

TOWARDS A THEORY OF PROTEST

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I PARTICIPATED in what may well turn out to have been an historic occasion, the first "teach-in" at the University of Michigan. This originated as a protest movement against the escalation of the war in Vietnam, by a group of Michigan faculty, mostly younger men. It developed from a simple protest into what turned out to be a unique educational experience in which between two and three thousand students literally sat down and talked and argued all night. The movement spread rapidly to other campuses and organized a national teach-in which was held in Washington in May. It now begins to look like almost a national mobilization of university teachers and students. In a way, the forerunner of this movement was the remarkable mobilization of faculty members on university campuses against Goldwater, which represented political arousal on a scale which has rarely, if ever, been seen before in these supposedly cloistered circles. The teach-in movement is clearly a response to Johnson's behaving like Goldwater, so in a way is part of this same arousal.

Nobody, unfortunately, is much concerned to study the effects of all this, some of which may be quite different from what the people who are aroused by the arousal intend. I am constantly impressed by the ironies of social systems, where action often produces quite the reverse of the consequences which are intended. On the other hand, presumably, the better our knowledge of social systems, the more likely are we to avoid any unintentional consequences. It is important, therefore, for protesters to have some theory of protest, and to be

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sensitive to those circumstances in which protest is effective in achieving its intended consequences, and those circumstances in which it is not.

LET ME VENTURE, then, on a few tentative suggestions for a possible theory of protest, in the form of some tentative propositions.

1. Protest arises when there is strongly felt dissatisfaction with existing programs and policies of government or other organizations, on the part of those who feel themselves affected by these policies but who are unable to express their discontent through regular and legitimate channels, and who feel unable to exercise the weight to which they think they are entitled in the decision-making process. When nobody is listening to us and we feel we have something to say, then comes the urge to shout. The protester is the man in the advertisement who does not read the *Philadelphia Bulletin*, but who has something very important to say that clearly isn't in it. Furthermore, as he apparently has no access to the *Bulletin*, all he can do is to stand in the middle of its complacent readers and scream. In the present case, the State Department White Paper on Vietnam is clearly the *Philadelphia Bulletin*; the protesters are those who see something quite obvious that isn't in it.

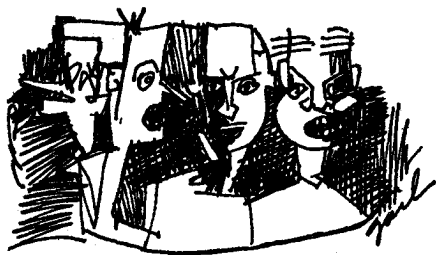
2. Protest is most likely to be successful where it represents a view which is in fact widespread in the society, but which has somehow not been called to people's attention. The protest of the man who does not read the *Philadelphia Bulletin* is likely to be highly successful, as he is usually trying to call attention to events which obviously ought to be in the *Bulletin*, being intrinsically newsworthy. Societies, like solutions, get supersaturated or supercooled; that is, they reach a situation in which their present state is intrinsically unstable, but does not change because of the absence of some kind of nucleus around which change can grow. Under these circumstances, protest is like the seed crystal or the silver iodide in the cloud. It precipitates the whole system toward a position which it really ought to be in anyway. We see this

exemplified in the relative success of the protest movements in civil rights. Here we have a situation, as Myrdal saw very clearly in *The American Dilemma*, in which certain fundamental images of the American society were inconsistent with its practices, and where, therefore, the protesters could appeal to an ideal which was very widely held. Wherever there is hypocrisy, there is strong hope of change, for the hypocrite is terribly vulnerable to protest. On the other hand, in the absence of protest, the supersaturated society may go on for a long time without change, simply because of what physicists call the nucleation problem.

3. Where the society is not supersaturated, a protest movement has a much rougher time. It then has to move the society toward the new position, from which change can then crystallize out, and this is a much more difficult task than crystallizing change in a society that is ready for it. Furthermore, protest as a social form, which may be very effective and indeed necessary in crystallizing a supersaturated society, may be quite ineffective in moving a society which is not saturated for change toward a point where it is saturated. That is, the techniques for creating the pre-conditions of change may be very different from the techniques required for crystallizing it. Where a society is divided and ambivalent, a protest movement designed to push it in one direction may easily arouse movements of counter-protest designed to resist the movement or to push it in the other direction. This is something to which protesters rarely give sufficient attention. Because they are themselves emotionally aroused, they tend to think that almost everybody must be in a similar frame of mind, which may not be true at all. It is quite possible, for instance, for protest movements to arouse counter-protests much larger than the original protests, and, hence, the net result of the protest is to move the system away from the direction in which the protesters want it to move. The Goldwater campaign was a good example of this. Goldwater was nominated as a Republican candidate as a result of a protest movement among discontented conservatives. The result, however, was the arousal of a much larger movement of counter-protest among those

who were frightened and dismayed by Goldwater, which resulted in a quite unprecedented defeat.

4. The dynamic process of social systems is not entirely random, and this means that any particular social system is more likely to go in some directions than it is in others. Obviously, a protest movement which is trying to push the social system in a direction in which it has a high probability of going anyway is more likely to be successful than one that is trying to push the social system in a direction that has a low probability. Unfortunately, it is by no means easy to assess the various probabilities of change; nevertheless, we can surely know something about it. At least we can be pretty sure, for instance, that movements toward absolute hereditary monarchies today have a pretty slim chance of success. We can identify certain cumulative processes in the history of social systems, such as the growth of knowledge, the widening of integrative systems, and so on, which have a certain long-run irreversibility about them, even if they may have short-run setbacks. Systems move, however painfully, toward payoffs.



As we learn to understand the payoffs, we can identify those protest movements which have the best chance of success. On the other hand, it is not the "real" payoffs which determine human behavior, but the imagined ones, and there can often be a strong divergence between the two, at least in the short-run, and this short-run can be painfully long.

5. We might, perhaps, distinguish between protest movements and educational movements, the one designed to cry-

tallize a change for which a society is ready, the other to push the society toward a change for which it is not yet ready. The techniques of these two movements may be very different. A protest movement needs to be shrill, obstreperous, undignified, and careless of the pattern of existing legitimacy which it is seeking to destroy in the interest of a new pattern which is waiting to emerge. Educational movements have to be low-keyed, respectful of existing legitimacies—tying into them wherever possible, and chary of arousing counter-protest. A good example of this in race relations is the work of the NAACP, which unquestionably laid the educational groundwork for the recent protest movement in civil rights. When the movement for protest arrives, however, the educational institution is often pushed aside, and perhaps properly so, as inappropriate in the circumstances. On the other hand, protest movements for which society has not been prepared by education, or which are seeking for improbable change, are virtually doomed to failure, like the IWW. The movement for social security in this country is an interesting example of one in which the educational process dominates it almost completely, and where the role of protest is almost negligible.

6. Even when a situation is ripe for a protest movement, it can go astray and be ineffective if it takes an inappropriate form. The form of a protest should be closely related to the object of protest. This is why, for instance, on the whole, the sit-ins have been very successful, whereas marches and parades are usually less so. It can be particularly disastrous to the protest movement if the protest takes a form which arouses a counter-protest over the form itself, and not over the object of protest. Any object of protest can easily be lost in argument and counter-argument over the question as to whether the form of the protest is legitimate or appropriate.

7. Protest movements are also likely to be weakened if the object of protest is not clear, or if there are many different objects, some of them incompatible, combined in the same protest. Thus, the strike in industrial conflict is usually a rather effective form of protest, particularly when it is directed toward a change that would have come anyway, because it is

appropriate to the objective, and the objective itself is usually very clear. Political protest, by contrast, is apt to be diffuse; its objectives are unclear and often inconsistent. Political protest movements almost always run into the problem of strange bedfellows, and the less clear the objectives of protest, the less likely is anybody to fulfil them.

WITH these propositions in mind, let us now take a look at the peace movement and the current movement of protest against the war in Vietnam. Unlike the civil rights movement, which has fulfilled almost all the conditions for successful protest, the peace movement only fulfils some of them. The condition which it fulfils is that related to the long-run payoff. There is no doubt that the payoffs of a stable peace are enormous. The \$120 billion a year that the world spends on the war industry is an appalling waste which may well set back the achievement of world development by even hundreds of years, and might even prevent it altogether. The probability of long-run change toward a system of stable peace is therefore high, and the peace movement fulfils this one essential requirement for the success of a movement for social change. On the other hand, it fulfils practically none of the other conditions. Its objectives in terms of specific institutional and behavioral change are not clear. We still do not really know how to get stable peace, and what particular forms of behavior lead us toward, rather than away from, this goal. There is, furthermore, a great diversity of view as to immediate objectives within the peace movement.

It is clear also that American society, at least, is not supersaturated in regard to social change toward stable peace. In a sense, the task of the peace movement is fundamentally educational, rather than protest. Most of the communications which are received by Americans, whether in the formal educational system or in the informal contacts of face-to-face conversation, tend to create an image of the world in which war is a recurrent necessity, and in which, furthermore, for the United States, war has paid off pretty well. We tend to associate war with easy victories, like the war against Mexico

or Spain, or with periods of economic prosperity and recovery from depression, as in the Second World War. We are not and never have been a peace-loving nation; we are not only ruthless and bloody, but we feel no shame about it. There is nothing in our Constitution; in our national heroes, many of whom are generals; in our national origin, which came out of a war; in our greatest single national experience, which was the Civil War; or in anything which contributes to our national image which makes war illegitimate in the way racial discrimination is felt to be illegitimate and inconsistent with our national ideals. In the case of war we have very little hypocrisy, and change is very difficult. The peace movement is not simply trying to mobilize an already existing mass feeling or sentiment; it is trying to create a radical change in the national image, against which all the forces of ordinary legitimacy seem to be arrayed. In the case of the peace movement, therefore, protest arouses counter-protest with great ease.



The hawks in our society far outnumber the doves, and those who flutter the doves stand in danger of arousing clouds of hawks from their innumerable nests. It will take an extensive process of education, and perhaps even the grim teacher of national disaster, before we learn that the prevailing national image is incompatible with our well-being or even with our survival; and we have yet to learn that we are only one people among many, that we are not the rulers of the world, that power cannot be exercised without legitimacy, and that the costs of stable peace, significant and important as they are, are far less than the benefits.

THE TEACH-IN MOVEMENT represents, perhaps, a partly subconscious recognition of the validity of some of the above principles. It began as a movement of pure protest and outrage, also, that we were using Vietnamese as the guinea pigs various. They included a genuine fear of escalation into nuclear warfare; they included also a sense of moral outrage at the use of such things as napalm and the "lazy dog," and the appalling sufferings which we are imposing on the Vietnamese in the supposed name of freedom and democracy. Coupled with this, unquestionably, were some people on the left who were politically sympathetic with the objectives of the Vietcong, though in the original movement there were few if any of these. I am inclined to think that the largest motivating factor was a sense of simple human sympathy with the sufferings of the Vietnamese, and a sense of outrage at the utterly inhuman weapons of the American air force, and a sense of outrage also that we were using Vietnamese as the guinea pigs in weapon experimentation. The method of protest first suggested by the original group at University of Michigan was a work moratorium and a one-day suspension of classes. This violated a good many of the above principles. It is a form of protest which is not related to the object of protest; it immediately aroused a large counter-protest over the means, as well as over the object of protest, and it was very strongly on the protest side of the spectrum and away from education. The teach-in, which was adopted as a substitute, was much more successful. It at least edged toward the education end of the spectrum, even though it still retained a good many of the qualities of protest, and it was appropriate to the situation. The teach-in movement, furthermore, seems to be developing more and more in the direction of dialogue rather than pure protest, and this itself reflects the fact that there is an educational task ahead rather than a task of pure protest. The problem is change in the national image itself, something which protest is singularly unable to do, for protest has to take the image for granted and call attention to certain inconsistencies and incompatibilities. It assumes a given national image and says to the policy maker, "be consistent with it."

Under these circumstances, what is likely to be the best strategy for those of us who are interested in producing social change toward stable peace? The answer seems fairly clear. It should be a strategy of limited protest and extensive education. We should not, I think, abandon protest altogether, for there are many points even now at which, for instance, the conduct of the war in Vietnam violates a widespread national image of the United States as a reasonably decent and compassionate country. Protest, I suspect, should be directed mainly at the air force; it should be directed at the use of specific weapons which certainly fall under the heading of "cruel and unusual punishments," the moral feeling against which is securely enshrined in our Constitution and history. We have paid enough lip service to the United Nations, also, to render protests on this score viable. The contrast between the shred of legitimacy which the United Nations gave us in Korea and the total absence of legitimacy in Vietnam is very striking, and protest could well be concentrated on this. We also have in our national image a high value on negotiation and a willingness to negotiate, and our present interpretation of negotiation as the abject surrender of the other side can be protested fiercely and effectively. Beyond this, I suspect, protest will be ineffective, with one possible exception. Our deepest trouble in Vietnam arises out of the total failure of our China policy, and, at this point, it may well be that the country is ripe for change, and that, to continue this particular metaphor, protest will shake the tree. There is real danger lest in our obsession with Vietnam we forget the larger issue, and we forget that the solution to Vietnam lies in our relationship with Peking.

Beyond this, social change toward stable peace can only come through education and research. The educational task is to convince people that stable peace is possible. Here we need to point to the many examples in which it has already been achieved. In the educational process, unlike in the process of protest, we want to tie in as far as possible with existing legitimacy, existing images, and familiar history. We need to play up how we got a security community with the British

and the Canadians. We need to play up historical examples of peaceful coexistence, such as was achieved between Protestants and Catholics in the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. We need to emphasize the continuing dynamic that goes on in socialist countries as well as in our own, and to emphasize the learning process and our role as a teacher. We need to emphasize, also, the possible role of the United States—not as a great power or as a world dominator, but as a leader in a world movement for stable peace. All these things can easily be fitted into existing images and existing legitimacies. Then, at some point, a protest movement may be necessary to crystallize the image as a peace leader. This may be some time off, but we should be ready for it when it comes.

