

Procedure Becomes Substance

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Robert Ross is one of a large number of people who responded (by mail, phone, and in person) to my essay in the October 1981 issue of *democracy* and to a related article in the September 5, 1981, issue of *The Nation*. I thank him and the others with warm appreciation. I have been particularly impressed by the knowledgeable and forceful talk by many nonacademics about how their frustrations with liberals and radicals have driven them into special interest politics, and hence *ipso facto* into tacit cooperation with the right. Consider this logger in a bar shooting pool: "Damn you, Williams, you got it right, but you don't offer me nothin' new so I am going to look out for Number One."

From the other side of our classless society, people like Donald Worster of the University of Hawaii and William Robbins, my feisty colleague at Oregon State University, chide me with friendly vigor that I am too timid. I think they are probably correct. All I can say in response is that my purpose was to provoke thought, not come down from Mount Marx with certainties. No, as we shall see, that is not a great evasion. My objective is to help imagine and then realize an alternative that honors our fundamental values as radicals.

It has been an illuminating and exciting dialogue, and I hope others will make their own contributions without being intimidated by the limits of this exchange. Radicals talk too much about each other and too little about issues and alternatives. Or, at any rate, they certainly overpersonalize substantive matters.

Ross makes a great deal throughout his critique of saying or implying—or whatever—that Jefferson is my mentor or ideal or idiom. But in truth Jefferson has almost nothing to do with any of my ideas about regionalism—or about any other issue here joined. All authors are a bit vain (only the ego can pick up the pencil!), but I do not think that I write so poorly as to leave anyone with the impression that the man from Monticello, who steadily increased his captive work force of slaves, is my hero. Let alone my model. Come now, Professor Ross!

Jefferson is an intriguing, challenging, and revealing figure in American history. He is not irrelevant to radical concerns, but he has little if anything to offer us in imagining or building a late twentieth-century socialism. It is true that in his younger years he mouthed some vague rhetoric about North America devel-

oping as layer upon layer of independent republics united informally but consequently by blood, philosophy, economics, and the religion of American exceptionalism. But he soon abandoned that idea and embraced the equation of liberty and empire.

If Ross does not want to accept my account of that transformation, as in *The Contours of American History*, then I refer him (and other readers) to Henry Nash Smith, Bernard DeVoto, or even Dumas Malone. Better yet to Jefferson's speeches and correspondence—say, for starters, the secret message to the Congress about the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

Here radicals might more usefully refer to John Quincy Adams. He also wanted the continent, but he did have a sense of limits. You may remember: "America goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. . . . She might become the dictatress of the world; she would no longer be the ruler of her own spirit." You might also recall that Adams opposed Jefferson's description and treatment of the citizens of Louisiana as "children" unfit for self-government.

In this connection it seems to me that Ross seriously oversimplifies the relationship between radicalism and foreign policy. He is correct in saying that I vigorously oppose our imperial intervention in other countries. He is mistaken, however, in the degree that he underestimates my willingness to help other peoples achieve *their* independence and make *their* own decisions about *their* lives. My position is that radicals dishonor their basic principles when they presume to define freedom for other peoples, or intervene to make sure that other peoples do not define freedom in the wrong way. And the record makes it clear that radicals have supported those kinds of activity in many countries over a long period of time.

In the broader sense I can only say that Ross is apparently privy to some wisdom that I do not know; but he never tells me—or you—that secret of secrets. The mystery he husbands is the answer to these questions.

How does Ross get national power, let alone international power, for a socialist America (and world) without first getting local and regional power?

If he somehow gets national and international power without local and regional power, then where is his earnest money to make it believable that he will give that power back to regional and local institutions and people in the *practice* of democracy?

And if he will do so, where are his proposals for the decentralization that he allows may be desirable?

Ross offers nothing that qualifies as an answer to those questions.

Impersonally, but frankly, I think Ross is so super-realistic as to be terribly fuzzy, romantic, ahistorical, and illogical in developing his argument. He giveth with one hand and taketh away with the other hand. And so ends with nothing actionable.

Consider the way that Ross devalues and dismisses my regionalism as mere localism, and then discounts my regionalism as irrelevant to his preferred centralized success. I propose to build up from the bottom rather than to be handed-down-to from the top. In that vein, allow me to remind you of a few truths. We locals, as even Ross obliquely admits, mustered the will and the energy—the power—to stop the war in Vietnam. There would not have been any national demonstrations without local and regional coalitions. And various groups even managed to develop a coherent philosophy about why they were against the war.

It is simply absurd to argue that the central government gave freedom to blacks. Having been in the South as long ago as 1945–46, I know that local and then regional blacks organized the power to force the rest of the country to recognize their humanity.

I think that Ross evades the central issue of regional radicals doing what blacks did in the South. He is frightened by the prospect of a Constitutional Convention. He concedes defeat. In his language, we need “*simultaneous* success.” But I suggest as a citizen as well as a historian that you do not get simultaneous success from the top down. If you get it at all, you get it from the bottom up. Just as we did during the years of the New Deal.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was more than a bit like Thomas Jefferson. We consider him great not because of his ideas but because of his understanding that he had to respond to pressures from the hinterland. Or at any rate that is why we should consider him great. Most of the New Deal came up out of the provinces: take Maury Maverick, Huey Long, and Upton Sinclair.

Professor Ross is still waiting for Lefty.

But there ain’t no Lefty. There is just us lefties and our fellow citizens.

The longer we lounge around waiting for Lefty the greater the probability that we will get Mr. Nice Guy Fascist. The courteous, friendly, humorous one-lining son-of-a-bitch who smiles your way into the tomb.

Ross and I have a fundamental disagreement. I think procedure determines substance. He asserts that procedure “does not directly address” substance.

Ross is a better Jeffersonian than I. When we get down to cases, that is, he thinks a domestic and international imperial system can be transformed into an “empire for liberty.” From the top down. And then the top can remove the empire from the equation.

Well, good luck.

You will need all the help from us locals that you can get.

Who else will be there to remind you that procedure determines substance?

You never know when you will need the people you have written off as soft-headed.