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Trotsky, Jesus & Buddha

Remembering the '60s

Ron Tabor

2003

It was early October, 1966. I had just returned to the “Windy City” to begin my second year at the University of Chicago. The previous spring, I had helped organize and had taken part in an anti-war/anti-draft sit-in in the school’s administration building that had tied up the campus for five days and had made the *New York Times* and national TV. I was looking forward to getting something like that going again. This made up for what I expected would be another unspeakable Chicago winter, as well as the stifling spiritual atmosphere (smug hypocrisy) of the U of C as an institution.

My roommate to be, Stewart Nathan, and I had heard that a mutual friend, Pete Braun, had “flipped out” the previous summer, but we hadn’t given it much thought. A lot of people flipped out back then, and besides, flipping out meant different things to different people. In any case, we hadn’t seen Pete yet and we had other tasks to concern us. Stewart had had both the foresight and the energy to locate an apartment off-campus and had asked me and another guy to share it with him. (When and how he found the place I still don’t know.) I had readily agreed and we were going about fixing it up. It needed fixing.

The apartment was large, with two substantial bedrooms, a big living room with a kind of alcove off to one side that could serve as someone's sleeping area, and a kitchen and adjacent eating area. It was in the basement of a typical Chicago apartment building and had typical "basement apartment" features. The windows were small and placed high up on the walls, so that little light came in. Water pipes for the apartments above us were exposed, and the apartment suffered from a certain grunginess. But none of this mattered to us. If anything, it gave the apartment a romantic, "underground" feel and a degree of privacy that we appreciated. At least the neighbors wouldn't see us get-ting stoned, which we did, rather often.

The place also had two bathrooms, as well as three doors to the outside, which I at least saw as useful in case the police raided the place. Of course, later (after we had moved out) when someone was arrested in the apartment—the police planted marijuana behind the refrigerator—the extra doors were irrelevant.

As important as these features were, another was crucial. Our new home was quite a ways from the U of C campus. This meant trekking to classes in the sub-arctic cold during the winter, but it also put some social distance between us and what we saw as the white, upper middle-class enclave that the university represented. We recognized that the entire area was a mostly white, middle-class island in the otherwise overwhelming Black South Side, but to us back then, the nuan- tial difference between where we lived and the campus mattered a great deal. We felt more "organic," closer to the Black community.

Although I was to give up one of the bedrooms to let still another friend move in (thus condemning myself to sleeping and studying in the dining area, through which our new roommate tromped at all hours of the night to make tea), the apartment was great. It was also cheap, what with four of us sharing the rent, while we lived frugally on rice, ground beef and scrambled eggs (nobody knew about cholesterol back then).

The preparation of our apartment (mostly, painting it scarlet, dark pink and an almost lavender blue), was not quite complete and the school term about to begin when we received a phone call one evening from our allegedly flipped out friend, Pete. He was in jail downtown, having been arrested for what he described as “jumping capitalists on Wells Street.” We didn’t know what this entailed and Pete sounded a bit weird on the phone, but we figured we’d better go bail him and worry about what kind of shape he was in afterward. So we called a few friends, rounded up the necessary cash (I think it was \$50), borrowed a car from some young professor friends who lived across the court, and headed downtown to rescue Pete from the clutches of the Chicago judicial system.

After we had dealt with the paper work, paid the money and waited a while, the cops brought up Pete. While he was very glad to see us, our pleasure at seeing him was tempered by what we noticed as he got closer.

In some ways, Pete looked as he always had: short and wide, almost square, with shortish brown hair and an Emiliano Zapata mustache on his attractive face. He was wearing blue jeans, boots and a red and black lumber jacket, all of which was almost a uniform with him. But his eyes were different. Brown and normally soft, alert and expressive, they were now bloodshot and didn’t move around much. Mostly, he just looked straight ahead, turning his head to look at things.

While Pete’s eyes were suggestive of a change in his mental state, his behavior was even more so. Under his right arm, perched on his hip, were ten or so small art books, almost pamphlets, consisting of vivid color prints of the works of various impressionist and post-impressionist painters, such as Monet, Renoir, Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec, Van Gogh, Matisse, Kandinsky, Picasso, etc. “Look at this!” he exclaimed, before even greeting us, while showing us one of the prints. “Isn’t this beautiful?” Stewart and I agreed with him, as we looked at each other worriedly. This

process continued as we made our way to the car. Pete, it was now apparent, had indeed flipped out.

We heard later that the “flipping out” had occurred the previous August, during a national SDS convention, held somewhere in the Midwest. Pete, his girlfriend, Kathy, and his best friend, Carl, had “tripped” (taken LSD) together, during which experience Pete had learned that Carl and Kathy were sleeping together. While Pete pretended to be successful with the ladies, he really wasn’t, and the revelation that his best pal, Carl, had “stolen” his “girl” from him was more than he could bear. His acid trip never quite ended.

Now permanently high, Pete was in a good mood, chattering away as we drove back to our apartment, while Stewart and I tried to pretend, at least to Pete, that nothing was the matter. We had him sit down at the table in our dining room and gave him something to drink. While Pete sat there drinking and thinking whatever thoughts he was capable of, I pretended I needed to go to the bathroom so that I could get out of the room and exchange a few words with Stewart.

“He’s crazy!” Stewart half whispered, half shouted in my ear. “Talk to him! Tell him he’s flipped out and should get some help.”

“No, YOU talk to him!” I insisted, although I was already accepting my fate. Stewart, assuring me that I was better at this kind of thing than he was, pushed me back into the dining room.

It was very hot in the apartment, and Pete and I had both taken off our shirts. We sat across from each other over the table, which was placed against one (pink) wall. I had already started to talk when I noticed Pete’s well muscled arms and chest and a large kitchen knife that someone had inadvertently left on the table. With Stewart looking on from behind Pete (and halfway around the corner), I sat as calmly as I could and began to tell Pete that Stewart and I thought he had, well, kind of flipped out and, uh, though the should see someone.

Saying this wasn’t easy, since neither Stewart nor I had much confidence in psychiatry or psychoanalysis, which we generally

he was the reincarnation of Trotsky, Jesus and Buddha, but, as we know, the revolution didn’t take place as scheduled. (Maybe Pete just forgot to give the signal.)

Years later, Stewart and I learned that Pete was right about one thing. Gerry Kirk was indeed a police informant. In the mid-1970s, he told some tall tales, including a bunch about Stewart and me (and our parents!), in testimony before a congressional committee investigating campus disturbances during the ’60s.

Then, during a pause when the doctor stopped to relight his pipe, Pete cut in.

“Wait a minute, wait a minute. I wanna ask YOU a question.”

A bit startled, the psychiatric social worker answered, “Well, all right.”

Then Pete: “I bet you think the way to bring about social change in this country is through the Democratic Party. Am I right?”

Even more surprised, the psychiatric social worker looked first at Stewart, then at me, as if checking with us before venturing an answer. “Why, yes. Yes I do,” he finally replied.

Pete then turned to Stewart and me with a triumphant look on his face, jabbing his index finger into his chest. “And you think I’m crazy!”

We knew right away the interview was over. Whatever the man’s clinical abilities, his credibility with Pete was utterly destroyed. Pete knew we agreed with him on the political point, and we knew we’d be incapable of convincing him that the man’s political opinions, however questionable they might be, had no reflection on his professional competence. Besides, we didn’t really believe this ourselves. In any event, the man, who had no idea what he had done, told us there was nothing we could do unless Pete voluntarily committed himself somewhere. So we all left the hospital, and Stewart and I parted with Pete and Gerry in front of the university’s administration building.

Stewart and I never saw Pete after that (nor Gerry). Quite awhile later, I heard (from Carl, as it turned out), that Pete had gotten himself somewhat together. He had been arrested again, but had accepted a deal that all charges against him would be dropped (he had never done anything violent, after all), if he underwent psychiatric treatment. He had indeed gotten some help and was back attending classes at Roosevelt University, then a commuter school for working class students in downtown Chicago. He still looked, talked and acted a bit funny, Carl said, but at least he wasn’t “jumping capitalists” on Wells Street. He may well have continued to believe

considered to be techniques designed to ensure people’s conformity to the ideology and behavioral norms of an evil and unjust social system. It also wasn’t clear what Pete would do when he found out that two more of his friends had “turned on him,” in this case telling him that they thought he was crazy and should see a shrink.

At first, Pete was silent. Then, starting slowly and softly and gradually gaining speed and volume...

(In a Black accent) “You don’t even know who I am, do you, motherfucker? You don’t even know who I am. Well, I’ll tell you. I was TRAINED in the streets, motherfucker, TRAINED in the streets. And I can use both hands, karate, jujitsu, kung fu...”

At this point, Pete stood up and started doing karate chops on the wall and the table, then picked up the knife and started waving it around.

I was trying desperately to look unperturbed and to avoid doing or saying anything that might get Pete even more hyped up than he already was. I was also not letting my eyes move from the knife Pete had taken such a liking to. But out of the corner of my eye I did notice Stewart, still watching and listening in on the conversation, crouching a bit closer to the ground. At bottom, I felt that Pete, who had always been a kind and gentle person, deeply concerned about the racial and other injustices of our society (underneath a little bravado), would not actually do anything violent.

Meanwhile, his tirade was getting more and more bizarre. He was the reincarnation of Leon Trotsky, Jesus Christ and Buddha. He had formed a new organization, the Revolutionary Organizing Committee (“That’s right, Rock, R.O.C!”) that he wanted us to join. He was in direct communication with Mao and Fidel (apparently, he was on a first name basis with them), who were infiltrating cadres into the United States through Miami and San Francisco. When he gave the signal, in a month, the revolution would start.

Somehow, after Pete had finished, Stewart and I managed to calm him down. We suggested that perhaps we should continue

the discussion tomorrow; it was late, we all need-ed to get some sleep, etc., etc. We fixed Pete up with a blanket and a pillow on a couch in the living room and retreated to our own sleeping areas. As I lay down on my mattress, I heard Pete talking to himself, and then a click, as Stewart locked his door.

The next morning, Stewart and I had things to do on campus (register for classes, buy books, catch up with friends, etc.), and this was as good an excuse as any not to pursue last night's conversation with Pete. So we all walked over to the university and then went our separate ways. The campus looked pretty, with the sun, already low in the sky, shining on the gray Gothic-style buildings and the leaves starting to fall, and I was glad to get away from Pete for awhile and avoid the responsibility of trying figure out what were going to do with him. Although it was obvious he needed help, he clearly didn't want it and I knew we couldn't force him to get it. Besides, I was starting to get pissed off at him. Who the hell needed to get a knife waved in his face and be called a motherfucker?

After registering, I bumped into Pete posted in front of the campus coffee shop trying to recruit people for ROC. He wasn't having much luck. And he still refused to see a doctor. His flip, arrogant attitude increased my resentment even more and I basically decided to wash my hands of the whole situation. We had tried, he didn't want to get help, so what more could we do? (And fuck him, anyway.) Right?

I don't know where he spent the next few nights. Stewart and I hadn't kicked him out of our apartment, but we hadn't gone looking for him either. When we did run into him on campus, he was still doing his thing. Along with his other fantasies, he was particularly caught up with the idea that one of the guys active on the campus left, a big, good-looking, light-skinned Black fellow named Gerry Kirk, was an informant for the Chicago Red Squad. We knew, on principle, that the pigs had agents in the movement, but Gerry didn't fit the pattern. A nice guy with a friendly smile, Gerry never

had much to say that had any political substance; he never acted like a leader and he never tried to incite violence or talked about guns. Mostly, he was just there.

"The guy's an agent, I'm telling you," Pete would say, shaking his head.

About a week after we had bailed him out and first heard about ROC, Stewart and I encountered Pete again. Our consciences getting the better of us, we tried once more to convince him to see a psychiatrist or something. To our surprise, Pete agreed, and with Gerry Kirk appearing from nowhere, we all set out across the campus and across Ellis Avenue to the university hospital to try to find someone who might be able to help our friend.

When we finally located the psychiatric department, we asked the first person we saw if a psychiatrist were available. She said there wasn't (it was evening by this time), but there was a psychiatric social worker on duty who would see us. He wanted to talk to one of us alone before taking on Pete. I was elected.

Although I didn't know exactly know what a psychiatric social worker is or does (I still don't), I somehow felt the man in the office looked the part, or was trying hard to do so. He was a pleasant faced, middle-aged fellow, dark, probably Jewish. He wore greenish pants, a green/brown tweed sport jacket with leather patches on the elbows over a green sweater, and comfortable-looking shoes. He also had a longish crew cut, complete with dandruff, and topped everything off with a pipe. After I explained that we had a friend who had flipped out during an acid trip, that we wanted him to get help, etc., the man asked, "Well, what are his symptoms?"

"Symptoms?" I exclaimed. "He thinks he's the reincarnation of Trotsky, Jesus and Buddha. He thinks the revolution is happening next month, when he gives the signal."

"Well, bring him in," the man said.

So Stewart and I brought Pete in, with Gerry trailing along. Puffing on his pipe, our psychiatric social worker asked Pete some questions, which Pete answered politely, if somewhat impatiently.