

FROM “GUY” TO “COMRADICAL LOVE”

Community and Inquiry in the life of a campus activist



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Soc 155B – Protest, Politics and Change: Social Movements

March 3, 2010

"Capitalism, blast it with piss."

Guy Rossman, the resident campus long-haired radical, balances on a chair in his suite, chomping on a vegan meal of beans and rice. "Can you make sure to quote that in your paper?"

Guy is a singular person on campus. He single-handedly kept SDS together as a campus club, and by force of charisma built it into a thriving community. Leading by example, he is perhaps universally well-regarded as a kind, inquisitive, amiable (and sometimes inspirational) man. Guy has a penchant for "lifestyle activism" or "cultural/community activism". I was interviewing Guy to learn more both from curiosity over this sort of activism, and from his activist life trajectory - did it match the analysis of typical activist awakenings by Douglas McAdam and others?

Guy, of course, did not spring out of the womb fully-bearded and quoting Gramsci. Growing up in a suburban Minnesota household, Guy showed little outwards signs of incipient radicalism, preferring to spend his time learning how to program, or playing trombone in the marching band.

And yet!

Guy's parents were both blue-collar unionized bus drivers. His father, especially, worked his way up to be union president; his mother met him through the union. This is a straightforward example of what Douglas McAdam, in *Freedom Summer*, terms attitudinal affinity: one prerequisite to joining a movement, he posits, is an ideological, philosophical, gut-level agreement (or affinity) for the movement's goals and narrative. A familiarity with the realities of union politics and the viewpoint of the workers movement certainly paved the way for his eventual flowering as an activist.

Even all through high school, however, Guy was no activist. He identified as a gamer, or a Minnesotan. Even his trademark "Jesus Hair" was still yet to be seen – it's difficult to visually reconcile the young Guy seen on facebook (where he lists his name as "Comradical Love") and the Guy in front of me.

As his senior year of high school was winding down, however, things were changing for Guy. He started a phase of what he termed "extreme skepticism", even nihilism, towards life. It didn't help

that he broke up with his girlfriend soon after. An English teacher taught him about the idea of analytical literary lenses. "Feminism! Marxism!" Guy finally had words to help describe how he thought of things at a gut-level.

Then Guy hit Brandeis, and things started changing. In his freshman year, Guy still didn't think of himself as an activist. He cultivated an interest in philosophy. His girlfriend became a vegan. Her explanations as to why convinced Guy to embrace veganism himself.

This was a key moment for our intrepid hero. His relationship with his girlfriend, along with her ability to be convincing and his existing open mind, combined to induce Guy to join the vegan movement. This factor, his existing relationship with his girlfriend, is what McAdams calls "social integration", the personal relationships and organizational ties to movement actors that helps draw in people to join a movement. Guy, a man in a philosophical frame of mind, was attitudinally at a point where he was open to persuasion.

In his sophomore year, Guy took a pair of classes taught by Gordie Fellman - War and Possibilities of Peace, and Social Class and Social Change. Guy identifies this as a turning point for him. "[The class] attuned me to structural arguments about why things are so fucked up, which before that I was already aware of the vague outlines of". Guy was being exposed to new ideologies, and new worldviews. He had enough of a theoretical foundation to express and support his beliefs that he could build a solid superstructure of action. In other words, Guy's long skepticism-fueled search had led him to the path of the radical.

In the fall semester of his sophomore year, Guy, not content to merely switch to veganism, founded the Brandeis Veg*n (Vegan/Vegetarian) club. Guy would not have identified as an activist, but clearly something was shifting within him.

The Veg*n club may have been the first club that Guy joined (by founding it), but it wouldn't be the last. A fellow sophomore, Christine had been hanging out at his suite for a while (she had a thing for his roommate), and she invited him to come to a meeting of Students for a Democratic Society. Guy was

intrigued - SDS is the self-styled radical group on campus. Before long, he was helping organize the Northeastern convention (held in Boston).

Guy really likes conferences. "Identifying with a radical political position is isolating. Going to an explicitly radical event reinforces a sense of community and solidarity that Brandeis likely lacks." The Boston convention broadened his grasp on issues, like the prison-industrial conference or patriarchy, as well as teaching him organizing skills. This conference gave him the training in organizing and sense of efficacy to call himself an activist. "Because you're really articulating and reflecting on your ideas it seems like, again, everything is accomplishable. Simply, we all need to do XYZ and we know how to do XYZ now."

Guy was undergoing the process of social integration again: meeting and connecting with all the cool people at SDS that thought like he did. However, as in most of his life, Guy placed an emphasis not on meeting new people as much as having new knowledge, of having intellectual vistas opened and learning empowering techniques. We've already seen instances of this pattern previously in Guy's retelling of his life, and it'll return again and again.

McAdam's model of biographical availability, attitudinal affinity, and social integration as the factors leading to participation in movement activity does not do Guy justice. Yes, we can speak of his now-emerging worldview as an exercise in shaping his attitude, which later happen to have affinity with radical politics. However, this sterilized view obscures, rather than illuminates the story. McAdam's model might accurately say that his radical beliefs made him more likely to join radical organizations or perform radical actions, but this observation seems rather trite. The real story lies in the power of these ideas, their content, and how Guy was transformed as he came into contact with them.

Of the available literature, the best explanation of this phenomenon might be found in Kristin Luker's *World Views of Activists*, if only because Luker's paper is concerned with the content and implications of ideas. Using Luker's frame, as Guy was exposed to new articulated worldviews (Marxism, feminism, anti-racism), his personal worldview became more explicit and understandable to

himself. As Guy felt more confident in his beliefs (and those beliefs were extended and strengthened by intellectual inquiry), these values forced him to try and create the world he'd like to live in.

Another interesting way to think of this process is drawing upon Snow et. al's groundbreaking work, *Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation*. Guy's intellectual development can be charted as a series of introductions to connected packages of frames. His undefined passions therefore drew structure from these new frames.

Emerging from this Boston conference, and a national SDS conference in DC, Guy threw himself into activism. Over his summers, he worked for organizations like the Sierra Club, Human Rights Campaign, and Greenpeace, or (one summer) worked at a job creating solar panels. On campus, he was involved in different campaigns and organizational initiatives: an SDS radio show, Radical Film Nights, a campus coalition to change the dining situation, a commemoration of the 5th year of the Iraq war, a coalition of students opposing the planned budget cuts, a radical 'zine, and more.

Interestingly, in contradiction to Drake Bennett's, "The Upside of 'Down With'", Guy, when asked if activism makes him feel happy, answers with a straightforward "No! ... I want to create a world I want to live in," and "it's relatively irrelevant whether I'm happy doing it. I am trying to carve a space for others to engage in lives of fulfillment of dignity and happiness. There's not enough right now". Then, what drives this man? What processes nourish him?

To more fully understand Guy, it is instructive to observe his actions. When pressed about actions he has pride in, he hesitates. "Answering this question would put a focus on me as an individual and not on what we've achieved together." Pushed, he cites how SDS is a sort of community unto itself, which has collective growth and conscious efforts to discuss and remove hierarchy and chauvinism from its ranks. Later on, he mentions how he brought some students down with him to Pittsburgh to protest the G20. It was his first time going to a self-styled anarchist protest, and the experience of "going to an explicitly radical anarchist event was very communal feeling." Pausing, he continues: "I was able to show people who weren't sure of their political beliefs a mass demonstration that was empowering."

This theme of social ties leading to action is worth understanding more deeply.

While, in the interview so far, Guy has made a point of citing intellectual events as drivers of his political *awakening*, his current state of political *action* points to societal and communal motivations as most significant. To use McAdam's terminology, Guy now places a large weight on social integration as factor in maintaining his identity, rather than his previous stress on attitudinal affinity or (and we're drawing on Luker and Snow here) foundational worldview or frame collection.

In my time during the interview so far, Guy has offered me food when I mentioned offhand that I was hungry, offered to play me in Billiards, and cheerfully loaned out his stove-top and kitchenware to an acquaintance. He speaks of reforming the University to “prefigure society in general”, of how SDS has “created community in a place with no community”.

Guy has some fond memories of his time at Brandeis, such as the “active community creation” of his Junior year, (there was a phenomenon of around 30 or more activist students becoming friends, having bonfires, etc): “It was great, a sense of a community growing and coming together... I think it was really cool and it could still be cool. I don't know if anyone will make it happen again.” He remembers the protest against the war fondly - “It was really cool, because it got people who weren't visibly active, to be out. To be aware and visible in this community, and to be acting together. It probably didn't do fucking anything against the war, though.”

Guy is a senior, soon to graduate into what he assures himself will be a life of activism. The interview must end, and he cheerfully bikes towards his job at the campus coffeehouse (he is an hour late). The loner, intellectually curious freshman with a Mohawk has matured into the Jesus-faced first citizen of an activist second family. No sterile, simplified model can fully explain or account for the intricacies of this dynamic student, he who works every day to create the world he wants to live in, though it doesn't make him any happier to do so. This is the personal obligation of a man opposed to the very idea of duty.