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Tribal Model as Revolutionary Action Model

With particular reference to the Masai of Africa

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To put all this “jazz” down on paper about organization, etc. is necessary. But what it is really all about is how we must hang together, dig each other, laugh and cry together and fuck up and never quite get organized but do “the thing” each alone and all together. These thoughts are offered with the affection that grows from the new-found excitement, energy and wonder of being a member of this unfathomably beautiful bumbling-effective assortment of real people.

1. “Power Seekers” and “Responsibility Takers.”

Power does tend to corrupt. The politicians of our nation are “power seekers”. Our political system, despite the myth of democracy, is a bifurcated one made up of leaders and the led. Our leaders are men of limited integrity and/or misguided moralism and self-righteousness. Their proverbial willingness to compromise and to “reason together” does tend, as our political scientists never tire of telling us, to help our political system function. But we in the resistance movement are committed to repudiating that system, to finding a more humane and human way of ordering our collective existence. Therefore, we ought to understand that we are engaged in a political struggle which demands coordination and leadership. To speak of social change is to be ready to contemplate alternatives, alternatives which promise to both achieve our goals and to continually reaffirm our values by working toward these goals in a manner appropriate to who we are and what we hope to become. Simply, our leadership must be one comprised of “responsibility takers”, not “power seekers”.

At the Resistance office, I have for the first time seen I kind of participatory democracy which stands in stark contrast to the kind of politics we in the U.S. have been programmed to accept as natural. The reluctance to take a formal vote on issues, the “sense of the meeting” and the informal staff or steering committee meetings are the concrete manifestations of our “New Left mood”. I dig it. We should retain it. But we ought to realize that the nature of the struggle confronting us is beginning to make demands upon us that require a more articulated organization. There is a non-bureaucratic model which seems to offer some hints to achieving this goal. It is provided by the political systems of traditional Black Africa. In particular, I will make reference to the Masai, the people with whom I am most famil-

iar (having spent 14 months doing doctoral research amongst this pastoral people of Kenya and Tanzania).

2. “Sense of the Meeting” and “Consensus”.

Anyone who has studied pre-literate societies would see a striking similarity between the refusal to take formal votes and reliance on the “sense of the meeting” which permeates the Resistance and the “consensus” decision-making which characterized traditional African societies such as the Masai. The Masai elders’ councils will discuss an issue until “everybody” agrees. There is no formal vote taken—there is (ordinarily) no need for one. But the consensus is and must be real. For the Masai to operate in this fashion a number of factors must be operative. First, there is a thoroughly shared, and deeply ingrained, set of values about the way decisions ought to be made, i.e. egalitarian-participatory as opposed to authoritarian-bureaucratic. Secondly, the ability to reach such a general consensus is based on the bonds of kinship and extended kinship (all age-mates are “brothers”) of economic interdependence and of the ties of locality and neighborhood. Out of these shared ties and value comes the quality of being able to really “speak each others’ language” and a commitment to talk, talk, talk. Every Masai elder may speak in council, most do. The meeting will continue until all feel they can agree—everyone recognizes that the appropriate decision has been made. If this requires two days they meet for two days. If they must meet again in a week’s time they will. And so on.

At the Resistance we must recognize that a “sense of the meeting” will be a phony and imperfect substitute for consensus unless we commit ourselves to talk, talk, talk. As for shared values and bonds, much already exists. Our collective *rite de passage* does form a bond for many of us.

Many of us have surely felt the impulse to call fellow resisters and resister-sisters “brother” or “sister”. Though still mainly unspoken, I believe many of us share parallel orientations toward politics and interpersonal relationships. Those of us, like myself who are seeking to, in some sense, share our lives in Resistance co-ops with others in the movement may be helping to lay the secure foundations for the kinds of ties and gut-level understandings which will help to make “consensus” decision-making a realizable medium for organizing our collective struggle to build something true and, therefore, beautiful in the way of political community.

Conclusion

The tension that exists between the desire for “openness”, “participatory democracy”, playfulness, and the seriousness of our commitment and magnitude of our struggle are very real. To keep our New Left “thing” is, to me, as important as being “efficiently organized” or “effective”. It is only our desire to see that ends continue to flow from means that offer us the chance to really achieve a different, more human life-style. These thoughts have been offered with the aspiration for such a life-style in mind. As we work, life, and struggle together I hope we can in some meaningful way come to love one another. In doing so we risk much. Not only the confrontation with prison but the physical violence we may increasingly encounter. Not only a personal challenge and apprehensiveness and fear, but the pain of being separated from “brothers” and “sisters” and feeling the pain of their pain. But this is a risk we must take. For this risk comes only from the willingness we have to really share with one another, to go beyond the corrosive, limiting individuality of an ego outside of community. To do “your own thing” and to do the “Resistance thing” will naturally grow together for many of us.