The Pitfalls of Liberalism (1969)

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Whenever one writes about a problem in the United States, especially concerning the racial atmosphere, the problem written about is usually black people, that they are either extremist, irresponsible, or ideologically naive.

What we want to do here is to talk about white society, and the liberal segment of white society, because we want to prove the pitfalls of liberalism, that is, the pitfalls of liberals in their political thinking.

Whenever articles are written, whenever political speeches are given, or whenever analyses are made about a situation, it is assumed that certain people of one group, either the left or the right, the rich or the poor, the whites or the blacks, are causing polarization. The fact is that conditions cause polarization, and that certain people can act as catalysts to speed up the polarization; for example, Rap Brown or Huey Newton can be a catalyst for speeding up the polarization of blacks against whites in the United States, but the conditions are already there. **[1] [2]** George Wallace can speed up the polarization of whites against blacks in America, but again, the conditions are already there. **[3]**

Many people want to know why, out of the entire white segment of society, we want to criticize the liberals. We have to criticize them because they represent the liaison between both groups, between the oppressed and the oppressor. The liberal tries to become an arbitrator, but he is incapable of solving the problems. He promises the oppressor that he can keep the oppressed under control; that he will stop them from becoming illegal (in this case illegal means violent). At the same time, he promises the oppressed that he will be able to alleviate their suffering — in due time. Historically, of course, we know this is impossible, and our era will not escape history.

The most perturbing question for the liberal is the question of violence. The liberal's initial reaction to violence is to try to convince the oppressed that violence is an incorrect tactic, that violence will not work, that violence never accomplishes anything. The Europeans took America through violence and through violence they established the most powerful country in the world.

Through violence they maintain the most powerful country in the world. It is absolutely absurd for one to say that violence never accomplishes anything.

Today power is defined by the amount of violence one can bring against one's enemy — that is how you decide how powerful a country is; power is defined not by the number of people living in a country, it is not based on the amount of resources to be found in that country, it is not based upon the good will of the leaders or the majority of that people. When one talks about a powerful country, one is talking precisely about the amount of violence that that country can heap upon its enemy. We must be clear in our minds about that. Russia is a powerful country, not because there are so many millions of Russians but because Russia has great atomic strength, great atomic power, which of course is violence. America can unleash an infinite amount of violence, and that is the only way one considers America powerful. No one considers Vietnam powerful, because Vietnam cannot unleash the same amount of violence. Yet if one wanted to define power as the ability to do, it seems to me that Vietnam is much more powerful than the United States. But because we have been conditioned by Western thoughts today to equate power with violence, we tend to do that at all times, except when the oppressed begin to equate power with violence — then it becomes an "incorrect" equation.

Most societies in the West are not opposed to violence. The oppressor is only opposed to violence when the oppressed talks about using violence against the oppressor. Then the question of violence is raised as the incorrect means to attain one's ends. Witness, for example, that Britain, France, and the United States have time and time again armed black people to fight their enemies for them. France armed Senegalese in World War II, Britain of course armed Africa and the West Indies, and the United States always armed the Africans living in the United States. But that is only to fight against their enemy, and the question of violence is never raised. The only time the United States or England or France will become concerned about the question of violence is when the people whom they armed to kill their enemies will pick up those arms against them. For another example, practically every country in the West today is giving guns either to Nigeria or to Biafra. They do not mind giving those guns to those people as long as they use them to kill each other, but they will never give them guns to kill another white man or to fight another white country.

The way the oppressor tries to stop the oppressed from using violence as a means to attain liberation is to raise ethical or moral questions about violence. I want to state emphatically here that violence in any society is neither moral nor is it

ethical. It is neither right nor is it wrong. It is just simply a question of who has the power to legalize violence.

It is not a question of whether it is right to kill or it is wrong to kill; killing goes on. Let me give an example: if I were in Vietnam, if I killed thirty yellow people who were pointed out to me by white Americans as my enemy, I would be given a medal. I would become a hero. I would have killed America's enemy — but America's enemy is not my enemy. If I were to kill thirty white policemen in Washington, D.C., who have been brutalizing my people and who are my enemy, I would get the electric chair. It is simply a question of who has the power to legalize violence. In Vietnam our violence is legalized by white America. In Washington, D.C., my violence is not legalized, because Africans living in Washington, D.C., do not have the power to legalize their violence.

I used that example only to point out that the oppressor never really puts an ethical or moral judgment on violence, except when the oppressed picks up guns against the oppressor. For the oppressor, violence is simply the expedient thing to do.

Is it not violent for a child to go to bed hungry in the richest country in the world? I think that is violent. But that type of violence is so institutionalized that it becomes a part of our way of life. Not only do we accept poverty, we even find it normal. And that again is because the oppressor makes his violence a part of the functioning society. But the violence of the oppressed becomes disruptive. It is disruptive to the ruling circles of a given society. And because it is disruptive it is therefore very easy to recognize, and therefore it becomes the target of all those who in fact do not want to change the society. What we want to do for our people, the oppressed, is to begin to legitimatize violence in their minds. So that for us violence against the oppressor will be expedient. This is very important, because we have all been brainwashed into accepting questions of moral judgment when violence is used against the oppressor.

If I kill in Vietnam I am allowed to go free; it has been legalized for me. It has not been legitimatized in my mind. I must legitimatize it in my own mind, and even though it is legal I may never legitimatize it in my own mind. There are a lot of people who come back from Vietnam, who have killed where killing was legalized, but who still have psychological problems over the fact that they have killed. We must understand, however, that to legitimatize killing in one's mind does not make it legal. For example, I have completely legitimatized in my mind the killing of white policemen who terrorize black communities. However, if I get

caught killing a white policeman, I have to go to jail, because I do not as yet have the power to legalize that type of killing. The oppressed must begin to legitimatize that type of violence in the minds of our people, even though it is illegal at this time, and we have to keep striving every chance we get to attain that end.

Now, I think the biggest problem with the white liberal in America, and perhaps the liberal around the world, is that his primary task is to stop confrontation, stop conflicts, not to redress grievances, but to stop confrontation. And this is very clear, it must become very, very clear in all our minds. Because once we see what the primary task of the liberal is, then we can see the necessity of not wasting time with him. His primary role is to stop confrontation. Because the liberal assumes a priori that a confrontation is not going to solve the problem. This, of course, is an incorrect assumption. We know that.

We need not waste time showing that this assumption of the liberals is clearly ridiculous. I think that history has shown that confrontation in many cases has resolved quite a number of problems — look at the Russian revolution, the Cuban revolution, the Chinese revolution. In many cases, stopping confrontation really means prolonging suffering.

The liberal is so preoccupied with stopping confrontation that he usually finds himself defending and calling for law and order, the law and order of the oppressor. Confrontation would disrupt the smooth functioning of the society and so the politics of the liberal leads him into a position where he finds himself politically aligned with the oppressor rather than with the oppressed.

The reason the liberal seeks to stop confrontation — and this is the second pitfall of liberalism — is that his role, regardless of what he says, is really to maintain the status quo, rather than to change it. He enjoys economic stability from the status quo and if he fights for change he is risking his economic stability. What the liberal is really saying is that he hopes to bring about justice and economic stability for everyone through reform, that somehow the society will be able to keep expanding without redistributing the wealth.

This leads to the third pitfall of the liberal. The liberal is afraid to alienate anyone, and therefore he is incapable of presenting any clear alternative.

Look at the past presidential campaign in the United States between Nixon, Wallace, and Humphrey. Nixon and Humphrey, because they try to consider themselves some sort of liberals, did not offer any alternatives. But Wallace did,

he offered clear alternatives. Because Wallace was not afraid to alienate, he was not afraid to point out who had caused errors in the past, and who should be punished. The liberals are afraid to alienate anyone in society. They paint such a rosy picture of society and they tell us that while things have been bad in the past, somehow they can become good in the future without restructuring society at all.

What the liberal really wants is to bring about change which will not in any way endanger his position. The liberal says, “It is a fact that you are poor, and it is a fact that some people are rich; but we can make you rich without affecting those people who are rich.” I do not know how poor people are going to get economic security without affecting the rich in a given country, unless one is going to exploit other peoples. I think that if we followed the logic of the liberal to its conclusion we would find that all we can get from it is that in order for a society to become equitable we must begin to exploit other peoples.

Fourth, I do not think that liberals understand the difference between influence and power, and the liberals get confused seeking influence rather than power. The conservatives on the right wing, or the fascists, understand power, though, and they move to consolidate power while the liberal pushes for influence.

Let us examine the period before civil rights legislation in the United States. There was a coalition of the labor movement, the student movement, and the church for the passage of certain civil rights legislation; while these groups formed a broad liberal coalition, and while they were able to exert their influence to get certain legislation passed, they did not have the power to implement the legislation once it became law. After they got certain legislation passed they had to ask the people whom they were fighting to implement the very things that they had not wanted to implement in the past. The liberal fights for influence to bring about change, not for the power to implement the change. If one really wants to change a society, one does not fight to influence change and then leave the change to someone else to bring about. If the liberals are serious they must fight for power and not for influence.

These pitfalls are present in his politics because the liberal is part of the oppressor. He enjoys the status quo; while he himself may not be actively oppressing other people, he enjoys the fruits of that oppression. And he rhetorically tries to claim that he is disgusted with the system as it is.

While the liberal is part of the oppressor, he is the most powerless segment within that group. Therefore when he seeks to talk about change, he always confronts the

oppressed rather than the oppressor. He does not seek to influence the oppressor, he seeks to influence the oppressed. He says to the oppressed, time and time again, “You don’t need guns, you are moving too fast, you are too radical, you are too extreme.” He never says to the oppressor, “You are too extreme in your treatment of the oppressed,” because he is powerless among the oppressors, even if he is part of that group; but he has influence, or, at least, he is more powerful than the oppressed, and he enjoys this power by always cautioning, condemning, or certainly trying to direct and lead the movements of the oppressed.

To keep the oppressed from discovering his pitfalls the liberal talks about humanism. He talks about individual freedom, about individual relationships. One cannot talk about human idealism in a society that is run by fascists. If one wants a society that is in fact humanistic, one has to ensure that the political entity, the political state, is one that will allow humanism. And so if one really wants a state where human idealism is a reality, one has to be able to control the political state. What the liberal has to do is to fight for power, to go for the political state and then, once the liberal has done this, he will be able to ensure the type of human idealism in the society that he always talks about.

Because of the above reasons, because the liberal is incapable of bringing about the human idealism which he preaches, what usually happens is that the oppressed whom he has been talking to finally becomes totally disgusted with the liberal and begins to think that the liberal has been sent to the oppressed to misdirect their struggle, to keep them confused so that the oppressor can continue to rule them. So whether the liberal likes it or not, he finds himself being lumped, by the oppressed, with the oppressor — of course he is part of that group. The final confrontation, when it does come about, will of course include the liberal on the side of the oppressor. Therefore if the oppressed really wants a revolutionary change, he has no choice but to rid himself of those liberals in his rank.

[1] *Rap Brown was fifth chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the 1960s. He was known for the phrase “violence is as American as cherry pie.”*

[2] *Huey Newton was a co-founder of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, a revolutionary Marxist-Leninist political party that started in Oakland, California.*

[3] *George Wallace served as the 45th governor of Alabama for four terms, he opposed desegregation and supported Jim Crow policies. He was known for the phrase “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.”*