

The Rights of the Majority *by vic lovell*

In the Midpeninsula Free University, it has always been easy to defend the rights of individuals and minorities to do their thing within the free university community. Courses and special projects, the most extensive and successful area of MFU activity, are totally free from any central control. Although the open curriculum once seemed controversial, the outcome of that conflict was never really in doubt. The need for, and the legitimacy of this kind of freedom has always been deeply felt by the membership.

In contrast, the rights of the majority, which constitute freedom for the community as an organic or collective unit, have not only been difficult to defend, but often even difficult to articulate. Often, this kind of freedom is seen as conflicting with that of individuals and minorities, and therefore as expendable. When rules are made or action taken in the name of the organization as a whole, this is often done not by the community, except in a formal or superficial sense, but rather by individuals who are felt to represent the community, either by themselves or by others.

The problem is as old as social philosophy. In the United States, it takes the form of a failure to distinguish between freedom in the libertarian sense and free enterprise. There is a contradiction between free enterprise and democracy, because in the former resources are disposed of by individuals and minorities, while in the latter they are disposed of by majorities. There is no comparable contradiction between civil liberties and democracy because civil liberties involve only the right of individuals and minorities to do as they please with themselves, and not with community resources.

Questions of majority rights arise in MFU almost invariably whenever time, space, or limited resources are to be shared in the name of the community as a whole. Courses and special projects may be left up to the initiative of individuals and minorities, without conflict, precisely because no such sharing is involved. With formal meetings, confrontation sessions, publications, the central office, capital, and political action this is not the case. All of these things belong to the community as a whole, and therefore when individuals do as they please with them this is license and not liberty. No one may spoil them for everyone else.

Yet someone often does, and the majority does not seem to know what to do about it. In a sense this is because the majority, as a self conscious and dynamic community, rather than a mere collection of unrelated individuals, hardly exists. Even those activities which in theory are undertaken by the organization as a whole in practice usually turn out to be the private project of some individual or minority. Thus we are far more effective in implementing our libertarian values than our democratic and communitarian ones.

It is usually supposed that this is because not enough members attend meetings, or volunteer to help with the work, or because there is something wrong with our structure, or because various individuals are thoughtless and insensitive as a result of their own inner conflicts. While all of these things may be so, I believe that they are best thought of as effects rather than causes. What is needed is a sense of common purpose, social commitment, and community involvement, together with a collective willingness to prevent individuals from interfering with the prerogatives of the group.

Members will volunteer their time and attend meetings if work situations and meetings are socially comfortable and interesting places to be. The right rules will be made if it is understood that rules represent a collective agreement and not merely individual paranoia. Members who have difficulty relating to others will have less difficulty if it is clear what is expected of them and if they are not threatened by constant confusion and individual impositions.

I am placing a great deal of importance upon the mystic of solidarity, and calling for a state of consciousness rather than any particular remedy. In order not to be guilty of mystification, I shall try to illustrate what I mean with reference to particular situations. Some of the difficulties I will mention have been beaten to death already; some have not.

In decision making meetings, one must be diplomatic, articulate, and relevant. One must listen, particularly to those with whom one does not agree, and one must respect the opinions of others. If one is concerned with an issue, and if one has something to say that has not been said, one should speak. It seems to me that invective and character assassination, although sometimes appropriate, are usually personal indulgences which do not contribute anything to what the meeting is trying to do. If a member sabotages the meeting, he should be called to account by the meeting as a whole, and particularly by the chairman. If the meeting does not like what the chairman is doing, it should call him to account.

The Coordinating Committee votes on whether to place items on the agenda of the General Meeting (if an item is voted down, it may still be placed on the agenda by petition of twenty members or ten percent of the membership). The General Meeting agenda is always overloaded. The meeting usually adjourns without getting through the agenda, and there is seldom time for adequate discussion of any issue, even though the meeting lasts four hours. Yet in spite of this, the Coordinating Committee is reluctant to refuse any item proposed for the agenda. There is feeling that if a member wants to bring something before the General Meeting, he ought to be allowed to do so, no matter how absurd, trivial, or wrongheaded it is, and no matter how much of the membership's time is going to be taken up.

Confrontation Sessions are often monopolized by individuals, against the will of the group. Sometimes an individual will demand that the group play his game, without recognizing its right to decline. Again, there is always some feeling that freedom, in this situation, must consist in letting everyone do as he pleases, regardless of the wishes of others.

The editors of this newsletter have felt that if material is submitted by an MFU member, that is reason enough to publish it. To do anything else would constitute censorship. There is little sense that the newsletter is a community resource with a limited amount of space and an organization to represent. If the newsletter is a drag, no one will read it, and everybody will suffer. It's not a drag, but it could be if the principle of publishing everything were followed to its logical conclusion.

A fine example is the office in back of the store. People often wander in, hang around, give other people a hard time, and disrupt what is going on. There is some feeling that since the office is open to the community, nothing can or should be done about this. But if the office is open to someone who makes it uninhabitable, then it is open to nobody.