

31. KPFA commentaries, part 1

Henry: In the summer of 1963 I had a sort-of position with the state public health department, but they didn't know what to do with me, so I had time on my hands, and I was very involved in the politics of the bracero system, having written a monograph called "Our Field of Bondage", which I distributed to the Congress, which was in the process of deciding whether to extend the bracero program.

I don't remember exactly how it occurred to me, or to one of my friends, that station KPFA in Berkeley, the listener-supported FM station, might be interested in a couple of programs about that subject, but I went to the director of their public affairs department, and offered to prepare a couple of sample tapes. She rejected one or two but approved one or two, so in July 63 my first commentary on the bracero program appeared on KPFA, and there was another one the following month. They seemed to go over fairly well, so I continued, and without anything actually being said in so many words, I was apparently looked upon as their house expert on farm labor, and that I would have a niche in their series of commentators, each of whom represented some particular interest group. They had commentators representing the Democratic party, the Republican party, the Communist party, and so on. At that point there was no thought in my mind that these would have any use beyond the listenership; it never occurred to me that I might mimeograph copies of the scripts, and that people would write in and ask for copies, nothing of that sort.

In April of the following year, 1964, KPFA was thrown into more than the usual turmoil by the fact that the engineers and technicians went on strike. I felt that I had something to say on that subject, so I abandoned my farm labor hat for the time being, and did three commentaries on the subject of the governance of KPFA. I thought that it was more than just a struggle between the administration of the station and the engineers and technicians. I pointed out that the listeners were indeed supporting the station, the sole support of the station, by their subscribing to the weekly or monthly program guide, but the listeners had absolutely nothing to say about what went on in the station, that was the province of the administration. So I suggested in this series of 3 commentaries that the listeners might form a 3rd power group of their own, that would be neutral between the 2 other sides and might strike a balance of some kind. In time the whole thing was worked out, I can't even remember how, but the whole concept of a listener organization went into oblivion.

I went back to commenting on farm labor for the months of June, July and Aug 64, and then the presidential campaign between the incumbent Lyndon Johnson and the Republican nominee, Barry Goldwater, became the issue of the day, and I began commenting on that. I had an epiphany of sorts: that I wasn't going to follow any party line, and say what others were saying, perhaps in different words, but in essence simply repeating the views of the Goldwater campaign and the Johnson campaign. I said that I believed that my limited time on these airwaves is far better spent trying to open up new points of views than congratulating you on the wisdom and rectitude of your present attitudes and opinions. I directed these words to the listeners of my commentary.

So I made bold to say that maybe Goldwater had something to say of value. He wrote a book called "The Conscience of a Conservative" in which he began by sketching a view of really enlightened humanism. He was talking about the development of man – wonderful visions. And I said those were worth pondering, although at the end of the book he trashed them all by reverting to the Republican sacred cows of small government and low taxes and so on, which had nothing to do with the development of man.

In any case it struck a chord with a number of my listeners, and they said they were happy to have a slightly different point of view. They found it refreshing, etc. So that gave me the courage to continue in that vein. The following month I did a commentary on my ill-starred experience trying to conduct a research project under the auspices of UC Berkeley, and having it truncated because I dared to criticize the bracero program, which of course was the darling of the CA agricultural power.

That was in Nov 64. The following month I went even farther afield by talking about my vision of humanistic sociology, in a series that I called "The Nature of Human Nature". I was following quite closely on the lead that I had heard taken by a professor during the time I was a graduate student at the Univ. of Hawaii. Herbert Blumer was his name, he was on sabbatical at that time from the Univ. of Chicago. This was in 1950. By 1964 he was the chairman of the department of sociology at Berkeley. His view was that human beings were not driven by animal instincts, but they were of a different type of being. They weren't wired to be aggressive, war-like and so on, but if anything, they were wired to be caring, because that is how they became human in the first place. They had to receive the care of other human beings in order for them to survive.

Blumer told us a hair-raising story about some sociologist – they didn't even use the term back in the 19th century – but apparently in England they carried out a diabolical experiment to see what would happen to new-born infants if they had no contact with other human beings. No maternal contact – I guess they were given bottles silently, by women who would slip in and place these bottles by their head, and I guess other women would slip in and change their diapers, or whatever, but never exchange a word or a touch. What would happen to these children? And Blumer told us that the experiment was terminated when all the children died.

I did these commentaries, and received a response from a number of listeners that this was a new way of looking at things as far as they knew, and they would like to have copies of these commentaries. So I began mimeographing copies, mailing them out. It never occurred to me to ask for stamped self-addressed envelopes at that point.

In the following month, that is Feb of 65, I continued in somewhat this same vein. At that time, Lyndon Johnson was carrying out his War on Poverty, and he controlled the Congress to such a great extent that we was able to get very liberal financing for many aspects of this so-called War on Poverty. I once again proposed to say something a little different. I said what the country needed even more than a War on Poverty was a War on Alienation, in which people were in our contemporary society largely estranged from each other. From my own experience I knew that there were literally cases in which people lived for years as neighbors to people they had never visited, perhaps didn't even know their names. There was a great deal of

alienation at large, and what was needed was some sort of restoration of the kinds of human contact that used to be the very essence of a society. There used to be what the sociologists called Primary Groups, face-to-face groups rather than secondary groups in which you belonged to something, like the Sierra Club or the American Legion or some kind of voluntary association in which you don't actually meet the other people most of the time. You don't know them, and they don't know you. What was needed was more community in the most elementary sense.

Well, this touched an even larger chord among my listeners. I was besieged by mail. I answered them all, and in many cases tried to meet the persons because they had ideas and for a while I was totally absorbed, but in most cases wasn't able to follow up on them, I'm sorry to say, but I wouldn't have had time to do anything else but to encourage these small groups, which sprung up here and there.

I did other commentaries that were not related to anything that profound. I did a commentary on a Utopian restaurant, for example, which was just for fun. But in June of 66 I felt the need to attack another sacred cow of the radical-liberal or liberal-radical school which dominated the station and which I was afraid was dominating the thinking of the listenership, and so I undertook to attack another what I considered to be an uncritical acceptance of one of the things going on, namely the emergence of what seemed to be drug culture, which accepted the views of Timothy Leary, the proponent of LSD, and the slogan "Tune in, turn on, drop out". I myself had never tried LSD, or marijuana, or any of the hard drugs, but it seemed to me that you didn't have to have tried them in order to have some idea that they weren't a real solution to the search for a fulfilling life, and that there was no substitute for doing something creative on your own, whether it be a painting, or a poem, or a tune, or a friendship.

So I did a couple of commentaries on what I called the "Race for Middle Space", because there was going on a race for outer space between the US and the USSR in the form of rockets and satellites. And once again I was inundated with people who said they might have felt this way but hadn't heard it articulated. They wanted copies. I had over 200 requests for copies, and my thoughts were reprinted in a number of little magazines, even though they were quite simplistic. But apparently they filled a need. So I was encouraged to keep doing what I was doing, and looking for ways in which I could say things that were a little different from what was being said by other members of the KPFA stable of commentators.

In a little while I had another opportunity. I use a phrase from Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, who spoke of the "sickness unto death", and to him that sickness was despair. I used that to build a series of commentaries on an experience I had had with a Unitarian congregation in Walnut Creek, where I had been a member of their commission on Peace, and as a one-time sociologist it occurred to me to draw up a questionnaire to be handed to all the members of this congregation, trying to get their opinions about ways that one might work for peace. Exactly 100 people filled out this questionnaire (which made it very easy to calculate percentages). Most of these people felt strongly that foreign policy questions, and questions about the arms race, and the race for outer space, and so forth, were very important social issues. I included the question of how amenable to these problems is anything that you might do to help solve them. And it was quite astonishing to find almost nobody thought there was

much if anything they could do. And this seemed to me to be an example of what Kierkegaard called the “sickness unto death”. People felt strongly about certain problems, but felt absolutely hopeless and helpless to do anything about them. In fact, I thought there were things people could do, and that one should never give up.

And so it went. I reached a point where I wasn’t able to answer all the mail I got, and I wasn’t able to address all the return envelopes I sent out, or even pay for all the stamps that were required, and so I began to ask that people who wrote in wanting copies of my commentaries should enclose a stamped self-addressed envelope. A number of people not only did that, but enclosed additional stamps because they knew that some people would probably omit to include the necessary postage.

I had no idea how representative my respondents were of the total KPFA membership. I suppose my listenership was different from that of the Democratic and Republican and Communist commentators. But it was very gratifying. Many of them were new each time there a big response. It wasn’t the same people who wrote in every month. But as I say it was very gratifying.

I began to almost deliberately look for ways in which I could kick over the traces. For example, at just this point in history the city of Berkeley was coming to grips with the fact that the Berkeley schools were very largely segregated between the races and ethnic groups. It worked out a system of busing to desegregate all the schools. Well, that was all well and good, but I doubted that by itself it was going to cure the fact that the races differed quite decidedly in their scoring on standardized tests, reading up to the standards that were expected of each grade, facility with arithmetic, and so on. Because it occurred to me that most learning doesn’t take place in schools, but at home and in the neighborhoods.

I did a couple of commentaries which boiled down to the argument that what was needed was to do something about the very existence of ghettos, in which kids go home after a few hours of school and spend all the remaining hours of the day with kids like themselves in terms of culture. And so I argued that taxpayer money should be, a lot of it at least, spent on finding pockets outside the ghettos in which vacant lots existed, or in some cases corner groceries that might have become obsolete with the growth of supermarkets, and so those properties might be razed and new housing erected for the use of people who wanted to get out of the ghettos, and that these should be subsidized.

In fact, I don’t know whether the city fathers of Berkeley ever listened to my commentaries, but for one reason or another something of this sort did happen soon after that. Not to any great extent, but to some extent. That was gratifying.

I did commentaries on the subject of so-called Black Power, because the Black Panther party originated in Berkeley and Oakland, and was seized upon by self-styled left-liberals and radicals to prove their bona fides as true radicals, by excusing whatever the Black Panthers did, and to some extent they had good arguments and good programs, but they weren’t all good. So I dared to criticize them when I thought criticism was justified.

I did a series of commentaries on the subject of higher education, and I was very critical of the Univ. of CA, and I didn't even mention my problems in this series; I was talking about the more general problems of people going for grades based on booklets, they used to sell copies on Bancroft Way, of the essence of classes, whereby you could take the final exam without ever having been to the class, and I thought this was pretty much a travesty, and so were many other things going on in the name of higher education.

This went over tremendously well. I was invited to give a lecture or two to a class in the school of Education, which was run by a good guy named Jack London – no relation to the original Jack London – but he agreed with almost everything I said, and so I was able to reach a large audience in the form of his classes, and I also got a very large number of requests in the mail. This time I expanded on my radio script to such an extent that the mailings turned out to be costly in terms of paper and mimeograph ink, and I asked for a contribution of 25 cents to defray those expenses, and people were usually very happy to come up with that money.

On another occasion I did a commentary under the title “To render the world a more human place”, and it was based upon a papal encyclical. The Pope at that time was Paul VI, and I was astonished to see that this encyclical, which he called On the Development of Peoples, was extremely liberal and humanistic rather than ecclesiastical.

I had so many requests for that one I ran off 200 copies. I sent copies to the various Catholic papers. Some of them were weeklies, some were monthlies, and my comments were run, and my only regret is that I wasn't addressing it so much to Catholics as I was to anti-Catholics, because so many of the liberals and radicals, self-styled, still labored under the old impression that Catholics were all authoritarian and trying to keep people barefoot and pregnant, and so on. Whereas there was a strain, within the church, of liberalism, which was fighting against the old order. This was in 1967, and there have been some changes ever since, including the present Pope, who is really in the process of seeming to change everything.

Another subject that I took up about this time, we're still in 1967, I found sufficiently meaty that I devoted 3 commentaries. I called the series “Cigarettes and Social Well-Being”. In my years in the Dept. of public health I knew that the World Health Organization operated under the slogan “health is not merely the absence of the disease, but the presence of physical, mental, and social well-being”. And I was always intrigued by the meaning of “social well-being”. I guess if you boiled these 3 commentaries down to the very bottom of the pot, you'd find that I was arguing that cigarettes are attractive only because there is a lack of real social well-being, and so people don't really care if they poison themselves, and by this time to be a smoker you'd have to know that statistically your chances were 1 in 6 that you'd die from smoking. In other words it was just like playing a game of Russian Roulette, and yet people continued to do it, because – so I argued – the operational meaning of social well-being was not being realized, by and large, in modern societies. People weren't being given opportunities to exercise their needs for creativity and friendship and other good things.

In a follow-up to that, I undertook to write a commentary called “Toward a Sociology of Being”. My inspiration for that was a psychologist named Abraham Maslow, who had written a book

called “The Psychology of Being” in which he argued that sociology had been taken over by Freudians and others who emphasized the pathologies to which the human psyche is subject. Maslow argued that the human psyche is also quite capable of grand things, of feeling, oceanic feelings, of peak experiences, and all manner of good things. So I took off from that to say that sociologists could do the same, rather than getting bogged down in social pathologies – criminology and all those other social problems. In my souvenirs I have a letter from Abraham Maslow, congratulating me on my commentary.

But in December of that year I reverted to my practice of finding something to criticize in one of the favorites of the radicaler-than-thou school, which dominated KPFA. The Peace and Freedom Party had come into existence, and it was the darling of Berkeley in general and of KPFA in particular. I undertook to examine what it meant by those wonderful words, peace and freedom, and it seemed to me that they were rather limited to an apology for powers around the world who called themselves “People’s Republic” and things of that sort, when in fact they weren’t peace-loving and they didn’t provide freedom.

Let me explain what I’m doing, because the whole reason for my trying to recapitulate my life, the only reason that it has any value, is that I tried to do some good, I tried to influence some individuals, if not the general course of events, and I know that I did some good in helping people during the brief period of time when I was with the office of the Inspector General at Fort Lewis, WA. I helped a bunch of African-Americans who were stuck as garbage collectors after they had been wheedled into re-enlisting with the promise that they would be stationed in Germany, where they knew they wouldn’t be relegated to collecting garbage. I did some good in getting them reassigned.

In many other respects I was an utter failure. I was certainly a total failure in my working on behalf of world federal government. Nationalism, blind nationalism, is more powerful today than it ever was, I think, I fear.

I did some good in the world of pesticide controls by demonstrating that a waiting period of 21 days was necessary before orange pickers should be required to go back in to the orange groves of Tulare county. The powers that be thought that 2 days was sufficient. I did some real good there.

I don’t think I did much good in trying to prevent the fraud that was going on in the Medicaid program of CA. I think it’s still going on in CA and everywhere else.

But I do believe that it’s worth my while to recall the experience I had with the KPFA commentary series, because I do believe that I influenced the thinking of a few hundred people. I know that I did because they told me so in these letters that they wrote. So I haven’t finished up my recapitulation of that period, but I promise to do so next time.