

THE PORT HURON STATEMENT

Posts In This Series

The Port Huron Statement is the manifesto of Students For A Democratic Society, drafted by Tom Hayden. Hayden graduated from the University of Michigan, Class of '61. He was introduced to the SDS by Sandy Cason, an extraordinary speaker and feminist. They married in 1961. Hayden reported on Freedom Riders, and eventually became a Freedom Rider himself. The earliest draft of the Port Huron Statement was written while Hayden was in jail in Albany, GA as a Freedom Rider.

Hayden's draft was presented at a meeting of SDS members at the UAW's Port Huron conference center in November 1962. It was thoroughly vetted and adjusted, but in essence it's Hayden's vision for what came to be known as the New Left. The SDS eventually became a leading opponent of the War in Viet Nam, and splintered into several groups, including the Weather Underground.

The Port Huron Statement is short and direct. Here's a link to the text. This excellent article by Louis Menand suggests there are two main influences. John Dewey's focus on participatory democracy as a moral force is one. The other is C. Wright Mills, primarily *The Power Elite*, written in 1956. The Port Huron Statement opens with a discussion of values, then turns to critiques of education, politics, and the economy. This post focuses on values.

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Hayden begins by dismissing the politician form of values as meaningless rote expressions, obeisance to the views of the ruling class. Students aren't taught anything beyond those platitudes. Leftist elders aren't any better: "...our liberal and socialist predecessors were plagued by vision without program, while our own

generation is plagued by program without vision." Hayden asserts the importance of starting from a statement of values:

A first task of any social movement is to convince people that the search for orienting theories and the creation of human values is complex but worthwhile.

1. According to Hayden the dominant view at the time was that people are little more than stimulus-response machines, consuming and producing, but lacking control over their own lives. He admits humans can be ugly, but he rejects the human "... potentiality for violence, unreason, and submission to authority."

Human beings are "infinitely precious", with unfulfilled capacities for reason, freedom and love. We all have the capacity for independence and growth, and the aim of society should be to encourage these potentials. We should search for a life that is "personally authentic", not one that adheres blindly to ancient limitations, or one imposed on us by an inflexible past and present.

2. "Human relationships should involve fraternity and honesty." In the era of Mutually Assured Destruction, Hayden sees the survival of the human species as only possible through our relationships with others based not in competition but in love.

3.

As a social system we seek the establishment of a democracy of individual participation, governed by two central aims: that the individual share in those social decisions determining the quality and direction of his life; that society be organized to encourage independence in men and provide the media for their common participation.

4. Politics is the way we act collectively to make decisions about our society. Important decisions should be made by public groups. In this way people are brought together out of isolation and into community, which brings meaning to our lives. Politics should operate in ways that bring out alternative solutions so that discussion can be focused on making good social choices.

5. The economy should provide “incentives worthier than money or survival”. He calls for meaningful labor, not rote mechanical labor. Everyone should have a say in the way businesses operate.

6. Violence is abhorrent. It requires the targets to be depersonalized objects of hatred, and that is precisely the opposite of this expression of values.

Discussion

1. I agree with the idea that the left needs both a vision and a program. I’ve written several times about the need for theory that supports the various programs that progressives all support, as here and here. Progressives offer great ideas, but only rarely do they justify their ideas, and the justifications are weak. For example, we say the richest country in the world should X. Or X is a human right. I particularly don’t like implicitly patronizing rationales.

2. Each of these values, and some of the language, resonates with the ideas of John Dewey laid out in the posts in this series. Each of them resonates with other writers we’ve looked at like Elizabeth Anderson. I also see traces of the ideas of Hannah Arendt and other thinkers in works I haven’t discussed here. It’s clear that Hayden and the other delegates learned a lot as undergrads, notwithstanding their disappointment with their teachers.

3. I want to single out the idea that participation in democracy is a form of self-actualization (my word), In neoliberal talk,

voters are consumers of politics and political ideas. They are not the generators of solutions, and they have no input into either politics or policy except to pick and choose among the politicians hawking them. Hayden, like Dewey, believes that participating in society is a way to know ourselves, in fact, to form ourselves. Participating in democracy is a virtue.

4. On the negative side, the language of the document is white male dominated. The word "man" is used to mean both women and men. The words women and woman are not used. Here's an example of this centering.

Apathy toward apathy begets a privately constructed universe, a place of systematic study schedules, two nights each week for beer, a girl or two, and early marriage; a framework infused with personality, warmth, and under control, no matter how unsatisfying otherwise.

This is especially odd because Sandy Cason was a feminist and a potent leader, and a number of women attended the convention. This form of interaction with women became a real problem in the New Left, particularly in the anti-war left, and led to an independent women's movement.

The document repeatedly addresses Civil Rights, but the New Left was dominated by white men, and did not recruit Black leaders. Black activism was centered in groups dominated by African-Americans, like the SNCC and the Black Panthers.

This, of course, benefited Black and Feminist groups who controlled their own rise to liberation and generated their own forms of leadership and followership. But the divisions made it difficult for the Left to work as a single group on issues affecting everyone.

The document talks about working people, but the SDS is a student organization, with no labor participation. This became a real problem when the SDS turned to anti-war activism, because the Labor movement supported the War in Viet Nam.

This separation of activists is a serious problem, one the left has never solved.

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[1] Pragmatism doesn't generate values, nor does it deduce values from some fundamental principle. Values are the direct result of culture and lived experience. Therefore there is no proof that establishes their validity. They are subject to debate and discussion. We establish values by persuasion. Dewey treats the subjects of ethics and morality in a number of his works. Here's a good discussion. I read the form of the Port Huron Statement as following this tradition. Hayden doesn't attempt to justify his values by reference to any formal standard. He argues for them.