

# The Drinking Gourd

Vision as Strategy

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During the Underground Railroad movement of the mid-nineteenth century, people escaping the enslaved South were instructed to follow the Drinking Gourd, the constellation in the northern sky which points to the North Star and Canada, out of the reach of the U.S. slave system.

It provided a point of reference that would always bring the travelers back on course no matter what detours the terrain and their pursuers made necessary. My argument in this paper is that the irrelevance of the Left in the recent U.S. election is the result of our having surrendered our claim to a political/moral North Star as an anchor point for the development of political strategy and the building of popular support.

Reorienting the movements for justice around a unifying vision takes on increased urgency in light of the voracious corporate global feeding frenzy that has accelerated since the end of the Cold War. It is not enough to engage in fragmented social movements striving for minor improvements in our people's lives. Our besieged societies and fragile resources require that we think in bolder, explicitly revolutionary terms. First we must declare that our agenda is to remove from power the self-appointed corporate rulers of the world. No justice, or even survival, is conceivable as long as they retain control. Secondly we must replace their rule with modes of governance that put human wellbeing and ecological sustainability at the center of our agenda.

The 2004 electoral spectacle has the potential, if we seize it, to be a golden defeat. Every victory is built on a foundation of past defeats. Some are good defeats, those that illuminate new insights or develop new leaders. The movement to save the lives of anarchist organizers Sacco and Vanzetti in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, for example, was a defeat that trained a generation of leaders for the CIO union organizing drives of the 1930s. There can also be bad "victories," such as the successful drive for women's suffrage, which derailed the radical struggle for full equality, as the single-minded focus on the right to vote meant sacrificing alliances across class and race with women who had other priorities. In Latin America, by contrast, the feminist movement retained a broader focus, and a more diverse coalition. It did not experience the demobilization and forty-year lag between two distinct "waves" of feminism, such as occurred in the United States.

Then there are golden defeats. These are defeats that can turn the tide. They cause us to confront our weaknesses and challenge our assumptions in ways that strengthen us strategically. They are usually difficult to recognize until much later. The recent elections could be a golden moment for the Left much as the defeat of the 1964 Barry Goldwater presidential campaign—which caused conservatives to begin quietly building the framework for a new populist movement—was for the Right.

Let us be clear. The elections represented a colossal defeat for the Left and not because of which party ended up (by whatever means) in control of the government. Elections are not, in any event, the main stage on which movements act out the struggle for grassroots power. It was a defeat, rather, because the conditions had not been put in place for using the elections to build independent radical power, no matter what choices we made. Elections, like negotiations, reflect (in whatever distorted form) the balance of forces on the ground. The 2004 ones throw into stark relief the inability of any Left project to gain enough traction to either effect the outcome, constrain the options of the winner, or effectively lay the groundwork for future battles. Forces on the U.S. Left engaged in a massive and near panicky campaign to defeat Bush without being able to project an audible radical voice through the noise. The most serious

impact of Left panic was the muting of anti-war demands in order to improve the chances of the pro-war challenger. The anti-war movement has been slow to regain its footing.

Many post-election analyses have consisted of a scramble to find silver linings. Others have taken the form of activists restating their pre-election positions with the added assertion that the result of the vote has proven them right. Some enraged activists have declared that “never again” must we fall for the discredited tactics that other misguided leaders insisted on. It’s a narrow discourse that demonstrates how small we have become accustomed to thinking. To shout “never again” about tactical choices is like crashing into a tree after skidding over ice in an automobile and concluding that we must never again slam on our brakes. Tactics that derail us one day may save us on a future occasion.

The Left was reduced to several dismal options. One was to try to ensure a victory for the Democrat while either glossing over or dissing his politics, or we could support third party initiatives whose failure to put race and class at the center of their programs have made them ill equipped to appeal to the constituencies that should be their base.

The contest between the major parties was never about real differences in policy. Put crudely, when there is consensus among the corporate ruling class, there is “bipartisanship” between the major parties. As a class these folk agree on matters of profit, trade and global supremacy. The parties are allowed to debate those economic issues that the ruling class is divided on (precious few at the moment) or issues that they don’t, as a class, care about (known as “social issues”).

Given the absence of a powerful Left, the liberals have no incentive to assume progressive postures. Indeed, the broad ruling class consensus on the direction of the empire has made it difficult for the Democrats to offer any packaging that looks very different from the Republican brand. This explains the increasingly personal nature of political campaigns, as candidates have to focus on each other’s character and morality rather than on substantive policy.

So how did we come to this? What has gone down since the last great wave of radical activism reshaped the political landscape? The following sketch highlights some of the factors that marked the slide of the Left from center stage to the margins.

### **The surrender of vision**

The mass movements that swept across the landscape between thirty and forty years ago were informed by a moral vision. The Civil Rights, Chicano, Native American, and pacifist struggles were explicitly grounded in spiritual and religious traditions. The Black Power, Women’s Liberation, Gay Liberation, Puerto Rican independence and a significant current in the Anti-War movement all embraced a utopian vision of the common welfare, whether expressed in socialist, communist, pan-Africanist, anarchist or eco-feminist terms. Despite the diversity of ideologies on the Left, there was an explicit acknowledgement that each of these struggles represented one facet of a larger entity known as “the Movement.”

Badly shaken by the popularity and growing momentum of this upsurge, the ruling class responded by unleashing a wave of repression (particularly brutal against movements of darker people) and incentives (offered to more privileged elements in or close to the movement). The deaths and imprisonment of revolutionary activists, the red baiting purges of organizations and communities, and the funding opportunities for those who sought more limited goals offered lessons that were hard to ignore.

In the wake of the crackdown, money was poured into poor communities to irrigate a bumper crop of

social service agencies. Suddenly a leader in a community of color was anyone who got to be the head of an agency. Gangs reasserted themselves as the vehicle through which young people sought expression for their anger and hunger for respect. The myriad forms of direct service generated by the mass movements (the Black Panther's Survival Programs, battered women's shelters and abortion clinics, free clinics, GI counseling centers, farm worker service centers, American Indian Movement schools, etc.) were displaced by the now heavily funded service agencies. Insurgency and service-- the two wings of movement activism-- stripped of their revolutionary vision, became forms of community management, not transformation. Movements (now called "communities") lobbied for funds to meet the needs of their own constituents—often in competition with each other.

Repression amplified the co-optive power of the agencies, many of which were themselves the fulfillment of demands from grassroots struggles now too weakened to hold them accountable. Movement service projects were mainly organizing tools, without sufficient resources to materially impact the tremendous needs they purported to address.

What emerged from the wreckage of the radical mass movements was a panorama of fragmented mini-movements, administered by "non-profit corporations" with only an ameliorative vision. In place of a unified movement vision was a patchwork of interest groups in shifting and temporary alliances with each other and with their common foes. Even remnants of the Left that maintained their independence tended to view themselves as representing a specific issue or sectoral "movement" rather than as a current within a larger movement river. The inevitable betrayals which this engendered has contributed even more to the fragmentation of Left vision. As new generations have taken up the struggle, the fragmentation has remained a major obstacle to overcome. There is probably more, and in many ways, smarter, organizing taking place today than at the crest of the mass movements of the 1960s and 70s. Without a unifying social vision, however, it amounts to an irritant, but not a threat to those who grip the levers of power.

As a movement we surrendered a unified vision just as the Right was rallying around theirs. Without reference to a North Star we can wander indefinitely, living off the land, irritating, but not frightening the people who control the wealth. It is certainly uncomfortable to threaten ruthless and powerful people. But the liberal edifice that was built on the ashes of the Left has served its pacifying function, and the ruling class has less need to tolerate irritants. Timidity is no guarantee of safety.

### **In search of the North Star**

Can a radical collective vision be of practical help in the daily work of political struggle? I can describe how it works for me. My political and personal choices are guided by a personal mission statement. Simply put, it is to help bring about a world whose operative principle is love, not greed. This means that my choices are made in reference to that North Star principle. My participation in organizations, my family, my community, and other communities must be expressions of that vision. The need to walk our talk is particularly relevant here. If we hope to organize around the idea that a better, non-exploitative world is possible we must embody it: it is difficult to convince people who have not seen such relationships in their own lives.

Articulating a bold radical vision can resonate with many people who simply haven't heard it stated in the public square. The radical idea that "nobody gets seconds until everyone has had firsts" is not an alien concept. Many radical innovations and demands (civil rights, eco-agriculture, holistic medicine, women's equality) have become part of accepted common sense. Elite leaders use the language and values popularized by the Left—human rights, equality, democratic control, even feminism—to legitimize their policies. It is a tacit admission that the moral self-image of our people is out of step with the

objectives of our rulers. Applying a radical moral stance to all public choices amplifies that dissonance.

The light of the North Star can illuminate any arena of struggle. Take struggles over education. The liberal paradigm suggests that “we all want the same thing--what’s best for our children—we just disagree about how to achieve that.” But it’s not true. Education has always been contested territory between those seeking to create an educated and empowered populace and those wanting obedient cogs for the machinery of capitalism. A vision-based strategy would articulate a set of principles that starkly contrasts these contesting sets of values, insisting on young people as a worthy constituency rather than an “investment.”

The clarifying concept is that we are not all in it together. Is the Death Penalty simply ineffective in deterring crime or is it in fact effectively serving an agenda of social control? Are we all united in trying to control the predatory youth of the streets or are they instead our precious children who must be protected from predatory politicians and supported to be the leaders they were meant to be? Is our government just clumsily bungling the effort to foster democracy around the world or is it actively pursuing global domination? In every arena radical social principles would place the nurturance and protection of human beings and the environment we depend on at the center of the human mission. In every case they would be demonstrably incompatible with the capitalist imperative of profit at any cost.

Mass movements cannot be wished into being—or even predicted. However they will emerge. Preparing the ground for them and popularizing the vision they might seize upon can help ensure that when they do come, they will advance the struggle. This is accomplished by building that vision into the organizing that happens in the ebb times between upsurges. Transformative mass movements provide an opportunity for people to love profoundly in ways that are not sanctioned by shallow capitalist commercial culture—love that can extend beyond a close personal network to a broader humanity. The Religious Right has built on this insight even if their vision is deformed by white racial fear and homophobia.

One does not put ones life on the line to win additional funding for a housing project. People will, however, do so for a vision of dignity and well being for all, which at a given moment may well be expressed in the struggle to fund a housing project. A vision-based movement can create the conditions for powerful collective action, in contrast to the liberal wisdom that we must go trotting after the Right since they, after all, have a vision!

### **A New World in the Making**

To guide ourselves across an unknown territory requires a map that encompasses both our starting point and our destination. Achieving our transformative goals calls for struggle against a global system. To get concrete, let’s start with the basics of a global vision. Under the corporate paradigm, profit is sacred. International trade agreements are explicit in their promotion of profits as their central purpose while protections of human rights, labor rights, or the environment are relegated to so-called “side agreements.” A revolutionary vision turns that on its head.

At the heart of what I’ll call a “World Social Compact” is the idea that human needs and happiness belong at the sacred center of social organization. One expression of this would be to say that the resources of the Earth are the common heritage of humanity and that grassroots democratic participation is the appropriate mechanism for making decisions about their use and stewardship. We can even hold these truths to be self-evident.

Water, for example, is necessary for everyone. It’s uses for drinking, washing, agriculture, industry, and

energy impact differently on different groups but affects us all. Negotiating its allocation may be complex but under Social Compact principles we start from the premise that it is a collective treasure not a private asset.

In each area of social concern dialog can be opened that will start with the people most affected, until the compact encompasses health care, housing, food accessibility, agriculture, domestic rights, criminality, etc. These discussions can take place through the regional and global Social Forums that have emerged in recent years as well as through the internet and other mass and local channels. In developing the South African Freedom Charter, the African National Congress sent envoys to collect input from throughout their country's civil society. In the U.S., the Black Panther Party attempted the same by means of a series of Revolutionary Peoples Constitutional Conventions. Today the ability to consult with large sectors of world society is greater than it ever has been.

What is important is that the Compact comes to express, at its heart, the consensus of world civil society on the essential issues of world governance. It is the alternative to the ("There Is No Alternative") Corporate Compact, which, though not explicitly written, is enshrined in the international financial institutions, trade agreements, and corporate laws that govern global affairs. It would challenge the legitimacy of the anti-democratic and self-serving Corporate Compact as well as the reactionary theocratic currents that have emerged from the rubble of imperial onslaught and socialist disarray.

A global social vision can frame struggles ranging from independence movements contending for state power to neighborhood battles over bank policies or air quality, educational reform, or police brutality. Movements that disrupt the functioning of the Empire through civil disobedience, strikes, sabotage, boycotts, or other tactics can be framed as expressions of a world-wide struggle to enforce the legitimate Social Compact and displace the illegitimate and oppressive Corporate Compact; a struggle to establish the new world. Social organizations, municipal governments and political parties can be held accountable to its principles. An international peace initiative for Iraq, based on the Compact, would make it explicit that our objections to that war are not limited to this one intervention, but rather to its violation of globally accepted values. The elite can attack the Social Compact as unrealistic, claim that it masks sinister intent, or pretend to be its true champions, but they would have a hard time denying its legitimate mass appeal.

Attacking other countries, raiding Social Security, imprisoning non-violent offenders, gutting international environmental and disarmament treaties, and so forth, are reasonable and necessary policies—from the standpoint of the Corporate Compact. A world Social Compact would produce a radically different menu of options!

Revolutionary practice is not simply a matter of attacking what exists and declaring that another world is possible (been there, done that). It rather encompasses the systematic creation of the world we desire. As representatives of that future we must disrupt policies and practices that violate its principles; create alternative structures of governance and social life that manifest them; defend these alternative spaces; and tell the story of these actions and their significance.

In the national liberation wars of the mid twentieth century the concept of liberated territory held a honored place. Where geography allowed (Viet Nam, Eritrea, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique), the development of participatory economic and political structures was practical proof that alternative ways of doing things were possible. The story-telling dimension of this strategy was key to popularizing these revolutions: it demonstrated both that the humble can seize power from the mighty, and that this can lead to a better life. This is what the Vietnamese activists in the anti-U.S. war meant when they insisted that their struggle was 80% political and only 20% military.

Under the different conditions facing our movements, “liberated territory” can consist of the alternative services, institutions and media that we create, (or support,) which embody the vision of a new world. The struggle to protect Pacifica Radio in the U.S. against corporate subversion is an example of defense of liberated territory. A revolutionary social vision, can help link these alternative spaces through the concept of liberated territory to ongoing grassroots struggles.

The embrace of a humanist revolutionary vision can help re-weave the strands of our fragmented movement and restore radicalism to its rightful place at the center of the political stage. A clear moral alternative to reactionary cynicism, boldly stated, is the foundation from which we can launch challenges around specific policies and grievances. It is only when there is a radical threat that the liberal “center” shows any signs of progressive life, to thus prove to the elite that they are the best equipped to derail our aspirations.

We are not the first to face the challenge of overthrowing an empire. The one that we confront is unprecedented in its reach but is not omnipotent. It wields the worlds mightiest arsenal but with self-defeating arrogance. It commands the world’s most powerful propaganda machine, but its very reliance on illusion creates vulnerabilities. Illusion is best defeated by open and direct challenge.

Strategy is what connects our conditions of daily struggle to the vision of what we are fighting for. We in the United States have a responsibility not only to ourselves but to our sisters and brothers across the world to reinstate that vision and reconnect that thread. If that can result from our sad performance in the comi-tragedy of the last elections, then we will yet claim this as a golden moment in movement history.

Political weakness should not be confused with a lack of assets: we can operate with relative, if uneven, openness; we have mobilized constituencies and experienced organizers; we have a wealth of movement media and institutions; we have a population deeply influenced by movement values. We have no lack of potential allies—witness the movements against neoliberalism sweeping across Latin America. What we need is to remember the Drinking Gourd. With a visionary reference point we can re-set our eyes upon the prize. In a time of reaction such as we are living, it is more important than ever to be bold, unapologetic and visionary as we direct our efforts, not to a scramble for survival, but to a struggle for freedom.

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