

REVOLUTIONARY SUICIDE

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Writers and Readers 

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As for the future, the young streetcorner man has a fairly good picture of it. . . . It is a future in which everything is uncertain except the ultimate destruction of his hopes and the eventual realization of his fears. The most he can reasonably look forward to is that these things do not come too soon.

ELLIOT LIEBOW, *Tally's Corner*

The Brothers on the Block

Nothing we had done on the campus related to the conditions of the brothers on the block. Nothing helped them to gain a better understanding of those conditions. As I saw so many of my friends on their way to becoming dropouts from the human family, I wanted to see something good happen to them. They were getting married and beginning to have babies. Ahead of them were the round of jobs and bills my father had gone through. It was almost like being on an urban plantation, a kind of modern-day sharecropping. You worked hard, brought in your crop, and you were always in debt to the landholder. The Oakland brothers worked hard and brought in a salary, but they were still in perpetual debt to the stores that provided them with the necessities of life. The Soul Students Advisory Council, RAM, the Muslims, and the Afro-American Association were not offering these brothers and sisters anything concrete, much less a program to help them move against the system. It was agonizing to watch the brothers move down those dead-end streets.

The street brothers were important to me, and I could not turn away from the life I shared with them. There was in them an intransigent

Revolutionary Suicide

hostility toward all those sources of authority that had such a dehumanizing effect on the community. In school the "system" was the teacher, but on the block the system was everything that was not a positive part of the community. My comrades on the block continued to resist that authority, and I felt that I could not let college pull me away, no matter how attractive education was. These brothers had the sense of harmony and communion I needed to maintain that part of myself not totally crushed by the schools and other authorities.

At Oakland City College many of the Blacks were working as hard as they could to become a part of the system; I could not relate to their goals. These brothers still believed in making it in the world. They talked about it loud and long, expressing the desire for families, houses, cars, and so forth. Even at that time I did not want those things. I wanted freedom, and possessions meant nonfreedom to me.

It was a complex scene. Sonny Man was involved only with the brothers who did not go to college. His friends who had gone to college were estranged from him. Some of his closest "running partners" in high school moved away from him after they went to college and he stayed on the block. Now that I was also in college, I did not want to move away from the street brothers, as Walter's friends had done. That is why when I was not studying or in class, I was down on the block with the righteous brothers.

I think one of the reasons why I, in particular, had so many fights was because I weighed only about 130 pounds. You got a lot of prestige from being able to fight the hefty guys, who first gained their reputation by downing lightweights like me. There were not many others as small as I was, who looked the big ones in the eye. I had an added disadvantage: all the way through school my baby face made people think I was younger than I was. I resented being treated like a baby, and to show them I was as "bad" as they were, I would fight at the drop of a hat. As soon as I saw a dude rearing up, I struck him before he struck me, but only when there was going to be a fight anyway. I struck first, because a fight usually did not last very long, and nine times out of ten the winner was the one who got in the first lick.

Sonny Man was very good with his hands, and he taught me how to hit hard in spite of my light weight. Most of the other guys really did not know how to hit, so I always fired first and knocked them out, or at least knocked out a tooth or closed up an eye. Finally, I got a repu-

The Brothers on the Block

tation as a bad dude, and I did not have to fight as much. Every once in a while, however, one of the "tush hogs"—our name for a bad, tough street fighter on the block—would challenge me. After the fight we usually became really good friends, because he would realize that my features were deceiving.

Sometimes I got into teaching on the block, reciting poetry or starting dialogues about philosophical ideas. I talked to the brothers about things that Hume, Peirce, Locke, or William James had said, and in that way I retained ideas and sometimes resolved problems in my own mind.

These thinkers had used the scientific method by applying their ideas to particular formulas. They excluded those things that did not fit into the formulas. I explained this to the brothers, and we talked about such questions as the existence of God, self-determination, and free will. I would ask them, "Do you have free will?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe in God?"

"Yes."

"Is your God all-powerful?"

"Yes."

"Is he omniscient?"

"Yes."

Therefore, I told them, their all-powerful God knew everything before it happened. If so, I would ask, "How can you say that you have free will when He knows what you are going to do before you do it? You are predestined to do what you do. If not, then your God has lied or He has made a mistake, and you have already said that your God cannot lie or make a mistake." These dilemmas led to arguments that lasted all day, over a fifth of wine; they cleared my thinking, even though I sometimes went to school drunk.

Some of the brothers thought I was a pedant, putting them down. Fights started occasionally over an imaginary insult, especially with newcomers to the group, who did not know me or my relationship to the brothers. I liked talking about ideas, and street brothers were the only ones I wanted to be with at the time, because I liked the things we were doing—standing on the corner, meeting people, watching the women, and relating to those who struggled for survival on the block.

Rap sessions like this took place all over, in cars parked in front of

the liquor store on Sacramento Street near Ashby in Berkeley, outside places where parties were being held, and sometimes inside.

I told them about the allegory of the cave from Plato's *Republic*, and they enjoyed it. We called it the story of the cave prisoners. In the cave allegory Plato describes the plight of the prisoners in a cave who receive their impression of the outside world from shadows projected on the wall by the fire at the mouth of the cave. One of the prisoners is freed and gets a view of the outside world—objective reality. He returns to the cave to tell the others that the scenes they observe on the wall are not reality but only a distorted reflection of it. The prisoners tell the liberated man he is crazy, and he cannot convince them. He tries to take one of them outside, but the prisoner is terrified at the thought of facing something new. When he is dragged outside the cave anyway, he sees the sun and is blinded by it. The allegory seemed very appropriate to our own situation in society. We, too, were in prison and needed to be liberated in order to distinguish between truth and the falsehoods imposed on us.

The dudes on the block still thought I was "out of sight" and sometimes just plain crazy. One of the reasons for the "crazy" label was because I always did the unexpected, a valuable practice in keeping your adversary off balance. If I knew that some guys wanted to jump on me, I would go where they hung out—just show up by myself and challenge them right on the spot. Many times they were too shocked to do much about it.

This street philosophy also crept into my academic work. The brothers were hostile toward the police because they were always brutalizing and intimidating us. So I began to study police science in school to learn more about the thinking of police and how to outmaneuver them. I learned how they conducted investigations. I also began to study law. My mother had always urged me to do this, even in high school, because I was good at arguing points, and she thought I would be a good lawyer. I studied law, first at City College and later at San Francisco Law School in San Francisco, not so much to become a lawyer but to be able to deal with the police. I was doing the unexpected.

One day, in 1965, as I was walking across Grove Street to the college, I saw a white man sideswipe a brother's car. A motorcycle cop came up, and the two drivers entered into an argument over who was

The Brothers on the Block

wrong. The cop was about to write a ticket for the brother. I had been standing there with the other people watching this incident, and I walked over to the white man and told him that he was wrong. Angry at this, the cop told me to be quiet because I was not involved. I came back at him and told him that I *was* involved because I knew how he treated people on the block. The fact that he had a gun, I said, did not give him the right to intimidate me. The gun did not mean anything, because the people were going to get guns of their own and take away the guns of the police. I ran these things down to him in front of all the people. That was the first time I stood a policeman down.