

Martin Levy

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Joe Berke and the 1967 Congress on the Dialectics of Liberation

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To Julian and Alex, in the hope that they will be 'true professionals.'

Contents

Introduction.....	9
1. The Joe Berke Experience.....	17
2. Kingsley Hall.....	43
3. Pulling the Congress Together.....	55
4. Welcome to the Roundhouse	77
5. 'Call me Mr Carmichael.'	107
6. A 'Self-Governing' Congress.....	121
7. Stokely! Stokely!.....	165
8. Doctor Dog	199
9. And then there was Marcuse	235
10. Too Much.....	253
11. The Infernal Nexus	267
Appendix.....	271
Notes	273
Bibliography.....	297
Index.....	313

Introduction

‘We were eaten up by repressed violence and we were soured by the constant terror of inconceivable violence being visited on ourselves and the rest of man.’

— Jeff Nuttall.¹

Where did it come from this Congress on the Dialectics of Liberation, this anti-congress, this be-in, this being-there, which stuck two fingers up at capitalism and the West and denounced the educational, military and industrial elites as shams, time-servers and liars? It certainly didn’t come from the universities. If one can say anything definitive about the origin of the Congress, it is that its motivation was firmly, resolutely, unapologetically non-academic. The organisers of the Congress knew only too well—had they not been through higher education themselves?—that the universities were a part of the problem that they convened the congress to do something about: violence in all its forms, which is to say, the ‘violence called love’ and the boot on the solar plexus.² They hated higher education, hated what it had become: a bureaucratised system of mass lectures and ignorant status-seeking. If the Congress was to succeed in its aim of ‘demystifying violence and the social systems from which it emanates and to explore new forms of social action’,³ then higher education would have to be ‘liberated’ from administrative and intellectual bondage, so that new forms of education could be born: educations as they could be.

Paul Goodman got there first, as he often did during the early ‘60s, building on previous writers to be sure, but turning the rising criticism of higher education into a philosophy of startling common sense and integrity. *The Community of Scholars* of 1962 spread the bad news of bureaucracy-driven disempowerment: passive and contract-grubbing faculties, programmed ignorance and sclerosis, ‘company men and time-servers among the teachers, grade-seekers and time-servers among the students’.⁴

The universities had been taken over by administrators, he stated. ‘How did they get in?’⁵ What did they want, these apparatchiks, these interlopers, with their statistics, their endless committee meetings, their pecking orders, their notions of good order and

efficiency? They had no educational value. They had burdened the universities with a pomp and a size that were irrelevant to their needs and standardised much that was naturally youthful and spontaneous. 'Like the American economy itself, the system of universities is really a machine for its own sake, to run and produce brand goods for selling and buying. Utility is incidental. More revolutionary products like free spirit, individual identity, vocation, community, the advancement of humanity are rather disapproved. But frictionless and rapid running is esteemed; and by clever co-ordination of the moving parts, and lots of money as lubrication, it can be maximized.'⁶

Goodman counselled secession. Bands of scholars should abandon the colossi, rid themselves entirely of the '*external control, administration, bureaucratic machinery, and other excrescences that have swamped our communities of scholars.*'⁷ Such a course was difficult, he conceded. But it had been done many times before, most famously with the founding of Black Mountain College in North Carolina in 1933, which was 'really the first Beat school'.⁸ It should be done again, with renewed perseverance.

But the main point he wanted to get across was that young people were not flourishing in the universities. They were not growing up. For that to happen, education would have to function on its own terms, the students would have to associate with teachers in 'traditional', non-managerial ways and 'according to their existing interest.'⁹ In other words, the young people had to understand that education was '*about something*', that it had joys, meanings, commitments that transcended the merely utilitarian – rather than being 'a step on the ladder when there isn't much at the top,'¹⁰ except for useless corporate-type jobs (even when they're available) and a dishonourable retirement.

The organisers of the Congress anchored their revolutionary politics to Goodman's reasonable enthusiasm, adding a chunk of anti-psychiatry here, a pinch of Hermann Hesse there – a brotherhood, an illuminati – and a slice of Alexander Trocchi, his notion of the 'spontaneous university' a particular influence.

The main organiser of the Congress on the Dialectics of Liberation was not R.D. Laing, as many people think, but Joe Berke, a

psychiatrist and poet from Newark, New Jersey, and one of Laing's first American supporters. Laing had other fish to fry, though his contribution was, of course, essential.

During 1965, while Berke was helping to set up the Goodman-Marx- and Veblen-inspired Free University of New York (FUNY), Laing helped create the small anti-psychiatric community of Kingsley Hall, one of the first and certainly the most influential of a string of similar asylums. And it was only during the spring of 1966, following Berke's settlement at the Hall in the autumn of 1965, that Laing finally agreed to put his considerable influence behind the ambitious project.

As for the understanding of violence that underpinned both the congress and the asylum, that differed markedly from traditional psychiatric thinking, being deeper and far broader in its implications. In one sense, it looked back to Nietzsche's 'transvaluation of all values', though it wasn't Christianity it had in its sights (Laing himself was profoundly influenced by Christianity) so much as the 'technological' society, which it stigmatised as barbarous, not only in its treatment of the so-called mentally ill (through practices like involuntary confinement and lobotomy), but in its instrumentalisation of all human relationships.

According to Laing, violence wasn't 'out there'; it was 'in us', though often disguised as its opposite. As he put it in a lecture, he first gave in 1964, and republished afterwards in *The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise*:

From the moment of birth, when the stone-age baby confronts the twentieth-century mother, the baby is subjected to forces of outrageous violence, called love, as its mother and father have been, and their parents and their parents before them. These forces are mainly concerned with destroying most of its potentialities. This enterprise is on the whole successful. By the time the new human being is fifteen or so, we are left with a being like ourselves. A half-crazed creature, more or less adjusted to a mad world.¹¹

This, Laing said, was what society considered 'normality'.

The Congress opened at the Roundhouse, on north London's Chalk Farm Road, on the morning of July 15 with a lecture by Laing and closed on the 29th with a happening by Carolee Schneemann and a performance by the British pop group, The Social Deviants.

Gregory Bateson spoke apocalyptically about humanity's overweening 'purposive consciousness'; Stokely Carmichael grew furious about racism and imperialism; Thich Nhat Hahn opined softly about Vietnam; Paul Goodman chatted about decentralising the 'technical-managerial' society; Herbert Marcuse talked ponderously about liberation from affluence; and Allen Ginsberg chanted and clattered finger cymbals. 'The Provos were there from Amsterdam. There were students from West Berlin, political activists from Norway and Sweden as well as a large contingent from the New Experimental College, Thy, Denmark. There were representatives from the West Indies, Africa, France, Canada, America, Holland, India, Nigeria and Cuba', remarks the poet Susan Sherman, one of Berke's American friends, who covered the congress for *Ikon* magazine.²

There were question-and-answer sessions, numerous seminars, and films and poetry readings in the evenings. Thus, formal presentations were only one feature of the Congress. Also important were the activities and responses of the 'ordinary' participants, including the two-hundred-and-fifty or so registrants or 'gammas' in the organisers' slightly patronising parlance. For many of these mostly young people, the Congress was a turning point, not a gig on the radical consciousness-raising circuit, but a point zero from which a new kind of politics was able to emerge. For some it was Black Power, for others it was the women's or gay liberation movements. It was also amongst the best fun they had ever had. The Congress changed them and they changed the culture around them.

Academic conferences were two-a-penny in 1967, as they still are today, often trivial diversions for the educationally moribund: the single-issue squad, those 'in the know', postgraduates with a dissertation or a thesis to punt, mid-season professionals in need of a career-lift, jargon demons, technological scrap metal merchants — one eye on a job in IT, the other on a career in the 'helping professions'. But the congress transcended these trivial denotations. It joined students with autodidacts, workers by hand with workers by brain, the young with the middle-aged and the occasionally old, dropouts with activists, and Gandhian proponents of non-violence

with the apostles of the Molotov cocktail. To a large extent, it was self-governing. Entrance was by ticket or subscription.

One of the Congress's most provocative outgrowths was the Antiuniversity, of Rivington Street, Shoreditch. Opened in February 1968 in rooms rented from the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, it too countered the 'intellectual bankruptcy and spiritual emptiness' of the modern university, with the aim of promoting a 'position of social integrity and commitment'.¹³ It offered classes by, amongst others, Barry Flanagan (Sculpture), Roy Battersby (Documentary Films), Juliet Mitchell (Women and Revolution), Cornelius Cardew (Experimental Music), David Cooper (Psychology and Politics), R.D. Laing (Psychology and Religion), David Mercer (Drama), Obi Egbuna (Black Power) and Francis Huxley (Dragons). Berke himself led a course on 'anti-institutions'. 'How can we discuss how we can discuss what we want to discuss?'¹⁴ ('Maybe we don't need to discuss it', was one wag's timely response, thus reminding us that humour was also a part of the Antiuniversity experience.)

Admittedly, this book is a hybrid. It is neither a biography nor a history but a combination of the two, as that seemed the best way of bringing Joe Berke's contribution to the planning of the Congress into focus, while at the same time describing what went on there in the detail that the reader will expect. Inevitably this gives the book a now-you-see-Berke now-you don't quality, but it is justified on the grounds that the speeches (and the ancillary events, including the Q&As) are by and large what the Congress was about. Berke's contribution to the congress as it unfolded in July, like that of his fellow organiser Leon Redler, was interesting. But it was not *that* interesting.

Although Berke wrote about the early part of his life in the United States and his first years in England,¹⁵ he never wrote an autobiography proper—even though he would have been more than justified to have done so. Not only was he a pioneer in the non-medical treatment of severe mental illness, but rather like other American ex-pats, people like Joe Boyd, Susan Zeiger, aka 'Suzy Creamcheese', Bill Levy, Jack Henry Moore, Jim Haynes and Steve

Abrams, he was an outsize figure in his adopted country's counter-culture more generally.¹⁶

Of course, the Congress has already been written about – ad nauseum some would say in books and popular and academic articles. But I think I'm right in saying that this is one of the first books to make use of the extraordinary Joseph Berke Archive at the Mulberry Bush, in Gloucestershire, and certainly *the first* to make use of the Joseph Berke Papers now in the Wellcome Collection, in London. The Mulberry Bush contains what might be described as the official (or anti-official) side of Berke's professional (or anti-professional) interests. It includes, for instance, his Research Committee on Cannabis and his Arbours Association papers, his correspondence related to *Fire* magazine, large parts of his magazine collection, and drafts of his various books. But most importantly, for my purposes, it contains his correspondence with the people who attended the Congress and the audio recordings of all the major speeches that were delivered there. It was a shock and a pleasure to discover how far these differ from the collection printed in Penguin's *The Dialectics of Liberation*, of 1968. Yet this slim book is the source of almost all of the academic commentary on the subject.

When I accessed the Joseph Berke Papers, they were still in Joe Berke's possession. He kept them in a garage close to his house in Highgate. Most were damp and some were covered in mould. It was a delicate operation removing what I judged to be the most important into his house for safer keeping. I remember my excitement opening one file and then another and finding personal letters from Allen Ginsberg, Alex Trocchi, Michael Hollingshead, Simon Vinkenoog, Carolee Schneemann and Julian Beck as well as, of course, R.D. Laing, Leon Redler and David Cooper. It was also a joy. Hopefully one day, the Wellcome Collection will publish the complete collection online so that they are accessible to scholars everywhere.

I didn't write this book as an analytical account of the planning and execution of the Congress. I wrote it, or rather I wrote chapters 4-9, as a narrative account of what happened there. To a large extent, it unfolds in chronological order. I was interested, as I'm sure most of the book's reader will be, in what was said at the

Congress rather than in what I happen to think about what was said. However, the book does contain some commentary and some corrections of fact in the notes at the back of the book where warranted.

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Lots of people contributed to this book. Some helped with research, some with advice, while others simply told me their stories. I am grateful to all of them. But two figures stand out: the late Joe Berke and Peter Davis. Without Joe, the book would not have been written. Not only did he put up with my endless emails, but he allowed me to rummage through his extensive archive. I am pleased that Joe's wishes were followed and that the part not in the wonderful Planned Environment Therapy Trust (PETT) Archives at The Mulberry Bush in Toddington, Gloucestershire, is in the Wellcome Collection, London, where it awaits cataloguing.

Peter, thank goodness, filmed part of the Congress. He is thus an actor *and* an accomplice, without whom I would have had neither the *Anatomy of Violence* documentary nor his extensive collection of outtakes to work with. His friendship during the writing of this book has been a pleasure. Peter is a fount of knowledge on all sorts of things. But his knowledge of the Congress is exceptional.

My co-conspirators Jackie Ivimy and Jakob Jakobsen were a source of inspiration in numerous ways. When my enthusiasm flagged, as it often did in the early days, they were invariably there to provide conversation, support, and enlightenment. Craig Fees at PETT proved himself a prince of archivists. At how many other archives are you invited to sit down for a drink and a chat before starting your research? Thanks to Craig, I was able to work from digital copies of the Congress recordings at home. I hope that the book doesn't disappoint him.

As for the other people who helped, in big ways and small, they are listed here in no particular order.

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