

CONFERENCE ON THE 50th ANNIVERSARY OF THE PORT HURON STATEMENT

UC SANTA BARABA, February 2, 2012

Fifty years ago, in June 1962, roughly 60 people, mostly in their early 20s, gathered at a labor summer camp facility owned by the AFL-CO but mostly used by the UAW, to draft a Manifesto for SDS. Tom Hayden had written a draft, so the task was to revise it through workshops, break out groups, suggestions and discussions, over a one week period. The result was the Port Huron Statement, one of the pivotal documents of the U.S. New Left.

This conference was organized by Dick Flaks, at that time a grad student in social psychology at the University of Michigan. He was one of the pivotal people in SDS. Later, as a faculty member at the University of Chicago, he was almost killed in a politically motivated attack connected to his political activities. From the 1970s he was a Sociology professor at UCSB and someone I have known for many years. At the conference he brought together some of the key people who were at Port Huron and helped draft the document, along with a number of academics whose work in one way or another intersected either the historical context of the statement or its themes. I was invited to talk about real utopias.

Here are interesting bits and pieces from the two days of discussion:

Dick Flaks gave the opening introduction to the conference:

- “Imagine in 1962 if someone had come to us and said: I’d like to tell you something about what it was like in 1912. “ What an interesting point: There is a deep sense of historical continuity between the 1960s and the present, but there absolutely wasn’t between 1912 and 1962.
- He went on to talk about the context of 1962: “Chutzpa was in the air – it was Chutzpa for 59 students to think they could change the world and that they knew better than their elders. It was chutzpa in 1960 that 4 young black men sat in a Greensboro lunch counter in order to bring down segregation, or that students marched from Berkeley to SF to protest the HUAC hearings and eventually contributed to ending them. Protest songs were beginning, new troubadours singing about new beginnings.
- We were seeking to create a new vocabulary for the left, with a new style of action – inspired by radical pacifism of Muskie. We felt a deep need for fresh new ideas about the nature of society, morality, strategies. We were eager to hear from these new voices. C. Wright Mills was a critical voice – he died three weeks after the statement was issued. We heard these voices and wanted to distill a new coherence out of this. This was also a time of world revolutions – of oppressed people struggling to seize their own fate. We were also inspired by Fidel and of anti-colonial liberations. These were inspiring cases, and it was important to us that our government was the key power that opposed these trends.”
- He then showed some engaging clips from the documentary REBELS WITH A CAUSE along with a clip from the TV show Ad Men in which a young man brings the Port Huron

Statement to a jaded ad executive telling him that this will show him the mind of the new generation.

Tom Hayden gave the main talk at the opening session. He was very funny, very engaging, and also very thoughtful. Some of his comments:

- There is a danger when we glorify these events of the sixties, he said, of making students today feel that they don't measure up. But there is really much continuity between the progressive political energies of today and what happened 50 years ago. In the Occupy movement, the central impulse is call for participatory democracy.
- The sources for this call for participatory democracy when I drafted the Port Huron statement was exposure to John Dewey at Michigan through courses I took with Coffman. He coined the term "participatory democracy", but the idea is pervasive in US history and traces back to Thoreau. The vision of democracy is not just casting votes periodically for people to decide things for you; you have to vote with your whole life, enacting democracy through your direct actions. You live your ideals as you can in a moment – in freedom rides and lunch counters – direct action to put into place the ideal.
- 1962 was a golden moment. We always say we want to be part of something larger – to be inspired is to be part of a spirit. It is a bit of a mystery how these explosive moments happen. How did it happen that OWS suddenly exploded on the scene? Somehow it was in the air – it was a spirit of the moment. It happens – blowing in the wind, the time is ripe, a holy moment – something is in the air. People take hold of the moment. The time for action is when the "spirit moves people".
- We never defined participatory democracy very well. What is participatory democracy? PD as a framework for movements – the umbrella idea that weaves other things together. Participatory democracy was never separated from economic democracy. Work as inherently important for human creative potential and thus needed to be participatory. Not left, but a principle within which the Left can thrive.

Hayden went on to discuss what he thought happened on the 1960s which lead to the unraveling of the hopeful idealism of 1962?

- First: murder of JFK and other leaders. No one factors in assassination as a factor of history. We didn't realize the intensity of hatred that would grow up – as around Lincoln, JFK, and now Obama. A climate of hatred was intense. Zinn minimizes the importance of public figures/leaders who do things and symbolizes possibility. You need a Kennedy, you need a MLK – when JFK was murdered, the whole idea of forging a coalition to push the president, was stopped. Assassinations mattered.
- Second: Viet Nam happened. In June 1962 we were not thinking that Viet Nam was around the corner. We saw ourselves focusing on racism, then poverty, then military conversion. I think JFK would not have sent combat troops. When the war and draft began, there was no way to move on to anti-poverty. If the war hadn't intervenes, then the student movement

would have connected with mass movements to stimulate a progressive impulse – but this was blocked by Viet Nam.

- Third: we did not know that the CIA penetrated and subsidized all sorts of organizations. The AFL-CIO's foreign branch, the National Student Association, many other organizations. This made it impossible to realign the Democratic Party against the Cold War. Liberals were obsessed with stopping communism. We were accused of being communists, but it was absurd: this was the result of view that anyone who is even tolerant of communism was a communist. Martin Luther King gives a speech against war in 1967 and then gets attacked by NYT and told he should stick with civil rights. There was a hidden-hand behind the curtain.
- Fourth: faced with all this, SDS took a strange turn. It was a turn towards Marxism and the move towards interjecting a specific class analysis into the SDS. Resistance to the war escalated confrontation and conflict. The search for an ideology in 1966-7-8 involved "invoking isms that provoked schisms": isms divide. Toxic rain replaced blowing in the wind. Marxism divided the movement, deflected it away from the mass movement. SDS disintegrated under the face of this, and this ended the centrality of participatory democracy. Repression against SDS was crucial here – assassinations (including the attempt to kill Flaks) – lots of infiltrators, lots of provocateurs; mistrust runs rampant.
- By the mid-1970s we had won much of what we wanted: we got the vote; the war ended; we helped drive out two presidents; Cesar Chavez was marching towards contracts; the Democratic party realignment had occurred – the white racist Dixiecrats had moved to Republicans which resulted in a more ideologically coherent party divide. This realignment had been a goal in Huron Statement.
- We became a generation of might-have-beens – not has-beens – we disintegrated as a movement before really forged the mass coalitions that could have generated the participatory democratic ideal.

There followed a Panel of participants from 1962: Chuck McDew – first president of SNCC 61-64; Mickey Flaks, Dick's wife and a leading advocate in Santa Barbara for affordable housing these days; Michael Vester, a representative from the German SDS who was at Port Huron; and Bob Ross, a sociologist sociology at Clark University who was one of the youngest at Port Huron and was an undergraduate student at Michigan then.

Chuck McDew:

- SNCC ended meetings with an old negro song, "This may be the last time we all speak together, this may be the last time you never know" whereas other civil rights organizations always ended with "We Shall Overcome." This will be the last reunion for many of us – there won't be a 75th anniversary. I was at Port Huron. We came to talk about PD as it played out in SNCC [A telephone rings with a twilight zone ring – McDew makes a funny statement about this having a bit of the feel of the Twilight Zone). Within SNCC one of the things we

did when we formed the organization was to decide it would only last five years so it could free us up to do what we wanted to do. We would not have to be concerned about building the organization for the future. Many years later Andrew Young, said at a ceremony honoring the SCLC, pointing to SNCC veterans: “these are the people that did the real work for which we (SCLC) got credit.” One of the best things we did was to have a five-year plan: we believed we would either be dead, in jail, or insane.

Mickey Flacks

- The group in 1962 was far less scruffy than other left groups I knew. Everyone wore coats and ties, and dresses. Everyone looked fresh faced and well-scrubbed.
- There was incredible articulateness – Tom was the champ, but everyone was capable of standing up and making incredibly articulate statements about political philosophy, about the world. I had never met a group where people spoke so well. And they spoke a new language – no 19th century German formulations. There was an Americanness to the analysis and an ability to communicate to ordinary people.
- There was also a commitment to parliamentary procedure – we used to think that this was a way to silence people. These folks knew the reasons for this: it was a way of organizing discussion so everyone could talk and not stray from the topic. Parliamentary procedures made sure we were efficient and still participatory.
- Before the Port Huron group I had never met a Southern White liberal and radical. Casey Hayden was a “lady” – she always acted in a way so as to not anger people, not belittle people, and yet speak her mind. She was the Queen of the event.
- And then there was Michael Vester, who shared our ideology and was a German. As a NY Jewish girl I had thought all Germans were Nazis, but he showed us that there was a new generation of Germans.
- A critical aspect of the discussion was an Articulation of anti-anti-Communism. I was an ex-young communist, but I was never comfortable in organizations that required people to be anti-communist. SDS had an anti-communist oath in its first year, but by 1962 this was eliminated and SDS began articulating an anti-Cold War and anti-anti-communist stance. That made me know I belonged. Later Women’s Strike for Peace adopted the same position.
- On the last morning of Port Huron, after not sleeping for 24 hours, I told the story from elementary school history, Ben Franklin said at the constitutional convention: “I have been looking at the chairs in the room (which all had a sun burst sun on their backs) and wondering if it was a rising or setting sun. I think it is a rising sun.” After the long night I saw the sunrise and I felt that it was a rising sun for our ideas. The fact that we are here 50 years later shows that I was right – the ideas still have relevance.

Bob Ross

- What was new? What is relevant today? The key idea is that the demand for true “Democracy” is the way to unite across many issues.

- SDS initially had two faces – civil rights activists and young people inspired by that and people more connected to social democrats and the labor movement (many connected to the Young Socialists). From the East came people whose families were influenced by communism. What we shared was a view about the Cold War as a false polarization and source of division within the Left. As long as the left was caught up with the Cold War, we were trapped and could not really deal with the important issues. Before SDS, Citizenship was superficial and restricted to voting; Economic power undermined democracy; racism excluded blacks from political life; and parties were morally compromised.
- Here's a story: In December 1964, Robert Rules saved the day. The SDS national council meeting in New York had a motion to have a march on Washington to end the war. On the one side were people engaged in Community organizing who felt that the anti-war march would undermine those efforts. The motion failed – and I also voted against the motion. A friend of mine after the vote said to me that participating in the march was crucial, that the war was the moral issue of our time. I knew that Robert Rules that said that I could reopen the discussion because I had voted against the motion. The motion was reopened, and the motion passed, and this was really the turning point for SDS.

Saturday discussions

The Saturday discussions were more academic, more centered on the analysis of historians and sociologists.

Nelson Lichtenstein

Lichtenstein, a prominent labor historian, had some really interesting things to say about the connections between SDS and the UAW and the complex political and generational issues involved in this. SDS was enthusiastically supported, initially, by the brain trust around Walter Reuther. These had lots of old socialists. There was a genuine, if brief, love affair between them. In the 1962 convention of UAW, a month before Port Huron, there was a political document of principles and resolutions adopted that was every bit as radical as the Port Huron Statement. There were 58 resolutions on civil rights, housing, international affairs, all very similar to PH statements. Of course, most of the delegates never read most of these resolutions, so the votes don't exactly mean strong support, but still the leadership of the UAW was definitely behind them and supported the same ideological stance as SDS.

This all unraveled in 1964 around the issue of purging the Dixicrats from the Democratic Party. This was strongly advocated in the Port Huron Statement. The idea was to make the Democratic Party a more coherent progressive party. The UAW felt that this would not be enough to push for solutions to socioeconomic problems. In some ways realignment contradicted the insurgent impulse of the PHS, because it would weaken the electoral dominance of the Democrats. The problems became clear in summer 1964. UAW was initially in support of the Ella Baker MFDP in the Convention. LBJ opposed this fearing the ramifications, which included the Wallace appeal in north and the prospects of the Republicans gaining power if the MFDP was seated in the

Convention. LBJ thus put the squeeze on Reuther who went along with blocking the MFDP. And this led to a sharp falling out between SDS and the UAW.

Dan Geary

Geary, a historian at University College Dublin, explored the connection between the Left and a different strand of liberalism, the strand centered around anti-war, peace, and nuclear disarmament. Of considerable importance on these themes was the Committee of Correspondence – David Riesman’s newsletter – which for a time had a very wide circle of contributors and readers. Initially here as well there was a strong overlap ideologically with SDS. This shows that not all post-war liberalism were “Cold War Liberals.” In the course of the 1960s, however, a cleavage between Left and liberals intensified. Riesman’s increasing hostility to student radicals reflects this. Early in 1960s, SDS hailed authentic liberalism, but increasingly liberals became the enemy, especially under the rubric of “corporate liberals” (in contrast to humanitarian liberals). By the end of the 1970s all liberals were seen as corporate liberals. The Viet Nam war is what really shattered this connection.

The real Lesson here is the Importance of collaboration of between left and liberalism – both have been most successful when they work synergistically together even if they have different views on how radical a transformation is desirable and possible.

Grace Hale, an historian from UNIVERSITY OF Virginia

What made those mostly middle class, white, Northern students care about working class black people in the South? To make it simple: I want to discuss “love” in its broader meaning – deep feelings of attachment, concern, caring, emotions. This is a neglected thread in the history of New Left. Many people found love through solidarities in activism.

The development of the New Left involved a profoundly changing meaning of “authenticity”: people experienced in this period a profound shift from an objective/visual understanding of truth and authenticity to one that was internal, subjective, oral. Social justice infused into this new sense of authenticity.

Tom Hayden in 1960 talked about civil rights activists at a National Students Association meeting and said that “they lived on a higher level of feeling than anyone I knew”. Emotions and feelings come up throughout PH statement: love, passions, unfulfilled love, making people feel things, moving people. Love is what made possible a radical act of imagination of global solidarities.

There are tensions and contradictions in all this. Julius Lester denounced “too much love” by white liberals for blacks as stifling black struggles and initiatives. He said that black activists resented the fact that “we were the cause that made their lives meaningful.”

Lisa McGirr, Harvard Historian

The Port Huron Statement needs to be situated in a global context. The 60s were not just an American event. 1968 seemed like a moment of revolutionary possibility because of things

happening all over the world. Each experience nationally has its national trajectory – in Prague, Spain, Paris, Milan, Japan, etc. Simultaneity was striking.

1956 is a good place to start the 1960s; really the period 1956-74 = “the 60s”. 1956: deStalinization opens up humanitarian socialism; C, Wright Mills and Thompson start New Left Clubs; The French Nouvelle Gauche begins building in the 1950s to oppose French colonialism; 1955 is Bandung conference for nonaligned nationals – the idea of the third World as a positive world emerges. In US 1956 is the Montgomery bus boycott.

Global context:

1. Rising youth culture interconnected globally, anchored in anglo-US culture through films and taste.
2. There was an Explosion of universities everywhere: the rise of the student population outran structures of universities, outmoded curriculum, etc. And this occurred under conditions of relative political stability and prosperity. Universities became site of resistance and turmoil everywhere because of the demographic shock everywhere hitting old institutions.
3. There are important shared elements of movements throughout much of the world: generational/youth oriented; rejection of materialism for a meaningful life; rejections of cold war; rejections of authoritarian bureaucratic domination; search for subjective authenticity; importance of creativity as core of authenticity with an existentialist edge. Marcuse and Mills were influences everywhere.

Comment on the assassination views of Hayden: these outcomes, unraveling, disintegration happened everywhere, not just the US, so the specific trajectory here cannot really be seen as a result of these factors.

Jim Miller, sociologist New School

Direct democracy was an attractive ideal, but SDS never really thought through the problems and contradictions of this as a form of political life. It also ignores the key problem that most people do not want to spend their lives that way. As Hannah Arendt said “one of the greatest freedoms is the freedom *from* politics.”

The Occupy movement faces the familiar problems of direct democracy – that it is not at all functional once there is any complexity and scale, especially where there are sharply divided opinions. There is a necessity of representation & compromising, which is blocked by consensus fetishism. The fetish of consensus tends to propagate polarization, moderates end compromising towards the most militant because of their desire to avoid blocking “consensus”, whereas militants don’t hesitate to block. Consensus ends up forging conformity towards militancy.

Jenny Mansbridge, Harvard Political Scientist

A Key feature of the 1960s is that this was the ONLY time in history where the youth were a majority of the population – the adolescent baby boom bulge. This will never happen again. This was combined with another novelty: affluence -- everyone knew that they could get a job.

Jenny studied participatory democratic cooperatives in order to see what the normal functioning of these organizations was like, how they developed, what was the normal pattern of crisis and problems. This is a bit like the research that tells parents that a “normal” 2 year old has tantrums and therefore if your 2 year old has a tantrum this is not because you are a bad parent. My research wanted to create a kind of manual for how to do participatory democracy.

My presentation

I had planned out a pretty complex presentation laying out the moral foundations for my view of real utopias and then the basic theoretical design of the idea of a social socialism. When I got up to speak, I chucked it entirely and did something completely different, talking about specific examples and how these examples embody participatory democracy principles. I explained the real utopias idea, but mostly elaborated examples – participatory budgeting and the US variants; Wikipedia; cooperatives. I don’t usually do this – just drop completely prepared remarks and give a more free-flowing set of comments in response to the mood of the moment, but it almost always feel good when I do.

Ben Manski

Ben Manski, an activist from Madison who is now the campaign manager for the Green Party Presidential candidate, Jill Stein, gave a nice talk about the current generation of activists and their sense of generational continuity with the new left. He spoke about how they didn’t feel like a “youth movement,” although perhaps that is beginning to change a little.

Charles Paine, Black University of Chicago political scientists (I think)

Paine gave an extremely Interesting account of how white volunteers in Freedom summer sometimes felt unappreciated by Blacks, especially young blacks. This is documented in very moving ways in an oral history book about Freedom Summer. He then raised a number of issues around the decline of the sense of humanism and universal bonds in the course of the 60s – SNCC chapters dissolving into fist fights, SDS fracturing around issues of violence and Marxism. Why? Provocateurs? How does a movement lose its capacity for mutual support and shift to internal conflict/competition? Is this a natural unraveling, or something that can be countered?

Last speaker

The final speaker (I didn’t get the name) was a woman who had devoted her life to activism. She addressed the young activists in the room and gave some advice about how to make such a life viable:

- Live a modest life
- Choose your influences: people influence you so choose them carefully – who you hang out with, how much TV you watch, whose opinion of you will matter to you, etc. All of these affect your spiritual sense of who you are, what is possible and desirable.
- Look for inspiration: put yourself in situations where you are with people whose lives you would like to emulate. Consciously realize you need to be re-inspired.
- Periodically step back and ask: am I leading the kind of life I want? Periodically review what you are doing.
- Take risks
- Live a balanced life: movement cannot fill every need you have. Movements are there to make change. Take care of yourself.

Final Session

The final session involved ten or so student activists from the UCSB campus. Each spoke for a few minutes, some raising issues from the conference, others asking questions. One theme that several asked about was their own privilege and how to cope with it. They were all minorities – Latinos and African-Americans mostly. They were troubled about defending budgets to public universities when there were so many more desperately pressing matters.

In the discussion which followed I responded to the issue of privilege by observing that in the Wisconsin struggle one of the attacks by Republicans was that state workers are privileged and that the opposition to Walker was just a special interest trying to protect its privileges – better benefits, more job security, than other workers. The response to this should not be to feel guilty about such “privileges” but to struggle for expansive union rights and extending those benefits to everyone, not restricting them.

The other comment I made later in the discussion was about divisiveness. I commented that one of the issues is how reactive one is, how thin-skinned, how quick to call something divisive. Sometimes it is better to let things pass or bring them up in private rather than to call someone out for slipping up and raising the temperature of the discussion. The key is genuine respect and really listening and responding honestly, without rancor. One of the students objected saying that this put a burden on students of color -- they were being asked to behave a specific way and ignore things.

White activists should just recognize their racism and not get upset when they are called on it. These are obviously very tricky and difficult matters, without easy solutions.

