

# TO RECAPTURE THE DREAM

Julius Lester



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What we know as “the Movement” had its beginnings in the late 1950s. In Afroamerica the beginning was the 1956 bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama in which a twenty-six-year-old minister, Martin Luther King, Jr. introduced non-violent direct action as a means of attacking the problem of racial discrimination. The bus boycott was a sharp departure in political tactics for blacks. Until that time the NAACP’s approach of using the apparatus of the system in the attempt to make the system work had prevailed and the NAACP had achieved a great victory in the 1954 Supreme Court school decision. The South’s reaction to the Supreme Court ruling was summed up in the new rallying cry of the Confederacy—“The South Says Never!” And Afroamerica watched black children being beaten as they entered schools in Clinton, Tennessee, Brownsville, Texas and Little Rock, Arkansas. In response, the Eisenhower regime did so little that it amounted to nothing.

In America during this same period, similar tactics were being used, as pacifists in New York, San Francisco and other cities demonstrated against the testing of nuclear weapons, the appropriation of monies for bomb shelters and air raid drills in the schools. In other parts of America a phenomenon known as the “beat generation” established psychic liberation zones in New York, Denver, New Orleans, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, saying that they would not follow the “man in the gray flannel suit,” that life did not consist of the balance in your bank account, but in the values by which you lived.

None of us who were a part of those beginnings in the Fifties could have then predicted the Sixties. The Sixties represent one of the most fantastic compressions of political ideas and action of any decade in American history. (As Jim Morrison of The Doors has pointed out: “A generation lasts only two or three years now.”) To go from

sit-in demonstrations at lunch counters in the South to the Black Panther Party, from pacifist demonstrations against nuclear testing to a mass anti-war movement, from the "beat generation" to a cultural revolution is a ten-year journey almost beyond comprehension. Yet, this is the journey which has been made.

It is a tragedy of the Sixties that too few of us know the journey on which we have been. We refer to "the movement" as if it were a political monolith. But what we now call "the movement" bears little resemblance to what we called "the movement" in 1963. In the early Sixties, "the movement" consisted of SNCC, CORE and SCLC in Afroamerica. SDS, various socialist groups and peace groups in America. At that time if one wanted to be a part of "the movement" one affiliated himself with one of those organizations.

Today, "the movement" is no longer an identifiable political entity, but we still refer to it as if it were. It is more a socio-political phenomenon encompassing practically all of Afroamerica and a good segment of the youth of America. It is exemplified by the high school dropout who knows why he's not in school, the long-haired youth whose life is lived in the streets, college students, SDS organizers, winos, blacks in daishikis and blacks in suits and blacks in black leather jackets and on and on and on. Indeed, most of the people who now consider themselves to be a part of "the movement" do not belong to any organization. Instead, there are loose groupings of people around the country who share a common outlook, common life-styles, and common aspirations.

What we refer to as "the movement" has become increasingly broad and more varied, not only in terms of the people who were involved, but in its aims. During the early Sixties it was easy to know what was happening. "SNCC has organizers in Mississippi. They are organizing people to vote." There was a political goal and a means of reaching that goal. Yet, as "the movement" progressed, it found that the problems it was confronting were more

complex than had first been recognized. And on another level, "the movement" had the power to unleash more than it consciously intended. Indeed, one action set off a chain of other actions around the country. For example, the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project was designed to organize the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, to challenge the Democratic Party delegation at the convention in Atlantic City, and to focus the attention of the nation on the state of Mississippi. All of these objectives were achieved, yet the Summer Project served as the catalyst for other actions that were not directly related to the desired objectives. Thus, the results of the Summer Project can also include the take-over of Sproul Hall on the Berkeley campus in 1965, the beginning of a black-white split in what was then the "civil-rights movement," the beginnings of an all-black movement, which announced itself in 1966 with the cry of Black Power. These side results of the Summer Project in turn set off other actions.

Things happened in the Sixties. We didn't make them happen as much as one action produced ten other actions (but the progression was geometric) and we were swept along with it. By the mid-Sixties, it was practically impossible for an organization to adequately control and guide actions which it initiated. And to tell the truth, we were so excited seeing so much happen, that few tried to control or direct what was happening. We were not concerned with being conscious of the implications of what we were doing. We were merely conscious of doing.

The nature of "the movement" underwent a subtle change in the mid-sixties. Until 1964, "the movement" had depended upon its own people to carry information from place to place. Meetings were small; "movement" publications were few and people depended upon direct contact with each other to keep informed and since there were always a fair number of people in motion, this was not difficult. However, with the Summer Project in 1964 and the murders of Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner, the



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media became more and more prominent as the carriers of "movement" information. (One of the reasons the Summer Project came into being was an attempt to break the media black-out on Mississippi.) It had always played an unconscious role in "spreading the word." A 14-year-old black youth who watched sit-in demonstrators getting beaten in 1960 via NBC was 19 at the time of the Watts Rebellion, and he had been politicized by NBC, not by meetings, rallies or "movement" propaganda. And a ten-year-old in Detroit who witnessed Watts via NBC was more than ready two years later. "The movement" took advantage of the media's new interest in it and began to consciously use and eventually depend upon the media to be the agent for information rather than upon its own people and organs. And as "the movement" grew, it became so loose and ill-defined in structure and constituency that a press conference was the most effective way of communicating with "the movement."

The media was also the principle agent of information for the cultural revolution, feeding itself and making news about be-ins, love-ins, hippies, rock groups, drugs, etc., and it took the Yippies to merge the cultural revolution with the political movement via NBC. Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin consciously used the media to transmit concepts of the cultural revolution and to direct those concepts toward political ends. They made their attitude as much a part of the information to be transmitted as their words and their dress (which is also attitude). (Vito Battista, a Republican legislator from New York, is a good Yippie. Chairman Mao swimming the Yangtze shows knowledge of Yippieism. Khrushchev banging his shoe on the table at the UN is a Yippie elder statesman.) Abbie and Jerry used NBC to communicate with twelve-year-olds in suburbia, consciously trying to give them concepts and models that would be an alternative to those presented by their parents and teachers.

By the fall of 1966, "the movement", which had once been composed of a few political organizations, was becoming a separate society, with its own newspapers, its own life-style, its own morality. It became like a huge river with people jumping in at every point along its banks. Those who had been swimming in the river for several years suddenly found themselves surrounded by hundreds of new swimmers and while everyone admitted that there was a communication gap between the young and their parents, few recognized that there was a growing communication gap within what we still called "the movement." We used the same words and thought we were talking about the same things, but, in actuality, increasingly, we were not. The political perspective of someone who has been in "the movement" since 1960 (and how many are left?) was, of necessity going to be different from that of one who entered in 1968. The viewpoint of the former was not necessarily superior to that of the latter, but the differences between the two had to be recognized and understood. The "movement" veteran had a sense of "movement" history, having lived it. The "movement" neophyte did not. As far as he was concerned, "the movement" began when he became aware of it.



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Because of the constantly changing nature of "the movement", because the constituency of "the movement" was constantly changing, we needed, by 1966, a history of the previous six years, so that each of us would have some knowledge of where we had been, whether we had been there or not (and no one had been everywhere). We still need that history, only now it must cover almost a decade. It is in our history that we learn who we are. It is in our actions that we learn who we are. If either element is missing, we become one-legged creatures on crutches, thinking that we are running simply because we're in motion. I speak to a college audience and casually mention the Freedom Rides and suddenly realize that most of those listening were between the ages of ten and fourteen when John Lewis stumbled from a burning bus outside Anniston, Alabama in 1961. They do not know what I know. (And because I am older, I lack some of the insights they have because they are younger.) The results of this become painfully apparent when one sits in a meeting in 1969 and finds himself participating in a 1966 discussion. The reasoning and the arguments are the same. Only the faces are different. The question then becomes: does each generation have to cover the same ground for itself or can the knowledge of one generation be transferred to another? Because a generation is now so brief, there *must* be a way. "The movement" today extends from the ninth grader just entering high school to thirty-year-olds like myself to "old



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men" like Staughton Lynd and Dave Dellinger and beyond. We must not become alienated from each other.

One of the tasks which must be undertaken in the Seventies is for those with the capability and experience to recognize that it is their responsibility to write and analyze our own very recent history. If this history is not written, we will then leave the job to be done by liberal historians (who have, in fact, begun) and the information which they will transmit to the future will not be the story of radicalism in the Sixties. Merely the liberal's story of radicalism in the Sixties. We of the sixties have suffered because we do not know the history of radicalism prior to ourselves. And because we don't, we see the increasing factionalism among political organizations and it's like the re-playing of a Grade Z movie. Because we don't even know our own history, we see SDS and the Black Panther Party repeating some of the mistakes SNCC made earlier in the decade. All of this is unnecessary, but it is happening. It will continue to happen as long as we do not know what happened in the Sixties, and before.

"The movement" is no longer what it was when SDS issued the Port Huron statement or when the Jefferson Airplane used to perform in Golden Gate Park. Today "the movement" has several divisions, the most apparent being the black-white one. Within both of these, there are sub-divisions. Within the white movement, a division can be loosely made between cultural and political orientations, recognizing that there is, of course, an over-lapping between the two. This is a division between the "street people" and those of a more traditional political orientation, e.g. SDS, PLP, SWP, etc. (Within the latter, there are many divisions and factions, and seemingly more, God forbid, on the horizon.)

Within the black movement, there is no clear-cut division between the cultural and political, despite the insistence of the Black Panther Party to the contrary. While the Black Panther Party has national projection as the leading organization within the black community, what is happen-

ing in the communities is contrary to this. Leadership within the black movement is becoming more and more localized. Just a few years ago, that leadership was national in character, best exemplified by Stokely, Rap, and for a period, the Black Panther Party. With the development of strong local leadership, the nature of the black movement is changing. People are being organized around practically every conceivable issue and sometimes, from every conceivable approach. Intense black-oriented education is going on within communities and once more, news of what is happening is being transmitted by word-of-mouth, not via NBC. This period of internalization is the natural one to follow the mass awakening which took place with the pronouncement of Black Power from 1966-68. The black movement is more alive now than it has ever been. It simply isn't visible on the six o'clock news, except when 14-year-old girls are murdered by cops in Omaha.

The one very clear division which does exist in the black movement is between those who use a Marxist-Leninist analysis (generally the Black Panther Party) and those who use a "race" analysis. The Black Panther Party would say that this is a political-cultural split, but many blacks from a political background, i.e. involvement in "the movement" pre-dating the BPP, reject both the Marxist approach and a complete "race" analysis. One of the most influential spokesmen for a new analysis based on black nationalism is Harold Cruse. His book, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* and his recent article on Cleaver's second book in the *New York Review of Books* are excellent examples of a new approach to black nationalism and the question of revolution.

The Seventies will undoubtedly see an intensification of struggle between black Marxist and black nationalist viewpoints. Because Marxism does not concern itself with the question of race, its relevance to the black struggle is highly limited. Those who define the struggle as a class struggle are using 19th century concepts of 19th century conditions. Those who define it solely as a race struggle are over-simplifying the realities of the last years of the Twentieth Century. Sadly, the attempts by some blacks to come to a new analysis of the black condition in America and of America itself are being hindered by white radicals who are only too happy to proclaim any black the all-Wise Leader if he says that it is not a matter of race, but a class struggle. This enables white radicals to avoid grappling with the problem of racism, a white problem. Both white and black Marxists make the remarkable assumption that if one is a Marxist one is automatically not a racist. No. One merely becomes a Marxist racist and racism under any name smells as bad. A radical "cracker" is still a "cracker." If the white movement is to grow, there must be a recognition of the fact that while racism proceeded from capitalism, racism now has an independent existence. Racism can exist within any economic system. The destruction of capitalism does not mean the automatic destruction of racism and many blacks do not think that the destruction of racism can be delayed until after the revolution. The question arises, but can racism be destroyed under

capitalism? No, but that has to be the priority. The white radical movement is infected with racism and any revolution proceeding from its ranks is going to have racism within it. And if there is a socialist revolution which has racism within it, there has been no revolution. Just a change in economic systems. The failure of the Black Panther Party and many white radicals to recognize this takes the political movement back to the days of 1964. We are not witnessing a radical coalition, but simply a new form of integration. And it has been given its validity by SDS and other white radicals, not by the black community.

There is a need for a new analysis. The quality of any political movement can be no better than the quality of its ideas and the way in which those ideas are expressed. A political movement functions on the basis of revolutionary concepts and revolutionary morality. In the past year, there has been an alarming decline in the quality of concepts and morality within the political movement. When a hyena has been wounded, it will turn and eat its entrails. The political movement which began in the late Fifties and came to fruition in the Sixties had a clear concept of where it was going and some idea of how to go there. Yet, the further it went, the more aware it became of the complexities of the problems and the less apparent were the solutions. The more complex the problems appeared, the more the political movement turned to solutions others had used with success, namely, Marxism-Leninism. While these solutions worked for other people, there was little questioning as to what degree, if and how these solutions might work in America. The ways in which Ho, Mao and Fidel each used Marxism-Leninism in different ways to suit their particular problems was over-looked and the fact that they used Marxism-Leninism became all important. The result has been an ever-increasing factionalism within the political movement, with each side saying it represents the one, true approach and throwing epithets of "counter-revolutionary" back and forth like the Chicago police throwing tear gas canisters. He who disagrees with me is counter-revolutionary seems to be the current level of political analysis and acumen. This not only creates dissension but is demoralizing in the extreme.

The political movement has become so concerned with itself that it has ceased to grow. In and of themselves, organizations are very dangerous things. They are begun as the vehicle for social change, for the revolution. After a while, though, they unknowingly become mistaken for the revolution itself. Organizations have to have offices, printing equipment, mailing lists, etc., and generally, it seems that the more the power structure moves against an organization, the more it becomes concerned with saving its offices, equipment, mailing lists, i.e. in preserving itself. Its principle tasks become paying the office rent and phone bills and getting people out of jail. And the more it is attacked, the more it has only one issue to bring before people—defend the organization. When an organization's overwhelming concern becomes its own preservation, it is no longer waging a struggle. It has merely become an employer with so many on the payroll and bills to be paid.

The organization begins to rule its members instead of the members using the organization as a means to the end. a means to the end.

One of the important tasks of the Seventies will be to examine and evaluate organizations and if necessary, disband many and create others. Our loyalties have to be to the struggle, not to any particular organization. Too many people have left an organization and thereby, left "the movement," thinking that an organization was synonymous with "the movement."

Intense involvement with organizational internal affairs can blind us to what we are supposed to be about—the creation of a society based upon values of humanity. Yet, we cannot be the vehicle for the creation of this society unless we ourselves are in the process of being transformed. If we become narrow in outlook, if we refuse to be open to criticism, to new concepts, we become the fascists we say we are fighting. If we become so self-important and self-important that we talk to no one and listen to no one who does not agree with the way we view the world, we are even less than those we are allegedly fighting because we are supposed to know better. If we continue to substitute the waving of the little red book for thought, if we continue to substitute the screaming of slogans for ideology, if we continue to divide and fight among ourselves, then "the movement" of the Seventies will be comprised of bitter, disillusioned idealists who lost the dream.

We must not mistake an organization, a gun, or even an ideology for the revolution. They are only means toward it. Revolution is first and foremost a question of morality, a question of values, a question of the inner life of people. If we lose sight of this, we can create a society in which everyone is well-fed, well-clothed, well-housed, and find a new generation of the young rising up and saying, "We want the world and we want it NOW!"

We had the dream and we are losing it. If we can regain the fervor and intensity of that dream in the next five years, that will be more than enough. To create a society in which each man has the opportunity to love himself and thereby, the opportunity to love his fellows. That is the dream. Before we can create the revolution which will make real the dream, we must begin to create it among ourselves. In the beginning it was easy to maintain the dream. Now, because the problems facing us are more complex than we ever imagined, maintaining the dream is that much more difficult. Letting that dream suffuse our every thought, word and deed is that much more difficult. Yet, that is what we must do, no matter how difficult it becomes. Without the dream, there is no revolution.

*Julius Lester is a long-time activist and author of Look Out Whitey, Black Power's Gonna Get Your Mamma and Revolutionary Notes.*