What a Free Speech Movement instigator teaches us today (Part Two)

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Read part one of this interview with Brad Cleaveland and Jan Lundberg here

JL: Before we go to the body of thought and literature that shaped the student movement and the anti-war movement -- that continued strongly until the early 1970s -- tell us how well you think the students and other activists did in terms of bringing about a change in consciousness and politics (for a while at least)?

BC: There were both big successes and great limitations; Berkeley's revolt was a shocker for so many US citizens. For its successes, the Free Speech Movement and the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment became poignant over the whole world. Both of these became all but absolute dictum in the political domain, not only in the US and its burgeoning student movement, but increasingly in all of the media internationally: especially on television covering the political domain. This met the beginning of its end under Clinton, in part; but it as you know, the whole "era of the Sixties" has been under savage attack by the mouth-foaming extreme Right in our country.

The greatest limitation of Berkeley's own student movement was, as aforementioned, a decline into sectarian, student politics. This decline, issued in large part, due from to a fascist "tendency" inherent in the FSM leadership itself. This was "Cultural Nationalism," known to be a major factor in the foundations of National Socialism/fascism. The movement here was led mainly by radical, partly religious students, all too self-consciously. When I ran for Chairman of SLATE in approximately 1960, a now famous U. Texas Law Prof., Michael Tigar, ran against me with his brilliant and amusing rhetoric, by saying, "...well! Isn't it about time that a WASP got into SLATE's top leadership?" which brought down the crowd -- no one had the stomach for such a statement. You've heard of "Red Diaper Babies"? The FSM leadership stayed too rigidly to what SLATE created in the US via the CA Democratic Club system, etc., literally in the SLATE period of self-creation. Three main ideas discussed: (a) "issue-oriented politics;" (b) Marxist student politics; and (c) education reform radical politics. The U.S. citizenry has been living under the rubric of "issue-oriented-politics" ever since.

JL: How did the University act to defuse and subvert the movement? Were other challenges, from federal agents, or from the activists' egos and cultural predilections, just as effective in eventually crippling the movement? Or was the end of the draft for most students the main loss of pressure for changing society?

BC: In every conceivable manner, and, I would add, "Plus a lot more!", due to the presence of US intelligence agencies infiltrating the UC Administration. UC Police were immediately "leaked," and, in turn, it became known that a sort of 3rd entity between the UC Police Dept. and the Berkeley Police Dept. emerged, which became known as "The Red Squad." I would say a second cause of movement weakness came from within the leadership itself. My old acquaintance, Michael Lerner, once tried to keep me from attending a spontaneous and very "hot" gathering of student leaders. When I approached the doorway of that meeting, Michael Lerner simply stated, "We don't want 'your type' here, Brad!" It was Michael, amongst those who were principal student movement would-be intellectuals who decisively, very consciously, created the hate-concept of "the WASP." At the time of the FSM I had just turned 32 years old. It was what led Michael Rossman to push very hard the notion that movement students must "Never trust anyone over thirty." Others did, too; but I especially noted Rossman's role. A further example of movement "limitations:" after all, this was to a significant degree, truly, a "bourgeois" student movement. Thus, the solidarity one hoped for was dashed by a sort of immaturity amongst the leaders. Back-stabbing; competition was all too common. You know, that dreaded emotion which seizes attendees at some very, very "hot" meeting, or gathering, where one feels terrified that one's own story will not come up; one's own words will not have a chance to resound strongly, if at all.

A few years after the FSM, Barbara Garson, wife of the very militant Marvin Garson, wrote a send up of Shakespeare, called "MacBird." However, at about the same time, I got some treatment that could only be characterized as wholly rotten: I was called into a meeting of radicals by them in order to be "held accountable," by them. I had published a SLATE pamphlet/handout in order to begin gathering undergraduates to start an independent student union. This first try failed, but gave birth to one of the many organizations that got up and immediately flopped. However, this undergrad attempt, and a later grad student try for the same union idea, grew and did succeed somewhat.

As for the decline of our movement here? Overall, the most important aspect of all was the immaturity of UC students, as compared with, say, European students, who had direct relations with all shades of Labor. Here in the States? I tried to get my student leader associates to pay some attention to US unions; or, at least much, much more willingness. I propagated the Berkeley movement at my own union hall in Oakland; a local which had been in the '30s, '40s, and on a somewhat radical one. One of its notable members was (William) "Red" Reynolds, the husband of Malvina Reynolds. In the mid-'60s, one of the Business Agents of my Carpenter's Hall finally showed up, actually leading sit-ins against UC

Regents' policies on wages, thus, leading to the establishment of "benchmark" wages -- roughly equivalent to the wages of forty Bay County Carpenters' organizations of the Oakland/San Francisco area and all of Northern California. In other words, the Regents' wage policy was to pay wages comparable to unions.

However, most of my work in this was trounced on the flimsy ground that -- as my Free Speech Movement friends said it," US Trade Unions? They're reactionary; thus... Brad's one of them'!" It was all about my appearances as a (for them) "super-WASP" type! Most of my days were very hard. Once, I was even called in for what can only be called a sort of vicious "hazing" on the grounds that I had gotten out 5,000-6,000 leaflets, soon after the FSM had declined, about a new beginning. In the leaflet, one statement I wrote was to the effect of saying outright "We made mistakes." (The FSM and its leadership.)

Another part of the answer of "defusing" the movement, then? It was the internal stuff, as well as the University. All in all? The students in Berkeley were quite courageous and collectively felt strong solidarity -- in the magnitude of the risks taken. All direct participants and principal actors knew...their "careers were on the line," period. Certainly, it changed the lives of several thousand US students, forever.

Now? Think: the Regents, the UC Administration; the Boalt Law School students! Think Professor (John) Yoo - that astonishingly stupid, and politically extreme reactionary, would-be human being! He went to the side of "W" in D.C. - to advocate the use of Torture, by national states, as a tool of foreign policy. After a 200-300 year absolute ban on torture, throughout the world. Professor Yoo did this by showing "W" how torture might be legalized!

JL: How did your social-change activism come into play in your other careers and activities to this day? What are a few of your latest projects?

BC: I've always wanted to be only two things (a) a liberal/radical citizen; and (b) a decent person who loves spirituality, but mostly being a fair person, which I feel is the most important US political virtue. I feel that word/concepts/values that strengthen the US hope for radical democracy are the very highest values available to all -- what I call, in my own little eccentricity -- all "natal-mortal beings."

JL: You have had a colorful career, working at some unusual jobs that the average student activist could never imagine him- or herself doing. What have been a few of your interesting jobs, and how did these experiences contribute to your knowledge of social change?

BC: There have been several very formative ones around Arab culture. In 1953 thru 1955, I was a sailor in the US Navy. I spent 18 months in French Morocco. During that period, I completed my work in Air Intelligence, in a Patrol Bomber squadron of "P2-V's" called "Neptunes." I decided to travel to the Italian Alps for a student movement conference at a place called Agape (pronounced ah-gah-pey and meaning spiritual love). It was a communist youth camp - unbeknownst to myself. It cost a buck a day. I met leftist student leaders from all over Europe. It had a great impact on me. Here I was in the company of youth from the leading Left student groups in the Italian Alps for more than two months!

My second Arab experience was working in Egypt in 1974 on the Suez Canal Clearance Project. Sadat had dumped 10 ships, and a huge "caisson" (barge-like structure of concrete) directly into the Suez to resist Western control of the canal. It became the very best travel experience in my life, until then. I continue to adore Al-Qahirah (Cairo), and it's people; they're distinctions are breathtaking as social beings; political beings. And the country! Indescribable. And, in spite of such horrific poverty.

The third contact was in working in Saudi Arabia. This experience, and the previous one, really got me into Arab culture: the language, the poetry, the amazing reality of their radically different ways from the West, and the food! But above all, the physical history: Memphis, the pyramids. The miraculous and tender love of the people for themselves -- as a people, for their people. Without going there, one can barely imagine. One way would be to read Lawrence Durrell's Alexandria Quartet. But the literature is fecund. Just think "Lawrence of Arabia," for example. There's so very much of it. My hair stands on end when I think "Egyptian Museum!" A last thing -- On an ordinary workday, on the Suez, a town called Ismailiya (Izmalia; like Somalia). And Alexandria (Is-kan-da-ree-ah)! Forgive...but I swoon, and can smell everything! The chai; the spices; the compressed, barbecued pigeons. The women are more free than any Arab women, anywhere. On an ordinary day I approached a small cluster of Arab men. A small and pretty clearly formed group circle; just standing, visiting, and talking. I approached them. I was acquainted with them. They were a group of workers' Foremen. As I approached, I was amazed to notice their subtlety, in the way they glanced as I approached, some beginning to smile. As I neared their side, I noticed something had happened. They had, as a group, opened up a space for me to be welcomed into their company. In other words a little opening for "Mistah Brot," (Brad). The two men I stepped between? One took my pinky-finger, the other put his arm on my shoulder. Very shortly, this morphed into an hour-long sort of Kaffee-Klatch, but with Egyptian chai tea. Another :time, sitting one day at my desk: suddenly, a big, huge, burley haired arm was softly placed around my neck. "Mr. Brot! Mr. Brot! Come. Come, Mr. Brot!" He raised me from my chair, led me down the hall. He led me to his side, where he had placed a chair before. He said, almost imploringly, "Please. Please, Mr. Brot! Sit. Sit," and then raising his voice high..."Mr. Brot! Just stay..." He then turned, and went back to his paper work. He turned occasionally, every 3 to 4 minutes until I addressed him, "Swellam!" He turned, beaming with pleasure. He said, "You

want to go? OK. Ok. I just wanted to say hello, Brot. Thank you very much!" This huge man had 12 children, who were like a little tribe...of...sweet screamers (their game, or signature, so-to-speak).

So much for my greatest existential experience, a. Aside from my own family; aside from my past 50 years, living here, in Berkeley California.

JL: How would you briefly describe your personal philosophy? Is it relevant to the average student today?

BC: Insofar as I would say "personal philosophy," I would like to use the more modest notion of "Theory." I have -- here, in Berkeley, over the years (50), become what is called a political existentialist. Along the lines of certain US political intellectuals, principally Arendt, the Liberal/Radical Political Theorist whom, when she lectured here at UC in Spring 1955, "told it as it is," so-to-speak, by exposing many realities. But, mostly, I would say, she inspired my own choice of terminology such as "Only politics can save us in this world" As distinct from other "worlds," such as the "worlds" of Art, of Science, of Religion or the spiritual domain.

In this matter, commerce can be granted the standing of the foundation of these other worlds. However, we are living, as we say "in a topsy-turvy world." The foundation has rather been 'exhumed' from being the foundation. It has been placed, with all its weight, upon all these other worlds. And it is crushing all of these worlds, simultaneously. It is a time of the commercialization of everything. As we say in the U.S. so casually, "Every Thing Has Its Price." Think about it. It reminds one of the increasingly influential anti-political "mad woman," Ayn Rand, who ostensibly cries, in despair, when she comes upon a decaying wreck of any abandoned factory. Her philosophy is an attempt at sanctifying (in a sort of secular manner) our "Almighty Dollar."

JL: "The scientific community has historically had little concern over, and has contempt for, social science issues....Is this changing?

BC: With the advent of our US Commercial Totalitarianism, our "Third Form," of Totalitarianism, the US is trying to lead the world away from the political domain, but under the banner of "change" on a grand scale; without politics at all. We can be reminded of a somewhat novel program & set of attitudes. Presidential candidate Ron Paul has called for -- literally -- the end of the Federal Government. And, for another example of this right wing lunatic pseudo-reality, Grover Norquist, an American Right Wing Extremist, would-be "Theorist," was on TV saying "By the time of 2012, there will be no Federal Government." And thus? Out goes the entire 2000-year evolution of the so-called "Western Way" and all of its hope for any kind of reform whatever! As I so believe the US extreme Right is lunacy-in-a-movement; one of the kinds of influence which spurs nightmares in any soul who loves human Freedom; political Liberty; who can look back 2000 years and say "Our Western Way" can be called 'The 2000 year grope of the West for understanding, and acting upon, the meanings and uses of Human Freedom.'" It means the literal "de-politicization" of everything worldly, in any traditional sense.

JL: How should scientists' findings and recommendations -- increasingly vocal and interventionist regarding the climate crisis -- deal with the political process to be better heard?

BC: Obviously, first, through their many scientific organizations. Then, promoting further democratization, but especially political reform. Something like scientists proclaiming their own citizenship; opening up; "coming down," as it were, from their privileged position of being encouraged to serve, above all other institutions, the institution of citizenship itself. After all, it is the citizen who pays the scientist! Citizenship is the context of science. Not the corporate so-called community. (Over-competition makes things such as cooperation, citizenship, and all the rest, some kind of sick joke upon all of humanity!)

Scientists should become proud of the human tradition of Freedom. Freedom, action, and politics are another triad, which is vital for understanding and human action for democracy.

JL: From our previous conversation on December 6, 2007, it seemed poignant that I was witnessing close up the greatest confrontation between the old guard and the young rebels on campus in many years. There I was chatting with you, a consummate, veteran observer on the telephone, and we could both feel the presence of the fascist tactics such as the high fences and the crime of feeding or watering the treesitters. The treesitters were probably lonely, and as usual there were only a couple of young activists around to support the protesters. So I yelled up encouragement that was gratefully received. What advice would you have for the treesitters, many of whom are not students? What advice would you have for students who are seemingly oblivious to the conflict over the endangered oak grove and the administration's intention to build a huge, costly athletic facility?

BC: It is a temptation to call them cowards, but only a temptation. How can anyone hate youth?

The first thing I would say to any youth is the old, Eastern adage, from the I Ching: "Perseverance Furthers." (It is interesting to note that the huge influence at this time, in the US, of Eastern Religious Philosophy, springs from Berkeley's own world-renowned Religious/Philosophical Center).

The next thing I would say to any student is study the Political domain as if your life and future depend upon it. If we don't save politics from our emergent corporate state, I feel, in fact, that "The World Is Over!" Especially love for the world is over; it is one of our most precious suggestions for going beyond mere survival. We must -- all of us -- approach our world with Love, with amor mundi. We have massively important troubles to work on.

The foolish "specialists," not least amongst them, the scientists, have a strange bias against "generalizations." But, in most educated circles on our Earth, and in our World, we've a beautiful legacy in our political vocabulary alone. All political things are in the vein of a whole body of true "virtues." Courage -- guts -- is a distinctively political virtue. Another distinctively political virtue is forgiveness. Courage and Forgiveness are two examples of word/concepts which can be said to have come from the spiritual, or even religious, domain, but are examples of what might be said to be values which can be deepened in the secularization movement in our time.