p. 3. 1968), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Francine Du Plessix Gray, "The Bread Is Rising," *The New Yorker Magazine*, January 25, 1969, p. 64.

What are these forces? The forces responsible for the encroachments on community spirit are seen as, (1) application of vast technological resources in the interests of privileged elites; (2) too-rapid change of life patterns, also caused by the technological revolution; (3) a national obsession with armaments and consumption; and (4) corporate and public bureaucracy.

As these forces loom larger and larger, what happens to the community spirit? The fate of the community is really only the fate of the individual in the community; loneliness sets in, and a sense of being invisible, of going unnoticed and unlistened-to; creativity and individuality are smothered; interpersonal love becomes shallow and corrupted. Eric Fromm writes, "We have a well-functioning economic system under the condition that we are producing goods which threaten us with physical destruction, that we transform the individual into a total passive consumer and thus deaden him, and that we have created a bureaucracy which makes the individual feel impotent."<sup>3</sup>

The instinctual sense of alarm which is aroused by all of this gives rise to "The Movement." The Movement, therefore, is a collection of people who sense a disintegration of community in the United States and who are trying to halt those forces in society which they see as responsible for it. Their methods run the range from electoral politics (McCarthy, Kennedy) to civil disobedience bordering on guerilla warfare.

This, in simplified form, is the radical critique.

A Mormon's reaction to The Movement can easily be a troubled one, for while the radicals seem, in gospel terms, to be antireligious, promiscuous, and valueless, one cannot fail to notice a resemblance between the philosophical direction of the New Left and the precepts of the gospel.

The introduction to the biography of Apostle Melvin J. Ballard states, "The measure of life is how closely it equates with its potential. Few men have their potential clearly defined in childhood and few can, at life's end, feel an assurance of having matched the achievable with the achievement." Similarly, the policy statement of the New Left, the Port Huron Statement, declares, "We regard men as infinitely precious and possessed of unfulfilled capacities for reason, freedom, and love."<sup>4</sup> These statements show a philosophical link between our religion and present student radicalism; they express a basic faith in the godly potential of human beings.

Another analogy is seen in Mormon community theory. Our religion is a kind of enlarged family structure in which individuals relate to one another in many ways. The Movement, also, has a vision of this kind of life. The Port Huron Statement says, "Personal links between man and man are needed, especially to go beyond the partial and fragmentary bonds of function that bind men . . . ." The Movement's experiments with communal activity reflect a desire to construct communities which, like those in our Church, integrate worship, work, play, and personality all at once.

<sup>3</sup>Eric Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope* (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup>"The Port Huron Statement," *The New Student Left, An Anthology*, Mitchell Cohen and Dennis Hale, eds. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), p. 12.

A third connection is found in the prophets' repeated warnings against materialism, on the one hand, and the New Left's conviction, on the other hand, that personal peace will be had only when society overcomes its "idolatrous worship of things by men."<sup>5</sup>

It is possible that any similarities in doctrine between Mormonism and radicalism are superficial, fading in the light of larger incompatibilities. But it is also possible that the Church may someday view society's values and institutions as the same threats to family unity and human fulfillment as does the New Left.

### III

Aside from issues of philosophy, another question occurs to the observer of the scene; assuming the radical critique of society is correct, does The Movement offer a constructive way to redirect society from bureaucracy and isolation to liberation and community? Will a strategy of pressure to effect structural changes in the system obtain the desired results?

In contrast to other viable rebellions in our nation's history, the New Left seems chained to logical and practical contradictions. There are three major contradictions.

First, the students demand a rational, uncompromising and efficient national policy directed toward a reallocation of national priorities from war and consumption to social welfare and urban reconstruction. Such a policy would require a highly unified, powerful elite at the head of the government. On the other hand, The Movement demands a more democratic system, a "participatory democracy," more responsive to the individual in the national community. Such a system would require sharing of policy-making authority and slow, inefficient implementation. The two goals are mutually exclusive. Thomas Jefferson said, "We have a choice between efficiency and liberty." The New Left wants both.

Second, the students demand that the universities be autonomous and free from political manipulation. At the same time they demand that the universities take a more active role in the positive correction of community inequities and poverty. In other words, what they're saying is, "Everybody who's political leave our university alone, but we demand the right of our university to jump in and meddle with everybody else's politics." Again, the two goals are mutually exclusive.

Third, "participatory democracy" would require, of course, responsiveness to the demands of everyone. The ethic of compromise would be a premium in such a community. As Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., said last year at Boalt Hall, "Democracy is the renunciation of absolute goals." But the New Left has rejected the doctrine of compromise in favor of absolute demands. Time and again I have heard the leaders of the Berkeley movement denounce administrative compromises as "sellouts."

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<sup>5</sup>"The Port Huron Statement," p. 13.

These contradictions hopelessly confuse the direction of The Movement and create frustration and irrationality among its constituents. We see, therefore, not the development of a movement, but a perpetual process of a movement being conceived, followed by a perpetual abortion of itself.

This is indeed a peculiar and complex problem: a movement whose abstract goals are justifiable, but whose efforts at implementation are self-defeating. This phenomenon suggests that we may be reaching a critical point in the progress of our national experience.

If a conservative reaction suppresses The Movement, we could be justified in presuming that our society was unable to respond in a beneficial way to the New Left. It may be, therefore, that political systems reach a point of complexity and improvisation, after repeated rebellions and reforms, at which they no longer can be improved upon by structural modifications. This may be because political systems are only a reflection of the quality of the people who make them up. They are constantly rebuilt and improved, therefore, until their defects are due relatively less and less to the systems themselves, and relatively more and more to human nature. And so it may be that the New Left is attempting to correct by political means what can only be corrected by religious or spiritual means. The radicals attack the weaknesses of human beings, and this makes their own constituents vulnerable. The Movement turns against itself.

Is there any road that The Movement could take that might lead to real results?

Political revolution seeks to affect the quality of the individual life by changing the system. Religion would more probably try to affect the system by changing the individual. The New Left would alter the system so that instead of satisfying only temporal needs and guaranteeing property and civil rights, as it has been geared to do for thousands of years, the system would create a humane, spiritual community. But as Michael Harrington admits, "Social structure cannot create spiritual life. It can help make it possible."<sup>6</sup>

A true revolution, therefore, would not aim at institutions as much as it would aim at the individual. It would have to be a spiritual upheaval, effected man by man, child by child, until a society was transformed. Anything else would seem to be superficial, missing the root causes of the problem.

If radicalism seeks to transform the world by changing the system, and if organized religion addresses itself narrowly to the individual, is it possible that a link might still be found in the *type* of individual which religion attempts to produce? Would it be possible for the Church to avoid broad social issues but, in directing itself to the individual inspire that individual to look beyond his personal moral world and to work for fundamental changes in society as well as for his own salvation? Would, in fact, his involvement in the moral issues confronting his society facilitate his spiritual growth and

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<sup>6</sup>Harrington, *Toward a Democratic Left*, p. 144.

his personal salvation? I think such an idea is not outside the spirit of our religion.

Whether there is any possible fraternity between the New Left and the gospel is the question I have raised in this essay. Whether organized religion can retain its vitality if the committed, creative young increasingly spend their passion elsewhere, whether the radical movement can sustain its positive moral quality over the long, difficult road ahead of it without the stability and perspective of organized religion, and whether the New Left has, in fact, anything worthwhile to offer, are questions which ought to be asked. They ought to be asked because, like our religion, The Movement commands the loyalty of hundreds of thousands of idealistic youth, and because, like our religion, it is less an economic or political program than it is a concern for the spiritual quality of life, and because, like our religion, it exhibits an increasingly significant influence on our national culture.



