
READERS

WRITE

On the Nuclear Disarmament Movement

To the editors:

Reading *democracy* is, for an old-time radical democrat like myself, like coming home. In the late forties, when I was . . . at Hobart College, an activist in race relations (breaking restaurants in New York), and a supporter of "left-liberal" associations, political organizations, journals, and magazines, I felt that I had a home, in the sense that my vision and my radical democratic convictions found resonance in a substantial group of observers and activists in the political arena.

In fact, I thought I was part of a collectivizing "left consciousness" such as Burnham speaks of in the July 1982 issue of *democracy*. Though recognizing that the most progressive ideas were still embryonic, I thought that they would be given a hearing, and eventually lead to a "politics of human dignity" rather than a "proletarian politics," as Burnham calls it.

The next two decades consisted of a continuing rebuttal of that expectation. As the nuclear threat mushroomed, literally and figuratively, and worldwide hunger and pollution steadily grew, as political liberalism dug its own grave by clinging to the same old laundry list of programs and avoiding addressing the gut problems of the society, as the media became deformed, the parties decomposed, alienation and apathy multiplied, crime spread throughout society, and hedonism flourished, the mirage of a growing "collectivizing left consciousness" became ever clearer. I had lost my political home.

Now *democracy* among others is giving me that home again. But especially *democracy* and, in particular, the July issue with Burnham's article and the many perceptive responses to it. . . .

Burnham has articulated a challenge which no one concerned with the future should ignore. That challenge, to find the ways to create and support a reconstituted left, a politics of human dignity, got a beginning series of answers in the comments that followed. . . . What should be the premises, the priorities, the constituent elements of a program of a reconstituted left? How should it relate to the various American publics, including the unions and the huge party of the nonvoters?

Since it seems clear to most of those writing in that issue, and to myself, that this will be a *very* long-term process, if it works at all, then I propose that this time be used in a special way. I propose that each of the participants in the dialogue reviews all the ideas that one tends to reject automatically . . . to search them out thoroughly, and see if they do not provide some kind of vital ingredient, perhaps in a modified form. The reconstituted left will only have a chance if we all relearn how to be truly open to other's ideas, even those we find ridiculous at first. That kind of openness was *not* wholly evident in the July issue.

Because the prospects for a reconstituted left are limited, and the obstacles to overcome are so huge, all of us who accept Burnham's challenge must find ways of letting go of a very common but destructive thought-pattern, which might be called the "optimism/defeatism syndrome." So many whom I know feel they "must" be optimistic that everything will turn out okay in the end. Without that optimism, they feel, they will fall prey to defeatism. They turn cartwheels so as to be able to feel that the odds are positive, that in all probability human dignity will win out. My view is to see that prospects with small possibilities are sufficiently valuable in themselves as to warrant their support. And, as we know, many of the most effective movements in our history looked impossible in their early stages. So let us help one another to not get sucked into the whirlpool of the "optimism/defeatism syndrome." The July issue showed disturbing signs of it among some.

Jonathan Schell has articulated one way of helping do this, when he says that it is conceivable that some generations from now, if those generations do indeed have a chance to come into being, people at that time may look back, and see a number of us as the "founders" of a world of survival and dignity. "Founders" cannot be sure of success; let us all think of ourselves as potential founders of this new world. For me, everyone who accepts Burnham's challenge can think of himself or herself as a founder. I do myself.

I propose that we avoid accepting minor gains as the best that is possible, while giving up on essential components of a world of human dignity. Let us not accept modest reforms of the Democratic party, for instance, as so much better than Reaganism that we can overlook total inattention to basic dilemmas in American society. I, for one, do not think that any program of a reconstituted left can ignore the need to develop the clearest possible sense of what constitutes "justified inequalities" in the power, income, and wealth of differing members of the society. Can it be all right for one person to have 1,000 times the wealth and income (and hence power to a large degree) of another person? Are there appropriate upper limits to income and wealth, just as I think we are most all agreed there should be lower limits? What are those limits, and if it is better to express the limits through a series of processes, what are those processes? And how do we win the sympathy of working people for such ideas, when so many (I know

through interviewing them) believe in an American dream of virtually unlimited opportunity?

. . . I propose that we constrain our caricatures of events when those caricatures themselves blind us to positive aspects of reality. Here, I refer to Wolin's caricature of the peace movement. Surely he's right about many of the actors in the movement, but just as surely he's utterly wrong about a great many others. We are not all, by any means, turning ourselves into single-issue, PAC-oriented, grassroots-disavowing, political idiots.

Even those exposed to Ground Zero activities often became grassroots activists. Mobilization for Survival, one of the key organizations, is full of people highly dissatisfied with the whole structure of American society, and seeking deep changes. . . . They will, many of them, be parts of angry demonstrations about the nuclear threat, Lebanon, sexism, and American corporate power.

Wolin should know what it was like for those involved in the civil disobedience of June 14th [at the United Nations]. This was, by its very nature, a strong expression of an unwillingness to be bound by the power structure of society to the point of being willing to be arrested for interrupting the official business of the missions of the five avowed and the two likely, though unavowed, nuclear powers.

The 1600 of us who participated were all arrested, and were ready to face whatever sentences the law imposed. Most of us had never participated in CD before. In fact, my group of twelve (three supporters and nine CD'ers) all faced the uncertainties of CD for the first time. We met as strangers, for training, two weeks beforehand. We trained for seven hours. We met again two more times before the action, so as to share our fears and problems and work out our common strategy as a group. We decided everything, at those meetings and all during the action, by full consensus, often agonizingly worked out.

Our little group, nine people among the 1600 arrested, prevented some fifty persons from going to work at the U.S. embassy. The frustrated employees called us traitors and other equally unpleasant things. Many struggled physically to break through our lines. One butted himself up against us full force, football style, three times in a row before giving up. (Dressed in a beautiful suit, too.) We never responded in kind. We asked them to remember Hiroshima, and if they would join us for the day. None, of course, did.

Later we moved to another location, directly in front of the mission . . . and found that the police were using a line of buses to keep breaking up groups trying to block employees from going into the front entrance. We got other "affinity" groups to join us and sat down, three deep, all across the street, in front of the oncoming buses. The police were furious. They threatened and cajoled us. After a little hesitation (we were all new to this), we sang songs together. Finally, several policemen grabbed each of us in turn and bodily threw us to the side of

the street. I went five feet through the air, which is at least a little startling for someone sixty years old.

Having begun at five A.M., we were finally released from police processing at four P.M. It was clear that everyone felt good. We discussed other things we might have done that day, inventing the most enticing things we could think of. But we all agreed that there was nothing in the whole wide world that we would rather have done. We felt joyous, as if we had become more of our true selves, more integrated, more whole, freer. We have met four times since then, partly for action, partly just to share more fully our outlooks and goals. We are very deeply committed not only to disarmament, but to a whole range of issues.

Reconstituting the left will take both theory and action. I don't think it is too far from the mark to consider our actions as part of the reconstitution. It will take millions of individual small acts for a reconstituted left to bring any program to fruition. I, for one, think of our acts as being small in scope yet symbolically giant steps for human dignity. In any case, they don't fit in Wolin's highly misleading caricature of the whole peace movement.

Among other things, we want a government of consent. We have not consented and we don't believe the American public as a whole would consent (if asked) to the government's intent . . . to commit the most monstrous genocide in history. Even more emphatically, we don't consent to that pledge at a time when the government is increasing the scope of the potential disaster without taking reasonable negotiating positions with the USSR. For us this is not democracy. We are for radical changes.

I believe that the dialogues that *democracy* is holding are of the utmost importance to our future and wish you all kinds of success.

Robert W.C. Brown

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To the editors:

As a contributor to *democracy*, I read your editorial in the July issue with great interest; but as a participant in local Ground Zero activities, I read it with dismay. I agree that the peace movement is vulnerable to manipulation and cooptation (like every other mass movement of the past fifteen years), but it is much more than computerized mailings and national fund-raising drives.

My participation has been strictly local, in a small peace group that has been meeting since January. Its program is very simple, and it's a genuine grassroots organization. In recent months I've visited similar groups, mostly church-related, in other towns. We do get literature from national groups, such as the Fellowship of Reconciliation and Sojourners, but I think that's preferable to relying on television news. Many of us have signed nuclear-freeze petitions, but of course

we don't believe that's enough. Just getting people to think and talk about the nuclear arms race will keep us occupied for a long time to come.

As you're aware, political consciousness in the U.S. is grossly underdeveloped. Often people attend to an issue only if they believe that it affects them personally and immediately. They may also confront social problems in a religious context. Of course such activity is implicitly political; nothing Roger Molander says can change that. Reagan's attempt to coopt the peace movement is testimony to its political importance. I don't think people are fooled, and I don't think they'll stop talking and demonstrating and pressuring politicians. But getting to the point of open resistance may take a very long time and much effort.

As I said in my article on Brazilian democratization, these groups may not prevail, but at least they exist. If they are ineffectual, perhaps it's because the structures of democracy are very frail in a centralized state dominated by corporate groups. (Thus the tendency to form opposing corporate groups.) In addition, people feel terribly impotent; overcoming this is difficult for all of us. I respect the grassroots peace groups because they are conscientiously struggling to act in a meaningful way. We can only hope that they'll eventually do exactly what you call for: "declare a common refusal to contribute body, mind, and labor" to the imperial system.

These groups may not have any lasting effect, but I wouldn't dismiss them out of hand. At least, like Sisyphus, we can push the rock almost to the top of the hill before it rolls down again.

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