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April 20, 2011

“Harmonizing Tensions of the Left: From SDS to Complementary Holism”

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Abstract

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By Misty Novitch

The political left can never seem to come together like the political right. The left expands a wide range of people, issues, and strategies and therefore tends to embrace differences, or at least allows an outlet for them. These differences when thrown together tend to cause tensions between activists, groups, and movements since it is difficult to know how to deal with difference – it is often seen as a problem and the tensions tend to cause anxiety. These tensions often result in progressives trying to hierarchically arrange different issues and strategies and thereby splitting up into smaller and smaller groups or trying to force homogenization, both of which are antithetical to left values and movement effectiveness. Studying the history of Students for Democratic Society (SDS), a central New Left organization in the 1960s, some essential tensions can be derived, tensions still very much at play in the left today. Investigating the way SDS handled some of these essential tensions can give insights as to how to handle these same tensions today. Additionally, the theory of complementary holism, which is focused on balancing solidarity and autonomy in movements, provides a conceptual starting place for organizing across differences and creating holistic strategies. Combining the historical evolution from SDS to complementary holism and applying these lessons to strategy today, the left can help facilitate a non-hierarchical, holistic movement of movements to win a more progressive world that uplifts all progressive values.

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I want to thank my dad and every activist fighting for progressive change. You are my heroes.

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Harmonizing Tensions of the Left: From SDS to Complementary Holism

Introduction

I became a social justice activist because I felt the pain of others – like the (most recent) US bombing of Baghdad, the genocide in Darfur, or the homelessness rampant in the streets of America. As an activist, I seek to 1) lessen or prevent that pain, and 2) create the conditions in which everyone can survive and thrive. I try to go where I think I am most needed, to do the work I think is most useful, and to focus on what I think is least attended. In short, I try to help complete the "Movement."¹

And since I try to fill in whatever piece I see as missing, to make sure every base is covered, this project is a natural extension of my life's work. This project seeks essentially to connect dots between the "bases," for the space between is also a "base" to be covered. I believe that if activists wish to succeed in our various causes and movements, then we must *connect* our causes and movements. Although efforts are being made to show the relations between various issues, I believe we need to be more explicit about this "connecting" work and that it must be a top priority for the political left (which I define as those “support[ing] social change to create a more egalitarian society”²) and all who truly seek progressive change.

If activists continue to assign this connecting work to the periphery, the left will continue to fight separate, demoralizing uphill battles against all new attacks on the public sector, human rights, and human dignity. If activists continue to conceptualize their work in tiny little segments and causes that do not overlap, where nothing really affects anything else, they will continue to feel overwhelmed by how they keep losing every fight they wage. They will continue to take their frustrations out on one another -

¹ Sale, Kirkpatrick. *SDS*. Random House, NY: 1973. P. 7.

² Wikipedia. “Left-wing politics.”

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Left_\(political_attitude\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Left_(political_attitude)), *last accessed* December 17, 2010 at 1:06 pm.

- which is much easier than fighting an enemy that has no face and is in fact a system – and fight amongst themselves over which strategy, cause, or issue is most important. In short, they will continue to feel – and, for all intents and purposes, be – small.

Since I have been an activist for a while now, I have seen the factional disputes on the left around issues and strategies, disputes that anyone who has been involved with this community within the past fifty years for long enough can attest to. I have worked on all sides of these disputes and have seen the power and wisdom that diverse issues and strategies offer to the larger Movement. I feel that this array of activities helps put me in a more ideal position to appeal to all "sides" and helps motivate me to find ways to reconcile seemingly irreconcilable tensions that arise from our differences.

The tensions are numerous and at first, with the antagonistic philosophical reasoning of the US, they seem to be "either/or" opposites where activists must choose one camp or another. Should they focus on the "ends" and do what is most efficient for immediate, short-term goals, such as having the best speakers, writers, and leaders continue to speak, write, and lead? Or should they focus on the "means" and the long-term needs of the Movement, such as propping up new speakers, writers, and leaders who may not be as articulate, powerful, "on-message," who might harm short-term efforts? Should activists reform what they have to work with, where they are, recognizing the political, economic, and social realities of their situation and take small steps and make small corrections to the existing framework? Or should they make revolution and transform their current situation, focusing on the long-term and directing their energy to this system's overthrow rather than band-aid solutions to a rotten system? Should activists choose one cause, effort, or campaign at a time and quickly and efficiently solve that particular problem, putting all of their resources and people into this one thing? Or should they accept them all, spreading their resources thin and their efficiency perhaps out the window, but all members happy with their particular favorite and the many bases beginning to be covered? Short-

term efforts or long-term movement? Reform or revolution? One focus or many?

These tensions in the Movement are paradoxical. The tensions that threaten to, and do, destroy unity, solidarity, and organizations themselves are the very same tensions that allow autonomy for the different sub-groups and individuals within the larger Movement. Cynthia Burack says all "groups are always, irreducibly, coalitions"³ and activists must recognize the "reality of common difference" within every group and movement. So, if differences are inevitable, and differences create tension, then tension is inevitable. But tensions need not be destructive – this is but a potential danger regarding tensions, for tensions, again, can address multiple needs and allow autonomy. If tensions are inevitable, and tensions can actually be positive, constructive forces, then the job of activists is not to get rid of tensions or differences but to *guide* tension in a productive direction that helps "cover all the bases" of different needs, desires, and efforts on the left. In short, the left's job is to figure out how to make tensions between differences *complementary*.

With this project, I seek to compile and synthesize best practices for building and maintaining coalitions across differences in issues and strategies on the political, social, and economic left. I will focus on how best to complement activist differences, balance autonomy and solidarity (diversity and unity), and guide potentially destructive tensions toward creativity and growth. I will recount some of the tensions resulting from diversity in one multi-issue, multi-strategy group in the 1960s -- Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the main organization of the white "New Left" – to show how their embrace of different issues, tactics, and people kept them intact and helped them to thrive, dramatically shaping the political history of this country. I will then look at the development of a particular theory coming out of the New Left political tradition – complementary holism – to investigate how this theory

³ Burak, Cynthia. "The Dream of Common Differences: Coalitions, Progressive Politics, and Black Feminist Thought." Found in Forging Radical Alliances Across Difference: Coalition Politics for the New Millennium by Bystydzienski, Jill and Schacht, Steven. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2001. P. 39.

could conceptually assist our coalition building work today. I will apply lessons learned and insights found from SDS and complementary holism to help inform left strategies today toward a movement of movements to win the progressive world we want.

This work is only a small piece of a much larger effort to understand how the left (and others, for that matter) can work together across difference. This project, far from being comprehensive, is only a brief introduction to a much larger question. It is meant only to forward a timeless conversation that the left needs now, perhaps more so than ever before, as the world comes to the crossroads of annihilation or revolutionary transformation. The implications of these types of efforts at complementing differences on a large scale are exciting. I hope to be a part of further discussions around this question as the left moves in this direction, as it inevitably must.

SDS

I have chosen SDS as my case study for how to negotiate difference on the left because they seem to exemplify the three main qualities that are necessary for coalitions on the left to embrace: efficiency, diversity, and equality. SDS had 1) an “impressive record of accomplishment”⁴ (efficiency) even while they had 2) innumerable issue and strategy foci (diversity) and 3) a fairly decentralized, non-hierarchical organization where members and even non-members were able to express themselves (equality). Their generally non-hierarchical structure and goal of participatory democracy allowed the different opinions and ideas people had to be expressed, thereby providing the organization with a more developed set of choices as to what exactly they would do and how they would do it. The dynamism of SDS's "impressive record" warrants description to further justify their study.

⁴ Sale, Kirkpatrick. SDS. Random House, NY: 1973. P. 7.

As Kirkpatrick Sale recounts, they built “much of the student support for the Southern sit-ins”⁵ and brought the attention of politically-minded college students to “such issues as automation, poverty, disarmament, and the bankruptcy of the Cold War.”⁶ They were “the first [and] most important...organization to mobilize Americans against the war in Vietnam”⁷ and “the inspiration and...supplier of talent for a wide range of ‘alternative institutions’ [like] free universities, underground press, Movement ‘think tanks,’ guerilla theatre groups, free health clinics, alternative political parties, and collectives and communes.”⁸ SDS “was the seedbed for the women’s liberation movement...and supplied many of that movement’s initial converts, and it played a part both formally and informally in other types of political broadening such as high school organizing, GI resistance, trade-union agitation, the Venceremos Brigades to Cuba, and ‘radical caucuses’ in the professional societies of almost every branch of the academy.”⁹ They “[opened] up the left spectrum of politics in this country...pushing the liberal cannon to the left [and] establishing socialism as at least a possible political alternative”¹⁰ until there were “more than a million people within just the universities who identified themselves as avowed revolutionaries,”¹¹ the largest number of “revolutionaries” in America, perhaps in American history.

Although SDS accomplished much, embraced a variety of causes and strategies, and often employed participatory decision-making, from its very beginning it embodied major tensions that created anxiety and threatened the wherewithal of the organization. When SDS was first deciding what program it should put its energy behind, no one could agree on which single program should be elevated above others. When there was a major split in SDS between ERAP (the Educational Research and

⁵ Ibid, p. 7.

⁶ Ibid, p. 8.

⁷ Ibid, p. 8.

⁸ Ibid, p. 9.

⁹ Ibid, p. 9-10.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 8.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 11.

Action Project) and academia -- whether to give their bodies and lives to the poorest, most dispossessed in the population or to focus on research and academic, theoretical assistance -- they could not achieve consensus on either of these foci. When there was a need to respond to a particular situation, as well as to communicate in general, SDS had a problem making decisions and communicating with its base in a timely manner due to organizational strains. Each of these tensions is multi-layered and deserves more investigation, as they each played out in different ways. Additionally, some of the solutions (as well as the lack thereof) that SDS employed (or failed to employ) to deal with these tensions are worth noting for their value in today's situations.

Numerous Programs

SDS began with a vision conducive to channeling tensions into the all-encompassing kinds of coalitions left activists should seek today. Al Haber, the first president of SDS, articulated this vision of what he wanted this new organization to be even before it asserted independence from its parent organization, the League of Industrial Democracy (LID), when SDS was still called the Student League of Industrial Democracy (SLID):

First...SDS should play down the old SLID idea of establishing its own little chapters for its own little purposes at various campuses and concentrate instead on forming alliances with the existing campus groups that had already come into being in response to their own local needs...

Second...SDS could play its most valuable role by trying to coordinate these groups and service their needs on a national scale, publishing newsletters, sending literature, organizing conferences, keeping the leaders in touch with one another, giving them a larger sense of participating in a wider movement beyond their particular campuses.

Third, SDS should involve itself as much as possible with direct social action...pickets, sit-ins, freedom marches, boycotts, protest demonstrations - rather than limiting itself, as it had in the past, to strictly educational work.

And finally, SDS should abandon the ideological line-toeing that had characterized SLID, work with any groups that were genuinely involved in seeking social change, and content itself with giving them a nonsectarian vision of the totality of the American system and the connection between the various single-issue maladies. (Sale, 24-25)

Forming alliances with existing groups, coordinating and servicing these groups, supporting current efforts, being willing to work with any organization, and sharing a connecting vision are all characteristics of a collective that is not only ripe for coalition building. SDS, from the start, established itself as an organization with the main purpose of building alliances across difference.

It follows naturally from this vision for how SDS should relate to other groups and efforts that it would decide to similarly relate its own members, sub-groups, and streams to one another. Indeed, there were several other groups that were working on single-issue causes at the time, so one of the main reasons that someone would have joined SDS, we can assume, is that they did indeed care about more than one issue and wanted to be a part of a group that addressed issues more holistically. As Jeremy Brecher put it, he joined the group because SDS addressed "all the things I believed in [and gave] an enormous sense of dynamism -- a feeling of expansiveness -- "Dynamism" is the only word for it...you had a feeling of breaking out, that SDS was becoming a mass movement, it was on the verge of relating to much broader groups on campus...it's a whole different stance and attitude."¹² This vision by Haber set the stage for those who had diverse priorities and strategic agendas to come together to help forward the whole Movement.

However, although they started with a more encompassing ideology, once they started to develop a sizable number of members and chapters, one of SDS's first tensions arose when they wanted to choose a single program to unite behind. The first conference was meant to choose this national program, and so Haber asked activists to come up with ideas before the conference. As Sale recounts,

¹² Sale, Kirkpatrick. SDS. Random House, NY: 1973. P. 88.

"almost every conceivable political notion was put fourth, most of them in lengthy papers that sat in deep piles in the University of Michigan Student Activities Building that weekend."¹³ Poverty, university reform, civil rights, and peace centers were a few of the suggestions from activists, but there was no consensus:

The Ann Arbor conference foundered on its multiplicity of rocks, one group wanting to steer one way, one group another.

Haber had known that various campus groups were searching for a national program to unite behind, but he forgot that each one had its own favorite, or at least wasn't prepared to submerge its interests in somebody else's favorite...

Knowing originally that single-issue orientation was wrong, that only a broad radical consensus could draw student militants together, [Haber] had been tempted by the initial impact of the fall civil-rights campaign to want to put SDS unreservedly behind a single project. But naturally enough no one could agree on which one. (Sale, 39)

Even in single-issue groups, disagreement is a reoccurring phenomenon; it arises because difference is inevitable and difference tends to lead to tension. It is unlikely that members in each local chapter themselves even all truly agreed on a program that the whole chapter advocated at the conference since every group is essentially a coalition.

This first problem for SDS introduces a common theme present in tensions on the left: should activists get very specific while risking holism, or should they get very holistic while risking specificity? Clarity or inclusivity? Both of these "sides" are not "either/or" debates but are more akin to points on a spectrum. Both extremes of this spectrum have their risks and benefits. Going further, though, it would serve the left even better to see these tensions as not even necessarily "sides" but as pieces of a puzzle – where they just have to decipher how they best fit together since both "pieces" are needed to complete the picture. If the left is unclear, people will be confused, it might be muddled as to when they have succeeded, and their work might not be as powerful when they express it to others. But if activists are

¹³ Sale, Kirkpatrick. SDS. Random House, NY: 1973. P. 38.

exclusive, people will be left out and impatient that activists have "reduced [their priorities] to peripheral concern."¹⁴ That is the tricky part – to find a balance that suits activists' various needs, structure and practice that simultaneously allow for efficiency, diversity, and equality.

Although there was no consensus achieved on program for the whole SDS at that conference, it was far from a "failure" (Sale, 39). Part of why this and other tensions could be worked through is because this conference "was the first of what were to be a steady series of enormously congenial gatherings among sympathetic people, a process wrought by some mysterious chemistry of those early SDS days that no one has ever structurally analyzed" (ibid). The SDSers found a shared identity in their interests, attitudes, bohemian style, passionate urgency, frustration with the realities of America, and an excitement about the possibilities for change (ibid). This sense of good-natured friendship along with the cultural similarity and shared identity of members helped to soften the potential for anxiety from this initial disagreement and direct it toward a more positive opportunity for growth. This most basic human connection of attraction to and comfort from one another is something that people tend to want to preserve and so they are less likely to allow slight tensions to become hostile conflicts. However, although benevolence and camaraderie can carry groups and coalitions far and may even be necessary, more than friendship and shared identity may be needed in order to decide programs, efforts, and actions.

So then what of SDS's single, specific national program that they wanted for groups to unite behind? Using his original vision for SDS, as well as the experience of this conference, Haber had an epiphany that took SDS to the next level:

He realized that *what was important was not a single national program but the shared view of the world* (my emphasis), and so at one late-night meeting he came up with the

¹⁴ Albert, Michael et al. Liberating Theory. South End Press, MA: 1986. P. 80.

suggestion that SDS's real job should be to work creating a manifesto that would announce these basic feelings, and maybe thereafter could come to an agreed upon program around which an organization like SDS could function... (Sale, 40).

Thus was born *The Port Huron Statement* of 1962, SDS's official manifesto and perhaps the most widely read document in the 1960s.¹⁵ A manifesto like this could potentially help solve the problem of such diversity of opinions on which single cause or program to embrace because it can contain many issues within it. Indeed, *Huron* announces general feelings, values, goals, and positions on various issues, leaving room for different points to resonate with different people, or for the totality to resonate with people searching for the "dynamism" that SDS offered.¹⁶

Doubtless the most powerful part of *Huron* (and SDS for that matter) is its sense that these issues are closely related – a kind of holistic conceptualizing that goes beyond issue positions and political opinions, which may be what has held the left back from reaching its full potential. Sale articulates this point:

...what gave [*Huron*] a particular strength was its radical sense that all these problems were *interconnected*, that there was a total system of America within which its multiple parts functioned, and that social ills in one area were intimately linked to those in another, so that solutions, too, had to be connected. (50-51)

This point is perhaps the most crucial part of coalition building on the left: connecting issues and strategies to one another. Without this, the left will effectively see only the boxes in which it operates and not the wider Movement and society. Believing that everything – racism, capitalism, politics, war, poverty, etc – is connected makes people more likely to engage in solidarity because everyone's issues affect everyone else's issues and it is therefore in each individual's own interest to support the work of others. This recognition also increases the likelihood of a complementing of tensions as it shows that activists need not fight or compete over which issue to choose but instead support many since they are

¹⁵ Sale, Kirkpatrick. *SDS*. Random House, NY: 1973. P. 69.

¹⁶ SDS. "Port Huron Statement." 1962. Found in *Takin' It to the Streets: A Sixties Reader*. Oxford University Press, NY: 2003. Pp. 50-61.

connected.

ERAP vs. Academia

The ERAP vs. academia debate that came about in 1963 is another example that it was the right choice for SDS to embrace the totality of oppressions (or strategies, in this case) rather than a single issue or strategy. The ERAP "impulse,"¹⁷ with a philosophical undertone first introduced in a speech by Paul Potter at the Spring 1963 SDS conference and then brought up again in the paper *America and the New Era*, called for shifting the focus from the university and students as the source of radical change to the poor and the ghettos. "Thousands of students turned from theory to action, from classrooms to slums, going south to register voters in impoverished black communities, organizing unemployed workers in decaying inner cities, running tutorial projects for black high-school students in the North..."¹⁸ Sale outlines what he thinks was the root of this particular tension/debate:

What makes this especially important is that it stands in polar opposition to *The Port Huron Statement's* ideas of what universities and students can be and do – and the tension between these two impulses will continue throughout the decade to be faced by activist students: Is the university "a potential base and agency in a movement of social change" (*The Port Huron Statement*) or is it "ultimately committed to the nourishment of a...system in which the Cold War is inextricably rooted" (Potter)?...Are students operating in the university truly agents of social change, or must they leave the campuses and operate in the "real" world outside? (85)

This tension introduces yet another debate on the left that I call reform vs. revolution -- should activists work with what they have, trying for more easy wins, or should they reject it all as inadequate and try to change the underlying systems? Although I do not necessarily believe the implications of Potter's speech stood "in polar opposition to" *Huron*, since reform can be *part* of revolution (see final section below),

¹⁷ Sale, Kirkpatrick. *SDS*. Random House, NY: 1973. P. 85.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 95.

the tension between these analytic thrusts was real, and it had the potential to destroy SDS. Or perhaps it is better said that the *thinking around* these different thrusts almost killed SDS. For when SDS chose to keep the old academic focus *as well as* embracing ERAP (the newest and most popular drive), SDS was saved from being split apart by the strategic factions that it had developed.

ERAP developed out of a frustration with SDS having universality in thought but not in action, as having more of "a vague educational role," as Tom Hayden called it.¹⁹ This frustration seems to be an example of another kind of tension on the left – whether to study thoroughly first before action while risking never actually acting (since one can never know everything) or to act without thorough study while risking making counterproductive choices or repeating past mistakes. However, SDSers already had a theoretical background, and many were restless for a chance to apply their theoretical values to "real" people with "real" problems in the US, to escape their own racial and class privilege and follow their morals.²⁰ Adding a yearning for action to the lack of action from the National Office (NO) "chafed increasingly on a number of SDS in-group, and they began searching for new drives and programs that would energize the membership and circumvent the NO."²¹ ERAP advocates sought to match up SDS's actions and strategies with its analysis, vision, and philosophy, to make SDS holistic not just in theory but in action.

The "sides" of the ERAP-academia debate can be summarized in the arguments of the first two paid SDSers -- Al Haber for academia and Tom Hayden for ERAP. Haber's position was that ERAP should be a center for independent radical research and thinking, for "formulating programs around which *other* people organized themselves. Students should concern themselves as students, avoid the "cult of the ghetto," and use their own problems and talents to organize around, on the campus. If SDS

¹⁹ Sale, Kirkpatrick. SDS. Random House, NY: 1973. P. 95.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 101.

²¹ Ibid, p. 97.

spread itself from campus to ghetto, it would be spreading itself too thin.”²² Hayden thought ERAP represented a more grassroots movement based where "the [real] people" are: "There we can listen to them, learn from them, organize them to give voice to their legitimate complaints, mobilize them to demand from the society the decent life that is rightfully theirs. ERAP can be the insurgent action that would truly propel SDS on a "revolutionary trajectory" (as *America and the New Era* had put it). *Here at last was something for SDS to do.*"²³ Both sides of the Haber-Hayden debate, as it came to be called, had legitimate points as well as faults, and so, again, these "sides" should not be taken to extremes, or taken as being "in polar opposition" to one another, but should instead be taken together, *in light of* each other.

The main reason for the ERAP vs. academia hostility, though, was that the "factions" diminished one another, even calling for the dismantling of the other. It might have been a more manageable tension had proponents of each focus kept a warmer attitude toward one another and simply critiqued the other with more constructive debates, attempting to convince undecided members to give more of their time to each respective program. However, their critiques were often accompanied by condescension.

Proponents of research and the university continuing to be the main thrust of SDS likely had understandable fear and anger around the thinking of some of the ERAPers. Sale highlights why they may have felt this way:

The ERAPers began to feel that SDS should give itself over almost entirely to community organizing, that people should drop out of school and that it might even be necessary for SDS to *become* ERAP. (110)

Don McKelvey told Steve Max in a letter in the Spring of 1963 that Tom Hayden thought "that the campus program should be gutted."²⁴ Al Haber wrote in the March-April *SDS Bulletin* that ERAP "has become the base for an unfortunate anti-intellectualism in SDS... The 'into the ghetto' enthusiasm has

²² Sale, Kirkpatrick. *SDS*. Random House, NY: 1973. P. 107.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 110.

become linked with...a disparagement of research and study...a moral superiority for those who 'give their bodies'..."²⁵ Again, like the previous tension of choosing a single national program to unite behind, SDSers did not want their priorities subsumed by those of others. They felt threatened by the idea of dismantling their preferred program and offended by those who would doubt that academic study was legitimate work for revolutionaries put their energy into. Although ERAPers were acceptable when wanting to interact with and serve people outside of the university, their *attacks* on the academic program made them enemies and pushed this tension in a more destructive direction.

It was not only ERAPers who were offensive to academics, though: The academically focused "side" also dismissed ERAP as a dangerous fad, even a "cult," and as irrelevant to SDS's mission. In that same letter to Max, McKelvey described what he thought SDS was:

SDS is...a particular sector of [the Movement] with a particular thing to do -- i.e. get middle class students into politics in a meaningful, long-term way. (Sale, 110)

And in Haber's critique in the *Bulletin*, he shows that he thought similarly about ERAP and SDS:

And I am critical of [ERAP's] organizational role because *it diverts us from more important things* (my emphasis), ignores our role as a *student* organization...

The cult of the ghettos has diverted SDS from the *primary* (my emphasis) and most difficult task of educating radicals... (Sale, 110-111)

These leaders on the academic side made it clear that not only did they feel intimidated and affronted by ERAP encroachments on their program, but that they also thought very little of ERAP as a program, seeing it as minor – if even permitted – in the work of SDS. Although they also offered critiques of the ERAP program that could have been employed to make it more effective more quickly, the energy that the academics offered the ERAPers was similarly cold and unwelcoming.

The animosity between the leaders of the two sides is likely what kept the hostility of this tension extended over time rather than letting it become constructive and even complementary, but the choice

²⁵ Sale, Kirkpatrick. *SDS*. Random House, NY: 1973. P. 110-111.

SDS made as a whole to embrace both of these programs (and more) is a part of what let them succeed as an organization. At two different SDS conferences – the National Council (NC) conference in December of 1963 and the wider conference with all members in the summer of 1964 – SDS decided to do it all. At the first, they voted on which program they wanted but it was not a winner-takes-all system:

...the [ERAP] position won twenty to six. There were still to be campus programs of research and education around poverty and civil rights, there was still to be work in peace, disarmament, educational reform, and electoral politics -- but the main energies of the organization would now go into ERAP. (Sale, 107)

Over six months, another NC conference in April 1964, and after lots of failures and, finally, successes, the anxiety between the two camps brought up the debate again. At the second conference, they thought that they would try the popularity contest again, amongst all the members:

Since it was now a hoary tradition of fully two years that the job of summer conventions was to turn out programmatic papers like the *Port Huron Statement* and *America and the New Era*, each of these factions had come prepared with a document for the convention...This, it was thought, would resolve the factional dispute, for whichever paper was most popular with the convention would be the blueprint for the...year.

The papers were presented; the convention took just half an afternoon to reject all three [on ERAP, academia, and realignment]. The solution was in the best existential tradition of the New Left – no program, no blueprint, nobody telling you what you have to do – and it kept the organization intact. (Sale, 112).

This solution makes sense: Everyone has a favorite program, and often people are fairly evenly split, such as in this case or else the convention would not have rejected all three programmatic papers. People feel more passionate about one thing or another, and that is what they want to put their energy into. Coercing members of a group – especially a freedom-loving, leftist group – to engage in something they are not very interested in will not help that program succeed. Begrudging participants will not be committed: quite the opposite, they will likely feel resentful that they have to do something they do not want to do and that their program was not respected as well.

From looking at this particular tension in SDS, we can note three lessons to help left groups and

coalitions today: 1) balance theory and action; 2) embrace multiple programs (as we also learned from our reading of the first tension); and 3) maintain *at least* a tolerance and constructive criticism, rather than disparagement and hostility, toward programs one does not fully support. Different people (even if they have a lot in common) have different inclinations and should be free to make their own choices and follow their own passions. Further, not just morally but for the good of an organization, coalition, or movement, people must be allowed to do what they wish, and even to change their minds to make different choices as they learn and grow.

Activists need theory in order to understand the world, where they agree or disagree with the way things are, and as a first step for action – where exactly they want to make change (not to mention what to change things to be). Activists need action in order to actually bring about the world they seek, as well as to assist people's immediate needs, and even to support their theory or make changes to the ideas they hold. One without the other is incomplete. As Dennis Pascal said, "Action without theory is aimless; theory without action is lifeless."²⁶

And as with the first tension in SDS, embracing multiple programs kept SDS together, combining the strengths and insights of all those who might have otherwise split into three or more different movements. Each program gave different groups of people what they were looking for, and each accomplished something that the other "factions" would not have accomplished. As Sale pointed out, "[t]his vision [and application] – of a group which connects, and operates on, otherwise isolated issues – accounts for much of SDS's early success...[S]trategically, it is a way of bringing together a number of disparate single-issue clubs and ad hoc groups..." (25). Especially for coalitions, where the common definition is diversity, the idea of embracing multiple programs is an important one.

It is also imperative to maintain a good attitude toward the differences between left activists

²⁶ Pascal, Dennis. Getting the Right Things Done: A Leader's Guide to Planning and Execution. The Lean Enterprise Institute, Inc, MA: 2006. P. 21.

since differences seem to be here to stay. There is a fine line in this example between critique and enmity that must be highlighted for the left. In a better world, one can imagine a shared vision of activists' ability to offer constructive criticism to one another but disdain for each other's priorities does not seem to have a place in that world. And, if activists want to "incorporate the seeds of the future in the present"²⁷, then this kind of attitude has no place in a left Movement. But even on a more practical, strategic level, people can pick up on this hostility (since 90% of communication is nonverbal²⁸), whether in words, body language, or a more difficult-to-measure energy.²⁹ So even for activists' own individual interests they ought to change their thinking around embracing multiple issues, programs, and strategies if they are to change how they come off to one another.

Precarious Structures

Another tension in SDS arose during the Cuban Missile Crisis when SDS was not able to respond as a national organization due to the limitations of their structure. When this historic Crisis occurred, SDS was overwhelmed by numerous phone calls and new membership: the Crisis had shown people the need for the radical analysis and action that SDS offered. But SDS's structure could not keep up with the movement's demands. Sale describes the problem from the perspective of SDS:

It was clearly a moment for action but SDS did not know how to act. There was no

²⁷ Albert, Michael. "Building a Pareconish Movement."

<http://www.zcommunications.org/building-a-pareconish-movement-by-michael-albert>. May 3, 2006. Last accessed April 1, 2011.

²⁸ University of Northern Iowa. Business Communication. Physical Communication. "Elements of Physical Communication."

<http://www.cba.uni.edu/buscomm/nonverbal/index.html>. Last accessed on April 1, 2011.

²⁹ Novitch, Misty. "Planning Revolution."

http://www.zcommunications.org/planning-revolution-by-misty-novitch?toggle_layout=yes. August 5, 2009. Last accessed April 1, 2011.

machinery in the organization for swiftly organizing a national protest in the face of an unforeseen event; there was not even any provisional mechanism by which SDS could officially issue a press release -- written by whom? approved by what? (74)

SDS did not possess the internal structure to be able to use the analytical strength and reputation of the organization to take a stand on this situation or to tell the chapters what to do -- at least not quickly. They had just recently come to a delicate agreement with the LID about their relations with one another after a huge fight, where the LID literally locked them out of their office, called them before the executive council of the LID to defend themselves for their *Port Huron Statement*, told them that they could no longer publish any literature, etc. They were recovering from the shock of this tussle with their parent organization when the Crisis happened, leaving little time in between to decide upon a specific structure to meet their various needs. This lack of structural integrity made them miss a great opportunity for an exponential growth in membership and furthering of radical understanding and change.

This tension is difficult to address. On the one hand, SDS leaders in the NO were expected to tell their members what the official organizational stance was, how to respond, and to coordinate a collective expression of outrage at US officials' willingness to use nuclear weapons so haphazardly. On the other hand, despite there being official leadership in SDS's NO, the values of the organization and its members tied the hands of the leadership: they could not make decisions without the consent (and help) of the rest of the organization. As Sale puts it,

In a sense...the NO was a contradiction. A student group that wants the growth of decentralized communities where participatory democracy can operate has at its center a single, centralized office...

Utopians cluster around dystopian organizational form...they were organizationally trapped. (74-75)

This "trap" is a consistent problem for the left, which often wants such different institutions and such a different society than it operates within. Activists are so drenched in the every-day of their surroundings that it is quite difficult to extricate themselves from such an environment *even if* they *do* know they live

in it and *want* to escape it. How does one operate in a "dystopian" world when one's goals are so "utopian"? How do activists avoid or counterbalance being negatively affected by the dystopian cultural, gender, economic, and political roles that surround them in order to create utopia?

This third main tensional situation exemplifies another common problem on the left. Should activists prioritize efficiency in meeting goals or ends (arguably the reason they are activists) while risking authoritarian hierarchies amongst themselves (arguably canceling out their goals -- akin to selling their souls)? Or should they prioritize decentralized, egalitarian decision-making (maintaining their values) while risking being inefficient and even never reaching their goals (arguably canceling out why they became activists)? In this case, this tension between which of these to prioritize resulted in SDS not only having, technically, an officially hierarchical structure, but neutering its leadership so that it could not make the quick, executive decisions for coordination and unity its very existence was supposed to be intended for. So, returning to the spectrum analogy, instead of choosing one extreme or another, the goals and values of SDS almost canceled each other out so that they were arguably inefficient *as well as* hierarchical, the worst of both "sides." Accordingly, then, learning from SDS's mistake, the ideal situation for the left – and even a serious goal – is to have a more enriched, equitable, rotating leadership, as was suggested at one point in SDS. That way, the best of both "sides" – equality and efficiency – can be realized.

Part of the efficiency vs. equality problem was in a lack of prompt communication and, therefore, a lack of delegation. There were only three officers in the NO at this time – Jim Monsosis, Donald McKelvey, and Steve Max – and the work of running a national organization that was growing at an unexpected speed even in the early years (1962-64) was overwhelming the three of them. Sale comments on this lack of communication among the whole organization:

Communications simply weren't kept up. The Columbus NC had mandated the publication of a regular bulletin to keep members informed and give them a place for the regular pecculation of ideas, but *it didn't mandate anyone to do it* (my emphasis), and mostly it fell to an already overworked McKelvey...

The result was that people had to depend upon occasional conferences or visits from national officers to find out what their organization and its separate parts were doing. (78)

So the fact that the NC had called for a regular circulation of literature nationally shows that SDS had thought about communication around the whole organization, a crucial first step for the delegation process to even begin. The problem was that they could not foster communication (and delegation) quickly enough or on a scale large enough to meet the needs of the various chapters.

In order to ensure that everyone communicates on an equal basis, *and* that activists accomplish their goals efficiently, they must make sure that everyone participates: everyone has to do their share not only for equality but for efficiency. And chapters and members were ready, waiting for the leadership to coordinate them, to communicate with them.³⁰ Sale underscores their lack of delegation and that SDS had thought about this, too:

...the organization had set up nothing to take the place of the NO or to shift or decentralize the burden of work. A proposed scheme for greater regional autonomy that was passed by the Columbus NC never came about, despite faint moves toward regional organizations in New England, Michigan, and Texas. (77)

Perhaps it was this lack of delegation that was responsible for the lack of communication, which is responsible for this inability to take full advantage of this political situation in the US and the membership boom as a result of it.

Another example of SDS wishing to adjust their structure and decentralize the work came later when the paper *America and the New Era* came out. The paper talked about a "new insurgency"³¹ that was breaking out around the country. Sale shows that SDS wanted to follow the *New Era's* vision:

³⁰ Sale, Kirkpatrick. *SDS*. Random House, NY: 1973. P. 79.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 92.

One immediate response to the sense of a new insurgency was a decision...to give more power to individual chapters and local members at national meetings...that chapters should elect delegates to the convention on the basis of one for every five of its members...

Another response was to put new and younger people into the leadership of the organization...it was felt that...a regular rotation of the national officers...was necessary to insure [sic] true "participatory democracy." (92)

So SDS was consistently trying to adjust its own structure to reflect its vision and, I argue, it could have achieved greater efficiency to reach its goals if it had carried out some of these ideas. They tried to be flexible, as the times and Movement called for that.

SDS recognized two important strategies for building their Movement – decentralizing decision-making and fostering regular communication among members – which, fortunately, could possibly address both efficiency *and* equality simultaneously. In SDS's case, as in perhaps much of the left today, they might have been *most* efficient if they *did* employ a more equal decision making structural strategy, at least in responding to the Cuban Missile Crisis. The tasks that held up the NO, such as answering phones and gaining consent on a press release or position, could have been delegated to the membership base who were, after all, themselves leaders in their communities if they began to engage in activism in the first place. Then the NO would be able to coordinate communication for, and press decisions from, the members as a whole (since it can be difficult for that many people to quickly make decisions that affect all of them) such as a position to take and what kind of response to act out. They would be freed up to report on different activities that chapters were already doing to the whole organization and/or coordinate members, chapters, and other organizations for large-scale or widespread actions. The coordination of others was part of SDS's founding vision – coordinating activists already doing political work, though perhaps for single issues, using their manifesto as the theoretical grounding from which to make these connections. Again, it follows naturally that they ought to have coordinated their own group the way they wished to coordinate others. Perhaps they would have been even more successful if they

had done so.

Theory After Action

Although SDS started with their own sort of rudimentary theory that they developed themselves and then acted from there, this theory apparent especially in their *Port Huron Statement*, the left today has the benefit of developing more specific, comprehensive theory after such intense and prolonged action in the 1960s. Complementary holism is a holistic conceptual framework arising from the experiences of those active in this period, first described in the book Liberating Theory in 1986. Complementary holism actualizes the theoretical framework the left needs in order to unite in their diverse issues to create a movement of movements to attain a better world.

Analogous to the *Port Huron Statement* in 1962, complementary holism came out the need for a more equitable, non-hierarchical, all-encompassing conceptual leftist framework than was available. It was literally developed *in order to* "promote solidarity among people with different priorities,"³² to "combine agendas of different movements even while preserving the dignity and integrity of each,"³³ to help "each with their own priorities and to connect to all the others."³⁴ It "is meant to help close the gaps in our movement"³⁵ to create a whole movement of movements. Since all seven authors, having worked on various issues and themselves having different priorities, wished to unite left movements when creating this theory, there is already much promise for what it can offer the left in just reading their preliminary comments.

³² Albert, Michael et al. Liberating Theory. South End Press, MA: 1986. Comment by Robin Hahnel.

³³ Ibid, comment by Mel King.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid, comment by Holly Sklar.

Complementary holism is a way of analyzing society that recognizes four different "spheres" of society and, most importantly, their relationships. Proponents believe that virtually all human activity can be accounted for by conceptualizing four spheres of society – *community* or culture; *kinship* or gender, sexuality, and care-giving; *politics* or decision-making; and *economics* or production, allocation, and consumption. They also critique other more familiar leftist theoretical frameworks – such as nationalism, feminism, anarchism, or Marxism – as "monist" or "pluralist." They claim that both of these orientations are insufficient to meet the needs of diverse activists in a movement of movements³⁶ because they do not see the whole range of interdependent spheres and oppressions in society or the interrelations between spheres and oppressions.

Monism, as they call it, is "reductionist." It tends to subscribe to the orthodox Marxist "base/superstructure" idea that one "sphere" of society – community, kinship, politics, or economics – or one oppression therein – racism, sexism, authoritarianism, or capitalism – predominates all others and "disproportionately determine[s] the properties of the whole."³⁷ Monists would then reduce *all* oppressions to their own, claiming that their particular spheres or oppressions "are at least the central determinants of [all] oppression"³⁸ and that in order to make lasting change, this sphere or oppression is really where activists with any priority must focus. As they articulate in Liberating Theory,

The whole is...analyzed primarily in terms of these favored parts, on the grounds that these parts exist in and of themselves, operate largely according to their own laws, and powerfully influence the whole by processes immune to major alteration by other parts of the whole. (Albert et al, 8)

Thus the authors give a name and description to this kind of thought on the left, clarifying what many leftists have sensed and could perhaps not quite articulate.

The authors believe that this kind of monistic thinking is not only morally wrong and

³⁶ Albert, Michael et al. Liberating Theory. South End Press, MA: 1986. P. 15.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 8.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 7.

strategically inept, but also logically incomplete. They describe an example of how monism cripples even the monist's ability to understand even his or her favored sphere:

...black and white and male and female workers don't all have the same interests and mindsets simply because they all belong to the same economic class.

Over-simplifying causal factors to include only class relations ignores racial and sexual dynamics that cause women and blacks...to endure different oppressions, not only when pay checks and pink slips and dispersed, but day-in and day-out because of the racist and sexist definitions of their economic tasks.

Class concepts alone cannot explain factory life and so, *even to understand the economy*, much less the rest of society, we must go beyond Marxism [sic]. (Albert et al., 10).

Although they never quite say it straight out, they seem to imply that this kind of monist conceptualizing could be part of why the "socialist" revolution in Russia failed to make Russia truly socialist while it maintained oppressive tendencies, even classism (what the authors might call a "coordinator class" society of central planners, inserted above others with different day-to-day tasks and opportunities). The economic monism most obvious in Soviet Russia allowed the state (or political sphere) to be as authoritarian and oppressive as it was because the conceptual framework used was the base/superstructure idea that economics is more important than anything else. We can also see in a precursory overview of postcolonial theory that Marxism tended to downplay the priorities of the anti-colonial movement in the twentieth century. Monist thinking can be dangerous – it is not a great leap between a favored sphere or oppression and that strategically, because this sphere or oppression is most important to address, it is acceptable if one tramples upon the needs of others since those needs or oppressions will dissolve once we have socialism, or racial equality, or feminism, etc.

One can see why monist thinking would not do as a starting place for building coalitions across difference even on its face. If monists effectively banish all other oppressions but their favored one to the periphery, others with different priorities and favored oppressions will be understandably resentful – especially if their thinking is similarly monistic, but even if they *do* see merit in the oppression that the

original monist favors. Eventually, or even immediately, they might not even want to work with this monist at all, for often activists' priorities are often intimately entwined with their personal lives. Frequently black nationalists have experienced and witnessed immense racism firsthand. Likewise, feminists have commonly personally experienced sexism. It is also likely that both of these identifications – which are responses to the oppressions in society – are told by those outside and even inside the Movement that they need to "get over it," that they are "being divisive," or that their concerns will be dealt with eventually or in a roundabout way. Clearly monist approaches cannot be the theoretical grounding for a movement of movements if activists wish to counter hierarchies so pervasive in society as it is.

The authors also consider a more pluralist approach and then reject it as well for logical reasons. They point out that pluralism does not recognize the interconnections *between* these ideologies, spheres, or oppressions but only that there *are* multiple oppressions that one conceptually monist orientation cannot handle on its own:

Countering monism, pluralist approaches claim we must use more than one set of intellectual tools [such as Marxism, feminism, anarchism, and nationalism] because social causes cannot be reduced to a single class of determining relations...[T]hey rightly recognize the complexity of their environment and see merit in more than one analytical orientation...

Yet pluralism dictates that to analyze the economy you should use marxist [sic] categories, and this advice is inadequate...

...a marxist-feminist [sic] will see traditional economic exploitation and also patriarchal violence against women, but miss many of the more subtle ways that gender relations redefine class definitions or that economic dynamics redefine family norms. (9-10)

The term pluralism that they describe seems to be moving in the right direction for understanding the dynamism of society and for building coalitions across difference in issue priority, but it is a step short

of holism. Pluralism tends to keep analytical tools in "boxes"³⁹ or within their own spheres, where analyzing economics requires Marxism and nothing more, analyzing community requires only nationalism, etc. Although more than one oppression or sphere are recognized to *exist*, the two never shall meet or let alone mix⁴⁰ for they are thought of by pluralists as separate issues that do not really affect one another.

Complementary holism, on the other hand, completes the conceptual picture of society and oppressions within it, accounting for the way these different parts of society affect one another. The authors express why they reject monism and pluralism in favor of complementary holism:

Unlike monists, we must incorporate more than one angle of approach. Unlike pluralists, we must integrate our diverse angles of approach and allow each to refine the others within a comprehensive framework which allows important truths to emerge. (15-16)

Complementary holism begins with viewing society as a whole and then only abstracting from that whole to be able to communicate and specify details around the four spheres and oppressions flowing from them as needed, as the human mind must sometimes categorize wholes into smaller parts in order to be able to deal with them. But complementary holism always returns to the whole, assuming interdependence and interconnections between spheres, oppressions, and issues. It maintains that if activists do not deal with *all* oppressions or issues in society, even the changes made in one sphere will be overwhelmed by massive oppressions rampant in other spheres and the problems of others will return that sphere to its previous state, reversing all the left's hard work. Indeed, many left activists can attest to this fact: today the right is in a very real process of threatening many of the progressive changes made over the last century, such as the right to form a union. This is the theoretical accompaniment to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s quote that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

The complementary holist approach is easier to visualize when one considers the authors'

³⁹ Albert, Michael et al. Liberating Theory. South End Press, MA: 1986. P. 11.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 10.

thoughts on “dissipative systems.” They describe Ilya Prigogine's idea of dissipative systems and how these systems can undergo reforms or, occasionally, revolutions:

...*reproductive* (my emphasis) transformations [involve] continual fluxes in dissipative systems [that] embody a perpetual flow of energy and matter which leave the dissipative system largely unchanged over time...

Sometimes, however, fluctuations in dissipative systems invoke *fundamental* (my emphasis) transformations in their defining characteristics. In these "revolutionary" cases, instead of all changes away from the basic defining pattern being reigned in, pressures from within and without together push the system so far from its defining trajectory that old identities shatter.

If we view all complex structures as dissipative systems...than we can evolve an image of social structures existing within, overlapping and encompassing one another, all influencing and even flowing through one another. (Albert et al., 16-17)

This visual is helpful for imagining the full range of society's dynamism and institutions especially with regard to the concept of complementary holism. In thinking about complementary holism, one can image a series of porous spheres of a Venn diagram radiating out and through one another. Picturing society like this allows us to envision that different spheres can easily – and even unavoidably do – affect one another.

Complementary holism provides the best theoretical framework for working across difference on the left. It was developed *in order to* help activists unite across difference, as noted earlier. It assumes no hierarchy of influence of different analyses and spheres of society – it does not prioritize any issue, sphere, or oppression at all. It insists that activists recognize the inseparable interconnections that all left issues have with one another. From there, the logical conclusion is that, even for individual activists' *own* issues to be addressed and for their own movements to succeed, those activists must not only support other movements, but seek their counsel. Complementary holism requires not only tolerance but also genuine respect for the diversity of the left since activists' many differences inform their collective work in a way that no one person, group, or movement can do alone. They will need this "pragmatic

solidarity"⁴¹ and respect not only intellectually but sincerely, not only in words but in thoughts, actions, commitments – in their analyses, emotions, and energies – if they are to win a better, more progressive world. Starting with complementary holism when building coalitions and thinking about a movement of movements will start them off right.

Complementary Holist Strategy

Complementary holism was developed as an analytical tool in order to better help activists understand and analyze the world in which they work for justice. However, the left must go beyond analysis: it must develop vision and strategy for achieving that vision. I wish to explicitly apply complementary holism to how the activist left thinks about and executes strategy for social change.

Just as complementary holism shows that there are analytical monists, I believe there are strategic monists. Both kinds of monists hierarchically rank their favored issues or strategies above those of others and dismiss other activists' ideas of what issues are important or which strategies should be attempted. This lack of humility and respect for the ideas of others tends to create bitterness and keep movements in their boxes instead of complementing one another. To return to the ERAP vs. academia example, the leaders of each side were so uncompromising in their view of what activists should do – theoretical assistance or physical support – that they tended to discredit all other strategies that did not match up with their favorites. Similarly today, activists of different monistic analyses may have different strategies for accomplishing their own goals – such as communists preferring only to try to make revolution and not work for short-term reforms that might improve the lot of the needy in the meantime; some nationalists wanting to only take power from whites; or poverty activists wanting only to lobby

⁴¹ Farmer, Paul. Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor. University of California Press, Berkley: 2003. P. 146-148.

and never engage in more radical action like protesting or civil disobedience.

Complementary holism, whether applied to analysis or strategy, does not completely negate the possibility of one focus being more immediately practical than another (though it does doubt hierarchy and is instead more likely to answer that there are many central needs that should be addressed simultaneously). As is true with some spheres or oppressions possibly affecting others more than they are themselves affected by those others, certain strategies may objectively be more effective than others in certain situations for achieving desired ends. Some people may even have more experience as activists and can help guide movement strategy. However, this is quite difficult to measure if we indeed live within dissipative systems, for there can be multiple causes and contributing factors for change in a "remote" area. No one necessarily knows for sure which strategies are most effective even though some may claim to know best – like the economic monists in "communist" Russia. Without trying new things, the movements would not grow and last until their goals are accomplished, and they will be authoritarian with a kind of vanguard dictating what will happen. Additionally, it is not only about being right; the Movement will not succeed with only a few "right" people but masses of at least partially "wrong" people. Activists fill in each other's blind spots – analytically and strategically – and inform one another of their various weaknesses, and since no one is immune to these blind spots, everyone ought to be open to learning from others. Believing one has it all figured out is possibly the biggest weakness of all, especially in left activism where privilege and power differences as well as the whole range of activist causes come into play.

Complementary holism also does not disallow an activist to have priorities – favorite spheres, oppressions, or strategies – that appeal to him or her most. One can be more passionate about liberating women from their gender roles in society than about overthrowing capitalism, or more interested in directly and cordially lobbying members of Congress than in engaging in civil disobedience in their

offices. Indeed, it is almost inevitable that activists will be more drawn to some things than others. These diverse passions that individuals hold are what created the diversity of the left in the first place, the multitude of movements and the many tactics thereof. The different foci of the left have at least brought the attention of the world to a wide variety "personal" social, economic, and political concerns. These very same passions are necessary for activists on the left to inform one another of their emotional and intellectual understanding of specific spheres, oppressions, visions, and strategies so that all different sub-movements can succeed because together the many pieces of the left "cover all the bases."

Too often activists of varying radicalism snub one another for their strategic choices. A myriad of responses to others' strategic choices and pleas can be heard amongst left activists: Feeding the homeless and lobbying for increased foreign aid does not actually solve the root problem of homelessness and poverty, which is capitalism, so you are legitimizing the system by begging for crumbs. Trying to overthrow capitalism in favor of socialism does not work – didn't you see what happened to Russia? We've got to do the best to help people now with what we have in the meantime. Protesting bad things doesn't help – you don't even make it on the mainstream news and Bill O'Reilly will just make fun of you if you do, anyway. What we need to do is vote for people who will represent us when making decisions – voting is the only activism that really counts, not protesting. Voting with our ballots doesn't work – didn't you see Bush steal those two elections? We have to vote with our dollars and only buy organic, fair trade, cooperatively-owned products. And recycling your own trash is more important than writing books, blogs, or articles about changing the industry to use alternatives to fossil fuels – at least you have control over recycling your own waste. The list goes on and on, and each person has his or her own range of strategies that they are partial to and partial against, and whether consciously or not – as with favored spheres – many activists tend to downgrade the strategy ideas and issue priorities of others. Perhaps almost all activists are guilty of diminishing the strategies others favor,

so I would venture to say few, including myself, are exempt from this critique of strategic monism.

Besides being a mistake in practical terms – since it will insult people to dismiss their ideas and priorities, making it harder to maintain the amiability characteristic of the early SDS conferences – strategies are literally connected and even part of one another. Perhaps the spectrum analogy can help illustrate this point: The status quo is at one extreme end of the spectrum (point A) and transformative revolutions (or long-term goals) are at the opposite end (point Z, perhaps), with different reforms (or short-term goals) at various points on this spectrum between the two. *Reform can be the beginning of revolution*, even if reformists are satisfied with one reform to the existing system or revolutionaries refuse to participate in reformist actions. Reformists might not have, or aim for, long-term goals or a more utopian vision of an ideal world. They therefore create possibly only band-aid solutions that may undo themselves in a few years because they ignore the revolutionary changes that are necessary for lasting change. Revolutionaries might only aim for a utopian vision while ignoring the current circumstances of society. They therefore reject putting their energy into the short-term goals they could more easily "win" and count as steps toward revolution. Reformists focus on the needs of people today; revolutionaries focus on the needs of people long-term. Both are necessary and *both are incomplete without the other*. Progressive activists must stop rebuffing one another, respect the strategic insights of others, and see that these two strategic orientations are part of the same whole Movement for a better world.

Examples of reform serving as the beginning of revolution abound, provided activists have a shared vision in mind that they aim toward and keep in mind when informing their choices for reforms. Joining a union is closer to socialism than not doing so. Securing more funding for the Global Fund to fight AIDS, TB, and Malaria to ensure that more people suffering from these diseases get the care they need brings activists closer to long-term goals like full universal healthcare for all people worldwide,

and countries that receive aid being able to achieve social stability enough to have equal living standards to, as well as political autonomy from, donor countries. Affirmative action is closer to the end of racism than letting this oppression flourish amongst rich white bosses. Decriminalizing selling sex while criminalizing buying it is a step toward keeping women safe from trafficking and letting them define their sexuality on their own terms. Cutting carbon emissions by 10% is closer to completely transitioning to alternative energy than letting emissions run rampant. Again, perhaps none of these reforms are ideal, but they are more ideal than taking several more years for revolutions, through mass suffering and death, before changing anything, even if activists have to swallow their pride and even “beg.” Sometimes society must take baby steps before it can run, though it has to *want* to run ultimately.

But even if activists cannot or do not label a particular strategy for creating change as reformist or revolutionary, different kinds of strategies are related and even necessary to "covering all the bases." To return to ERAP vs. academia, consider each strategy priority by itself. ERAP without the theoretical background might be akin to feeling around in the dark, the "in itself," the pure human emotion and relation to another person in need to be sure, but likely more vulnerable to mistake after mistake and a multitude of kinds of thinking that were not dealt with at all so they would play out in perverse ways. Likewise, if SDS had not engaged in action at all, they might have had great ideas, but accomplished nothing besides briefly inspiring and informing people while most did not join their organization because they wanted to "take it with the hands." The fact that SDS embraced both of these strategic programs allowed all their members to pursue their own interests and passions, and it allowed the group to stay together long enough to allow more people to embrace diverse passions and programs.

Further, people from different walks of life working in the same movement for the same ends can engage in completely different strategies and complement the work of one another, like SDS did. We can imagine those who want to make art for change – paintings, music, pamphlets, movies, poems,

comics – working alongside those who want to write or repeal laws and ordinances to reform existing ones to bring us closer to a better world. We can imagine some activists organizing press conferences, academic conferences, and fundraising dinners, while still others plan protests, sit-ins, and general strikes. Some will lobby members of Congress while others chase them from the Capital. But imagine these diverse kinds of activists being forced (and not merely being offered a chance) to engage in the other type of program! It is one thing to respect the full gamut of strategic orientations; it is quite another to make someone act in a way that might deeply oppose their beliefs. People have different drives, talents, and beliefs even within the same movement and they should be encouraged to offer their specialty to the Movement as a whole, drawing still more people like themselves into the Movement and multiplying it in all directions.

I had some insightful experience with a multi-issue, multi-strategy group in Atlanta in 2009-2010, the International Organization for a Participatory Society (IOPS), founded based on complementary holism as well as discovering and advocating for alternatives to current systems (such as Participatory Economics). In IOPS, even among the ten of us, people were very different. Some members of our chapter wanted to mainly study history and theory, while others wanted to engage in more direct action; some wanted to flier strangers and share information directly, while others wanted to perform political street theatre to make their points; some protest and picket while others wanted to engage targets of protests directly and cordially. I do not believe this group failed because people had political differences or different priorities in issues or strategies, for I believe our analyses and beliefs were similar enough to be able to work together. Instead, the reason I believe IOPS Atlanta failed after a year was because people's diverse issue and strategy priorities were suppressed under "consensus" to the point where every detail of every action had to be approved by all ten or more members, forcing either splitting or homogenization. Critiques became admonishments and consensus became dictatorship.

There was even a clique of friends formed that was openly hostile to anyone that questioned their orientations or pronouncements.

Imagine instead if IOPS embraced diverse strategy priorities, as it was meant to at its founding. Imagine if strategies and conceptual frameworks were seen as interrelated and not necessarily opposed, if people were free to pursue their ideas and passions while perhaps listening to constructive criticism when they reported on their work back to the group, a healthy dialogue and “solidarity-autonomy” relationship might have been developed. If we had developed “work groups” or other ways for different people to lead tasks and campaigns that they felt more attached to, then everyone would have had the autonomy to follow their passions and the solidarity of the group offering suggestions and support. In short, the group might have served as a base for a kind of dissipative system, as all groups can do together on the left, where members, groups, and movements move in and out, toward, and through one another, influencing the politics, policies, and thinking of others and themselves being influenced by others. Complementary holist thinking and strategy can give us this humility and respect to balance our movements and rise together.

Conclusion

If we apply complementary holism to strategies on the left, then we can imagine Movement activity bursting out in all directions – from the academy to the ghetto, from the mainstream media to the alternative media, from making money for the left to seizing Wall Street for the left – where nearly all tactics are embraced and fitted together in a complementary way, sending in Martin and Malcolm together so that Martin’s reforms are sure to be adopted and Malcolm’s are the direction in which they are headed. And perhaps allowing members of one’s group or coalition this freedom to choose their own

programs while fostering their communication and ensuring their equality in decision-making will add to efficiency of organizations since the burden will be spread and people will be more excited about their work since they have almost complete control over what they do. Returning to the holistic conceptualization of society is perhaps the most grounding suggestion for activists, however.

I believe that to be more effective over the long-term, left activists must 1) embrace multiple issues and see how they interrelate; 2) embrace multiple strategies and fit them together; 3) view tensions as insights for understanding a common problem and take communication about differences seriously and gently; and 4) use complementary holism and SDS lessons to genuinely respect one another. Applying these ideas very flexibly and openly could be a tentative step closer to “covering all the bases” for a more holistic, comprehensive movement of movements so that the left can finally go on the offensive and win and humanity can thrive to achieve its fullest potential.