

Friedenberg on Friedenberg

Edgar Friedenberg, of sociological and educational fame, is one of 1970's illustrious additions to the Dalhousie teaching staff. Friedenberg is best known for his books, Coming of Age in America, and The Vanishing Adolescent, and his facility for remembering names.

Friedenberg is also a 'free school propagandist' and, according to Henry Hicks, 'a real catch.' He (Friedenberg, that is) is currently involved in setting up a commune in the outskirts of Halifax. Don MacLennan interviewed Friedenberg for the Gazette early this year.

GAZETTE:

Why did you decide to come to Dalhousie?

FRIEDENBERG:

I don't feel its so much a matter of deciding to come to Dal as deciding to come to Canada and turning out, as it happened, to have better and more effective connections with Dal than with any other university. Those came about through my earlier relationship with the people who publish "This Magazine Is About Schools," and George Martell, a Dal graduate and a former student of Dean McLean whom I have gotten to know very well.

Around 1966 I had a smallish sum of money to reinvest and I had to decide what to do with that and I found the prospect of putting even fifteen or twenty thousand dollars back into the US economy with the Viet Nam war being the way it was sort of unthinkable. I phoned George and asked him to find me a Canadian stockbroker. We did rather well, and then, of course, Regan was elected and Clark Kerr was fired and it was reasonably clear that the faculty was not going to really stand up against the regents or anything else, so I had to go to Buffalo.

Taking that job I was also aware it would bring me to within 75 miles of Toronto, and so I continued to see a great deal more of George and of Bob Davis, who is also from here, who is one of the founders of Everdale place, and is still very much involved with it. As a result of being in Buffalo it was possible for me to cultivate a more active involvement in Canadian education than I would ordinarily have done in the US; concretely I would accept speaking engagements that were nominally less important or paid less in Canada than in the US in order to get reasonably well known here.

What Dean McLean has told me is that George informed him when he thought I was ripe for the picking and he said that at the time that they were trying to enlarge and restructure the education department.

I certainly was pleased that it (the job) did turn out to be at Dalhousie. I like Nova Scotia; it arouses some very strange early feelings in me because it is so much like the South, without, I hope, the race hatred — which may come as some of your local Blacks begin to talk back. All kinds of things seem to me vaguely familiar; Nova Scotia gives me a wierd sense of *deja vu*.

GAZETTE:

So, you came to Canada because of a general disillusionment with how things were going in the states or because of a greater interest in Canadian education.

FRIEDENBERG:

Well, a bit of both, and a bit of neither. I know how it is possible for a person of normal intelligence to be disillusioned with the US; I mean, there's been no basis for any illusions about the US and being in it for a great many years. One of the things that distresses me most is that I'm among a comparatively few who don't feel that it is greatly changed.

There seems to be an idea that it has gotten a terrible whole lot worse, and in many respects it has. All the surface has worn off and certainly the whole repression has gotten a lot heavier, I suppose it's only in the past three or four years that I've had personal friends that are, in the view of the US government, criminal. But it seems to me that the basic inhumane attitude, the basic intolerance, are very, very old, and there's comparatively little that's happened to the Vietnamese that didn't happen to the Indians, except for the technological resourcefulness with which it could have been done.

It was also sort of the feeling that it was morally outrageous to stay in the States but I know that can be argued either way, or even a third way, I mean, it could also be a cop-out and so I think it would be if it were a culture or society that I greatly loved or cherished, but it

was beginning to seem like a bad marriage.

There are, I think, some hopeful signs in the present time, at least in the sources from which criticism is coming. The basic reasons for not being hopeful in the US lie in the response to the criticism. That is one of the things that is really extraordinary about recent American history, the way relatively responsible authorities do relatively responsible liberal things, or at least make relatively responsible liberal statements, and then, for the first time get hooted off. There isn't even lip service.

I don't think, for example, that the Walker report would have been greeted with derision and anger five years ago. I doubt that the Chicago cops have changed much, but I don't think you would have found as many people actively approving of their beating up people and dragging them out of their hotel rooms to do it, and so on. So that you do, in short, get a sense in the US that public opinion is rather solidly behind the worst of what is happening. Not behind the war, but that's because the war is a failure, and we never have liked failures, but there wouldn't have been much complaint about the war in Viet Nam if the Vietnamese had proved to be no tougher than the Biafrans.



photo by Chris Anderson

So I wouldn't say disillusionment, but sort of a sense that things in the US might be going to improve, but I wouldn't want to bet my life on it, and there isn't anything else you can bet. And also, one thing that you do learn as you grow older is that you don't have all that much control over your own destiny.

GAZETTE:

Do you see these attitudes that you say have always existed in the United States existing in Canada although not so blatant and active. Is it just a matter of degree, or do you see a hope in Canada that in various things, such as education, that perhaps we can avoid some of the difficulties that the U.S. has reached?

FRIEDENBERG:

I think the situations are qualitatively quite different. I'm sure there are things about Canada that I won't like; I don't think it's all that rosy. I really don't see in Canada the makings of a fascist society at all. It isn't that some of the same attitudes aren't there. Of course they are, and if you read George Grant's "Technology and Empire" you'll see that even the bases are the same in the over-empiricism, the sense that the environment is something to manipulate. I do think for example, Canada could manipulate itself quite easily into an ecological disaster, comparable to that of the US.

The basic difference, I think, is the way power is distributed among social classes here. From things like taking the Supercontinental across to Vancouver, which is a fairly good way to get to meet ordinary lower middle-class Canadians, I'm sure that there are people here who are just as up-tight and constricted. The attitudes of

brutality seem to me less common, or perhaps that is more like the United States during the Depression. There doesn't seem to be the same degree of self-hatred; there's more complacency here, and particularly there isn't the possibility, which is so paramount in large American cities, of totally losing your self-esteem as you get poor, as you get old and thus so desperately struggling.

I think Canada's defects, if they develop, are more likely to be like those of Switzerland. I mean it may become a very mercantile country and in some ways rather prosaic, but I don't see the start of a cycle of repression.

GAZETTE:

In the United States and Canada in the last few years, there has been a large growth of free schools, alternative schools to the present education system. How do you see those schools on a long term basis. Do you see them becoming effective on sort of a mass level, rather than state-controlled education?

FRIEDENBERG:

At the moment I doubt it. I do think though that there is

going to be a substantial decay throughout the developed world, as we call it, of compulsory school attendance as the assumed way that people have to be educated. I suspect what's happening to the schools is going to be relatively comparable to what has been happening to the railroads everywhere, except in Western Europe and Japan. I don't think they are going to improve their passenger service and I don't think anybody's going to really get off them, but bureaucracies do generally know what to do for their own preservation.

I think what the schools are going to have to settle for is a kind of certified power to legitimate a much wider range of activities that kids are allowed to do for themselves. What will happen will be that there will be a variety of schools some of which are very much like the worst of the old ones, but in order to retain its hegemony, schools are going to, in fact, waive a good deal of their authority. I would see certainly more so called "schools without walls", though I remember hearing about prisons without walls and the people who were referring to them were not referring to the solar system.

It's sort of dangerous to let a bureaucracy give you anything specially groovy, since they use that way of thinking you by threatening to take it away. But I still think there's going to be more variety in what you can do even though you are less than 20.

GAZETTE:

Do you think that the schools, while giving you more variety, are still going to put you through a process whereby you have to learn a certain amount of something, a means to reach an end. Do you think the end is going to