

Schools for Action: Radical Uses of Social Space

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Insurgent appeals to traditional communal bonds and “the way things are supposed to be” can take on very different meanings, depending on the social position and nature of the leader making the appeal. Both George Wallace and Martin Luther King Jr. claimed the mantle of “the true southern heritage.”

Popular democratic themes (such as civic idealism, religious identification with the oppressed, organized cooperation, or free expression) become distinguished from parochial interests when community groups move from simply resisting perceived threats to actively opposing the centers of power. Yet conventional analyses of social change largely fail to address such processes. Indeed, both left and right have held to an analysis that sees traditional communitarian structures as the bulwark of the social order, the barriers against social movements for change. Social movements, in the conventional view, grow out of detachment from such structures. As the sociologist William Kornhauser once put it, “people who are atomized readily become mobilized.”¹

The problem derives from assumptions at the heart of western political theory, whose fundamental categories, we would argue, occlude understanding of the communal wellsprings of democratic social struggles. Put simply, dominant theories of political action and social movement make a radical division between “life” and “politics,” between “private” and “public,” between traditional, settled, and historical communities and the arenas of progress, innovation, reform, and revolution.

¹ “The Politics of Mass Society,” in Mancur Olsen, ed., *Power in Societies* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), p. 406.

In these terms, both sympathizers and critics accept implicitly a hierarchy of movement and movement leadership that presumes a steady progression toward detachment from communal ties and traditional beliefs. Social movements tend to be judged as effective, sophisticated, and broad in their vision to the extent they leave behind "ancient ways" of communal life and enter a realm of cosmopolitan discourse. The language of interests and rational calculation is substituted for values, traditions, and group histories. Indeed, even our idiom for describing social struggles, terms such as "mass movement," or the common distinction between "primitive" social movements (based on communitarian identities) and "modern" movements such as trade unions (which are thought to have severed ties with older traditions), presumes that the highest level of consciousness is that of the deracinated individual who has outgrown his older beliefs and is able to rationally calculate "objective interests." Peter Friedlander neatly made the point: "labor historiography, which has tended to assume the presence of a modern, individuated, rational worker, has usually viewed the process of unionization in narrowly rational, institutional, and goal-oriented terms. The problem of culture and praxis is passed over in silence."²

A new generation of social history calls for reconceptualization in our received theory. Actual studies of social movements and their leaders consistently remind us of the dynamic and complex character of communities. People live in communal worlds of daily activity and draw strength from the cultural resources and traditions embedded in such specific contexts. Structures and ideological themes that, at least potentially, nourish dissent and democratic values always coexist with forms of accommodation and submission that are also woven into the fabric of communities. These communal settings are typically the incubators of sustained democratic social movements.

Community institutions reproducing the bonds of historical memory and culture also serve as the arenas where people can distinguish themselves from elite definitions of who they are, can gain the skills and mutual regard necessary to act as a force for change. From the outside, values and rituals of community life and folkways are all too easily seen in static and monochromatic terms, dismissed as "opiates." Yet such a perspective is a seriously distorted one.

In the course of social movements, people's institutions that may for years have been broadly functional to the system in reproducing its dominant beliefs become for a time subversive. Sometimes old institutions are transformed through this process. Often new structures emerge that are seen as organic extensions or adaptations of traditional settings but have a specificity and life of their own as well. We would maintain that both rootedness in communal settings and opportu-

² Peter Friedlander, *The Emergence of a UAW Local, 1936-39* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1975), pp. xiv-xv.

nities for popular participation are essential to the sustained vitality and broader democratic potential of social movements over time.

Until the nineteenth century, the concept of democracy had definite radical overtones and also roots in communal themes such as religion and place—which made it different from the modern views of left or right. In that century, however, there developed a divergence of meanings, as analysts of political culture such as Raymond Williams and C.B. MacPherson have demonstrated. The tamer “liberal” version of democracy came to mean simply a system that guaranteed certain basic liberties and involved popular elections but did not actively engage the general citizenry in decision making processes. This understanding, descended from John Locke and other English philosophers, held that the point of modern society is not participation but what MacPherson has aptly termed the philosophy of “possessive individualism”: the right of each individual to compete on roughly equal footing for acquisition of material goods, status, and power.³

Yet writers as diverse as Hannah Arendt, Robert Bellah, Vernon Parrington, and Sheldon S. Wolin have pointed out that in its original conception, American democracy was the more activist, participatory, and radical version. Arendt suggested, for instance, that for the Revolutionary generation, “public happiness consisted in the citizen’s right of access to the public realm . . . to be ‘a participator in the government of affairs’ in Jefferson’s telling phrase.”⁴ This was certainly the notion of democracy also intended by Alexis de Tocqueville in his observations on American society 150 years ago. Tocqueville argued forcefully that only through vibrant, continuing forms of association could Americans counterbalance the competitive and commercial tendencies in the culture.⁵

The issue has become even more complicated for those still committed to the older, participatory understanding of democracy. Not only do the large and centralized structures of the modern world make active citizen participation and control increasingly difficult, but they also destroy and erode those smaller structures through which democratic values and skills are acquired. It is against such a background that the most insightful democratic rebels in our history have described democratic movements as aiming not only at structural change but also

³ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); C.B. MacPherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

⁴ “Public Happiness,” in Henry Kariel, ed., *Frontiers of Democratic Theory* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 5.

⁵ *Democracy in America* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1964).

at political education and community renewal. For instance, Martin Luther King Jr. maintained that the civil rights movement was an effort not only to secure democratic rights to participation, but also to furnish a schooling in the public skills and values essential to democracy. King argued that the movement helped the entire nation recall its older values by "bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers."⁶

Democracy means altering structures to make democracy possible and also schooling the citizenry in the varied skills and values that are essential to sustaining a democratic polity. Democratic social movements, the collective endeavors that struggle against obstacles to popular participation, are vehicles for widening participation in decision making.

We term the communal structures most crucial to the democratic character "free social spaces." They are collective terrain, a part of a group's everyday life perhaps far removed from formally defined "politics" or militant expressions of unrest that nonetheless retain an important measure of insulation from elite cultural, organizational, and political domination. Politicized in a new way by specific historic developments, free social spaces begin to function as centers for a group's consciousness of insurgent democratic values, skills, and ideals. Leadership in such movements, trained and shaped by such settings, plays a major role in how social spaces emerge and develop over time—and what the legacy of the movements proves to be.

Most frequently, as a number of historians and social-movement theorists have now observed, activation of groups begins as a spontaneous occurrence as a group seeks to defend from outside threat the established ways of life or perceived "rights" people have come to count on. At the outset, group goals are aimed at the return to previous patterns.

But movement goals can change and become radical in the course of struggle. The American Farmers' Alliance organizations of the late 1880s and 1890s, arising from small farmers' efforts to keep their land through cooperative purchasing and marketing, became the base of a massive political challenge in the Populist party when their very existence was threatened by banks' refusal to extend credit. Joan Scott has found that the French glassworkers' union in nineteenth-century Carmaux was formed as "a last-ditch effort by craftsmen to save their craft: to halt the process of proletarianization."⁷ Unions became "organizing institutions of working-class life" that did considerably more than call for re-

6 Martin Luther King Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 99.

7 Joan Scott, *The Glassworkers of Carmaux: French Craftsmen and Political Action in a Nineteenth-Century City* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 4-116-120.

turn to the old days. They socialized rural migrants, taught them new skills, and used such traditional settings as funerals to spread radical notions. Historian E. P. Thompson has shown how the elite's assault upon working-class English institutions in the early nineteenth century produced enormous ferment: "Everything, from their schools to their shops, their temples to their amusements was turned into a battleground. . . ."⁸

Such transformations of values and aims do not happen mysteriously. As a generation of historical work has now richly documented, they occur in the communal settings of a group's daily life with a degree of insulation from dominant power—settings the people "own" to a large degree—where there are possibilities for cooperative experience, free expression, and acquisition of the skills of public life.

In the late nineteenth-century rural American South, for instance, communitarian settings inculcated a democratic self-consciousness among farmers. Populist historian Lawrence Goodwyn has described how a small group of innovative organizers such as William Lamb, Charles Macune, and Henry Vincent were able to develop an enormous movement of collective self-help through cooperatives, tapping the restiveness of farmers who feared loss of the land and control over their livelihoods to merchants and banks. The organizations of the Farmers' Alliance built on the networks of organizations already existing in farming regions and also created new structures of solidarity. "The Alliance organization was experimenting in a new kind of mass autonomy," recounts Goodwyn. "Inexorably, the mutually supportive dynamics inherent in these individual and collective modes of behavior began to produce something new . . . a new way of looking at society . . . that represented a shaking off of inherited forms of deference."⁹

In sum, free social spaces provide the grounds for democratic movement because they offer coherent patterns of group identity and possibilities for democratic education distinct from broader cultural and ideological definitions and power relations in the society. In these settings, leaders are schooled by the same processes that produce the movements. Recent scholarship on women's history makes these points clearly.

Because women share no apparent collective past and exist in all social groups of race and class, the process of collective consciousness formation seems opaque

⁸ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1963), p. 832.

⁹ Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 33.

at first. Social realities of many kinds—familial, ethnic, class, religious, geographic, patterns of courtship, divisions of labor—take on a moral dimension. Not only is that “the way things are” but also “the way they ought to be.” Historically, women have not generally been presented with a wide array of socially acceptable options. Feminist historians, with new questions about women’s subjective experiences, have sought to comprehend the texture of daily life and women’s participation in it, on women’s own terms.

At the same time, they have also begun to examine the process by which some women challenge social reality, subvert it, and struggle for greater control over their self-images and their destinies. Through such research, pictures have emerged of the rich, communal subcultures that women have been able to create around their shared domestic roles that, under certain circumstances, furnished resources for insurgency.¹⁰

During the American Revolution, when the formation of such subcultures was just beginning, individual feminists emerged. But they were not, nor did they intend to be, leaders of a broad social movement. Educated women such as Mercy Otis Warren and Abigail Adams appropriated the ideological ferment around them to assert the validity of women’s claim to equal political participation. Their writings laid the groundwork for the ideology of a later feminist movement. But neither they, nor their audience, had adequate access to the requisite skills or collective instruments for movement building. Women, on the whole, did not think of themselves as a group with collective grievances.

In the early nineteenth century, however, women’s consciousness of a shared condition grew as they were increasingly segregated from public social and economic life. Domesticity transformed a number of traditional cultural institutions into autonomous social spaces “owned” by women. In most cases, these spaces were highly contradictory, simultaneously reinforcing subordination and also providing the skills and heightened self-image with which to challenge it.

For example, women increasingly dominated the congregations of churches and evangelical revivals in New England as the church itself moved to the periphery of social and economic life. In the name of feminine piety, they created an explosion of prayer groups, missionary and education societies, Sunday schools,

10. Such a perspective asks how women have participated in a male-defined world “on their own terms,” as Gerda Lerner put it in “Placing Women in History,” Bernice Carroll, ed., *Liberating Women’s History: Theoretical and Critical Essays* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), p. 359. See also Nancy Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood: The Woman’s Sphere in New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Ellen Carol DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women’s Movement in America, 1848–1869* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978); Alice Rossi, ed., *The Feminist Papers: From Adams to de Beauvoir* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973).

and moral reform and maternal associations. Nancy Cott has pointed out that such groups raised women's self-esteem, trained them in political skills (writing constitutions, electing officers, running meetings, recruiting members, voting) while at the same time "accommodat[ing] them to a limited, clerically defined role."¹¹ In this paradoxical way they provided the tools for leadership and began to create a basis for active response.

Similarly, the growing movement for women's education was intended simply to train women better for their domestic roles. Yet, according to Cott, "the orientation toward gender in their education fostered women's consciousness of themselves as a group united in purpose, duties and interests. From the sense among women that they shared a collective destiny it was but another step (though a steep one) to sense that they might shape that destiny with their own minds and hands."¹² Within women's schools and academies young girls had access to strong role models in their teachers, training in skills such as public speaking, and a broadened sphere of their own interests.

Schools and religious reform associations thus formed the bedrock of the nineteenth-century feminist awakening. Each was seen as, in itself, an extension of tradition. Yet they also constituted free social spaces, arenas outside the family in which women could develop a collective consciousness, political skills, and a growing sense that they had a right to work—first in behalf of others, then in behalf of themselves. These spaces were not politicized, however, until the abolition movement, itself an outgrowth of evangelical reform, brought women into direct political agitation against the "sin" of slavery. The constituency for the massive petition campaign in the 1830s and 1840s lay in benevolent and reform associations of women who felt it their Christian duty to work in behalf of the "downtrodden." Abolition deepened and enriched that perception. Suddenly women such as the Grimke sisters found that in the name of Christian duty they had transgressed the boundaries of acceptable behavior and were forced, in order to speak out against slavery, to defend their rights as women to participate in public discourse.

A generation of feminist leadership was schooled by such processes. Sarah and Angelina Grimke, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony used the organizing styles they had learned in evangelical reform movements. Like other abolitionists, they saw themselves as a prophetic minority and drew on the rhetoric of the Revolutionary era to make their demands. Alice Rossi has demonstrated that women's rights leaders before the Civil War were typically involved in several reform movements of the period—religious revival-

¹¹ Cott, *Bonds*, p. 154.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 125.

ism, temperance, moral protests against prostitution, peace, and abolition. Out of these overlapping involvements came a group of leaders and a broad base of participants whose involvement in one or more such movements produced an active, organized response.

Similarly, in the late nineteenth century, the leadership and constituency for the resurgence of feminist activity that led ultimately to the 19th Amendment developed in the numerous institutions of middle-class female subculture: settlement houses, women's colleges, women's clubs, and perhaps most important, the Women's Christian Temperance Union.

The WCTU provides an example of the power of a leader, under the right conditions, to shape free social spaces. Frances Willard employed slogans such as "Do Everything" and "For God, Home, and Native Land" to fuse domestic ideology with the restiveness of middle-class women schooled in missionary societies to produce the largest women's movement in the nineteenth century. Willard used women's commitments to clubs and missionary societies and their social definition as moral guardians of the home to bring thousands into public, political activity for the first time. In the name of "Home Protection" they worked for reforms in the penal system, for kindergartens and PTAs, and for women's suffrage. Because Willard's achievement consisted in creating the WCTU as a free social space by politicizing preexisting social spaces and traditional ideology, she created an organization that trained great numbers to assume leadership in later battles for women's suffrage. Indeed, many female leaders in the Socialist Party also began their activism in the WCTU.

In the southern states, white women emerged more slowly and tentatively from the confines of the domestic sphere than in the North. Likewise, among working-class whites bitter economic necessity forced women and children to work long hours in the cotton mills, and the semifeudal paternalism of the mill village stunted the growth of autonomous collective spaces and truncated collective protest of any kind.

For middle- and upper-class southern white women the pathway out of the home lay—as it had for the Grimke sisters—through expanding their roles in the church. In the 1870s, women all over the South began to organize missionary societies. Although reluctant to challenge overtly cultural definitions of either race or sex, they nonetheless began to act on their religious values in a way that drew them inexorably into social action. Their initial involvement had simply extended the expected piousness of a southern lady. But the missionary impulse, when carried beyond the home, brought these women face-to-face with the grinding poverty of the South and personalized the horrors of racial discrimination. In response, they founded home missions to provide basic services to the poor despite the continuing opposition of ecclesiastical hierarchies. As they built their own organizations, battling with church authorities to do so, these women evidenced

an early flickering of feminist consciousness, tied to an awareness of the cultural centrality of race in the South.

Through this process a number of southern white women in the 1920s and 1930s became active in the women's committee of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC) and later the southern women's campaign against lynching. The transformation of such experiences into a broad-based social movement hinged, as in the case of the WCTU, on the efforts of a talented leader, Jesse Daniel Ames.

Yet both Ames and her followers remained in many senses within the confines of their culture. The bonds of white womanhood had stretched enough to allow a growing level of public activity and social concern, but they were far from broken. Though pushed initially by black women in the YWCA to confront the issues of racism and lynching, white women's responses were crucially limited by the boundaries of class and caste that they were unable to transcend: their political and cultural independence remained sharply limited. Working on behalf of blacks, rather than side by side with them, they could not cross the line between patronage and social equality. Indeed, burdened with the deepest fears and anxieties about sex between black men and white women, any possibility for such relationship brought their liberalism up short. They could take a stand against racial abuses—for their time, a courageous one—without being forced to confront the culture as a whole.

Throughout the twentieth century, a wide variety of other settings created social spaces that exhibited some but not all of the characteristics essential for feminist self-assertion. Like maternal and reform associations in the nineteenth century, they simultaneously generated new skills and new self-worth while in some ways reinforcing submissive definitions and boundaries. For the most part, voluntary organizations such as the League of Women Voters, church organizations, the YWCA, the Consumer's League, and the Girl Scouts were not politicized or insurgent along feminist dimensions. There is clearly a more complex story here than is suggested by the simple presumption that women's organizations participated in and reinforced a sexual status quo. In retrospect one can document that many leaders of the feminist resurgence in the 1960s emerged via the sisterhood and leadership development operating in such organizations.

The most fundamental questioning of cultural expectations developed among young women active in the social movements of the 1960s—the civil rights movement and the student new left. Though the writings of those feminists stressed women's oppression in the new left as the source of the new call for a women's liberation movement, in fact feminist consciousness actually originated in community settings that provided bases for women to violate the norms of passivity and helplessness and to widen their sense of their own potential.

The background of early feminists had, most characteristically, been traditional student organizations and especially campus ministries and the YWCA. In the South, such settings formed enclaves within a traditional conservative culture that encouraged dissenting values of social justice, equality, and the vision of an integrated "beloved community." They also frequently encouraged female leadership, and through the Y in particular offered adult role-models of socially concerned women. From such settings came a small group of white women who joined the civil rights revolt, no longer maternalistically as their foremothers had, but with an awareness that the assault upon southern racism included an attack on the cultural icon of the "Southern Lady."

In demonstrations, freedom schools, community organizing, and voter registration projects young women found also specifically female social spaces in which to discuss experiences, share insights, and find collective strength. Gradually, women developed a shared sense of their right to be treated equally—to have participatory democracy include them as well. Then, changes in the movement politicized women's awareness in a new way. As civil rights shifted to a more militant, black-nationalist stance and community organizing in the North gave way to draft resistance, women found their new sense of self endangered. But those whom the movement relegated to the periphery were already armed with self-respect, organizing skills, and an ideology that justified revolt against oppression. So they took the perception of the personal nature of political action and transformed it into the feminist assertion that "the personal is political." The women's movement they initiated built on the models they had experienced, with complex results. But it also activated the latent organizing experiences of millions of other American women not in the movement, who spontaneously began to initiate consciousness-raising groups, child-care cooperatives, rape crisis centers, and women's projects all over the nation.

The leadership of the radical branch of feminism in the 1960s emerged from the civil rights movement and the new left. Its nature, however, illustrates some of the problems of the social spaces produced by these movements. While such movements taught women organizing skills and fiercely egalitarian ideology, student radicals also reflected the ethos of a generation of highly moralistic middle-class youth in angry revolt against the culture in which they had been raised. The ahistorical and rootless nature of the new left fed an anarchic style suspicious of all leadership, avoiding structured organization capable of holding leaders accountable, and increasingly defining itself in terms of moral and ideological absolutes belying the democratic rhetoric of the movement. Inheriting such tendencies, some parts of the women's liberation movement engaged in endless debates over real feminists versus "cop-outs." The early democratic themes eroded. Leadership became increasingly charismatic, often selected by the media, accountable to no stable constituency.

In sum, the historical record calls for a new attentiveness to the life of rooted communities themselves, whose institutions are the foundation and wellspring for any sustained challenge to autocratic power. It is through the structures of community life that sustain and reproduce a group's shared bonds of historical memory and culture that an oppressed people begins to come to self-consciousness. Through their activity in new contexts, groups may acquire public skills, reinforce democratic values, and form new links between subcommunities into larger networks and organizations. And it is through such processes that a powerless people constitutes itself as a force for democratic transformation of the broader social structure and as a school for its own education in a democratic sensibility. Loss of organic connection to the communal sources of social movement can lead to the amorphous and rootless stridency of the late new left on the one hand, or to the bureaucratic stagnation apparent in many contemporary trade unions on the other.

Yet the evidence also draws attention to the *complexity* of community life, from a democratic perspective. If democratic movements necessarily draw their strength, vision, and power from communitarian settings, these also limit the nature of such movements. Leaders, organizational forms, and broader strategies may help movements overcome parochialism and ethnocentrism, may expand the democratic processes within the group life, may make the decisive difference in how effectively the movement influences the broader society. But the requirement for such developments is a clarity about the limitations inherent in the community foundations of a movement, as well as a deep grounding in its setting.

In present day America, recognition of both the centrality and the complexity of communities assumes no small urgency. Where are the places in our culture through which groups sustain bonds and history? What are the processes through which such groups may broaden their sense of the possible, make alliances with others, and develop the practical skills and knowledge to maintain democratic organization? Such questions confer the dignity of historical authorship upon ordinary people. They require a new respect for the ways in which people discover who they are and take democratic initiatives, on their own terms. And they are the precondition for effectively contesting a cynical, aggressive, and lavishly endowed right wing, which seeks to refashion every image of community in America according to its own rigid and rapacious definitions.