

THE SOCIAL CRITIQUE OF THE PORT HURON STATEMENT

Posts In This Series

The Port Huron Statement, written by Tom Hayden and adjusted and accepted by the SDS, asserts that the left needs both a program and a vision. The value section gives the vision. Those values are reflected in the critique of society. Hayden says that social structures of the early 60s were stultifying. Young people go from formative experiences in college to positions in the adult world for which they were prepared.

The fraternity president is seen at the junior manager levels; the sorority queen has gone to Grosse Pointe: the serious poet burns for a place, any place, or work; the once-serious and never serious poets work at the advertising agencies.

No one questions the system. The elites explain this passivity as evidence that people are satisfied with the status quo. But how can that be if people haven't learned about alternatives, or how to change things, or about the actual power that have? Or, the elites claim that actual issues are disappearing. But they control the media and the education system, so how would we know otherwise? Other elites claim that "democracy never worked anywhere in the past". But "... how can a social order work well if its best thinkers are skeptics, and is man really doomed forever to the domination of today?"

Universal apathy is reinforced by the existing power structure, which separates the public from full knowledge of the facts, and protects decision-makers from the public. Socially isolated citizens have no way to grasp how their world works. Hayden uses Dewey's language around "publics".

The very isolation of the individual – from power and community and ability to aspire – means the rise of a democracy without publics.

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The American political system is not the democratic model of which its glorifiers speak. In actuality it frustrates democracy by confusing the individual citizen, paralyzing policy discussion, and consolidating the irresponsible power of military and business interests.

Hayden identifies several reasons for this. First, the policy differences within both of the main parties are greater than the differences between the parties. Mostly this means that the Dixiecrats are more like the Republicans than they are either mainstream Democrats or liberal Republicans. The rigidity is increased by the seniority system in the Democratic Party, where most committees are chaired by Dixiecrats, and the system gives these chairs enormous power to enforce their wills.

Second, there is a bias towards local concerns. Legislators are more interested in trying to stay on the good side of their voters, even when the interests of those voters runs contrary to the national interest. Therefore politics fails to confront national and international issues in a smart way.

Third, whole communities are unrepresented: Black people, particularly in the South, migrant workers, poor people, and urban and suburban people gerrymandered into districts where they do not count

Fourth, all of this is made much worse by corporate power, expressed through lobbying and special access.

These forces work together to calcify politics, and weaken government, especially the

legislature. Image and charisma replace thoughtfulness and insight. Voters are confronted with “pseudo-problems”, but actual problems are not addressed, let alone solved, by a weakened government. The confusion and lack of results lead to worse apathy. Politicians do nothing about this state of affairs; in fact, they support it.

The dominant feature of politics in 1962 was anti-communism. Public apathy and ignorance open the way for highly nationalistic, conservative anti-communists. These people took over the Republican party under the leadership of Barry Goldwater.

Their political views are defined generally as the opposite of the supposed views of communists: complete individual freedom in the economic sphere, non-participation by the government in the machinery of production. But actually “anticommunism” becomes an umbrella by which to protest liberalism, internationalism, welfarism, the active civil rights and labor movements.

The economy has a few elements of social support, but for the most part it contributes to the malaise. Hayden says we live in a “national celebration of economic prosperity”, but millions live in poverty and deprivation. Work is “unfulfilling and victimizing”, but it’s the only means to achieve financial security. We think we are free because we live in a free enterprise world.

People are excluded from control over their work lives. The rich and their corporations run the country. They dominate the fabric of social life. Government is not a countervailing force protecting citizens.

The military industrial complex is another dominant force. The cooperation between corporations and the military is crystalized by

the statement of Charles Wilson, CEO of GM, who lauded the creation of the “permanent war economy.”

There’s more, but that gives a good flavor of the critique.

Discussion

1. The Port Huron Statement was written nearly 60 years ago, and 35 years after the publication of *The Public And Its problems*. I think it still serves both as a statement of values and as a social critique. True, it doesn’t mention women or the LGBTQ community, and its discussion of racism and the labor movements is weak. Some of the issues are no longer relevant, like the Dixiecrats. But these criticisms can be addressed within its framework.

2. Dewey says that corporations and the rich control political discussion. Their interests are not the same as the interests of the vast majority. Most people can’t even articulate their own interests because of the confusion and dissembling of the wealthy and their minions. Dewey thinks that a good society is one in which individuals have agency in all aspects of their lives.

The Port Huron Statement puts those concerns in the center of the discussion. Hayden adds discussion of the role of the military and the special role played by corporations that support it. That shows the influence of C. Wright Mills, especially his book *The Power Elite*.

3. The critiques of Dewey, Mills, and Hayden of the way democracy is actually working in America could all have been written today, with only minor changes. Mill’s power elites still run things. Issues of social inclusion are still a huge problem. National discourse is still confused by lies and distortions that serve the rich at the expense of everyone else. It is still difficult for citizens to recognize themselves as publics, capable of pursuing their own interests. The average person has little agency. Americans are divided by manipulation of

pseudo-issues.

As an example, the rich make demands on government and get most of what they want from all three branches of government: tax cuts, IP protection for critical vaccines, de-regulation, weakened agencies, hand-outs. At the same time, a huge number of Americans are suffering under a catastrophic pandemic and the effects of deteriorating infrastructure, chemical pollution, and climate change.

A significant majority of us want the government to act. Courts offer years of delay to any objection from almost anyone. Most legislators are locked into their ancient games. Legislators who have internalized the values of the rich, or who are corrupt, or just stupid and indifferent, use senate procedure to block necessary changes. The dissemblers and liars raise absurd questions like "do they deserve it?" and "how do we pay for it?", questions never asked about the demands of the rich. Anything that works for the common good is labeled Communist. Those arguments and tactics have been used at least 120 years.

This history is evidence of another of Dewey's basic principles: democracy is a project of a community, never a finished product.