

BOOKS

HISTORY AND THE STUDENT MOVEMENT IN TWENTIETH CENTURY UNITED STATES

Lewis S. Feuer, *The Conflict of Generations: The Character and Significance of Student Movements*. New York: Basic Books, 1969. Pp. XIII, 543.

Seymour Martin Lipset, *Rebellion in the University*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1971. Pp. XXVI, 310.

Philip G. Altbach, *Student Politics in America: A Historical Analysis*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1974. Pp. VIII, 249.

The Free Speech Movement of 1964-65 at the Berkeley campus of the University of California is a landmark in the history of the contemporary American student movement. Although student activism had been evident earlier in nations such as Japan, the eruption of dissent and confrontation on campuses which had been so lately populated by the "apathetic generation" deeply shocked academics and laity alike. The persistence and growth of student unrest (particularly at the most prestigious institutions) during the rest of the 1960's that culminated in the Kent State slayings of May 1970 called for narration and explanation.

The past decade has witnessed a literal deluge of studies, popular and scholarly, on virtually all aspects of the "rebellion in the university." Caught up in the whirl of student politics and violence, social scientists (particularly sociologists and psychologists) have sought the sources of student unrest and clues to its probable direction. Scholars, friendly and hostile to the new student movement, have investigated, interviewed, counted, analyzed, and interpreted the movement and its members. In their quest for an understanding of the student unrest and for hypotheses that would give some predictive power, the students of the academic rebellion have turned to sociological and psychological theories and data. Relatively little historical work has been done on student activism before 1960; however, three of the more productive students of the contemporary scene have attempted analyses that include a considerable historical component.

In varying degrees, the three scholars offer theoretical frameworks in which the student movement in the United States can be seen as historical phenomena. The present review will examine first the explanatory models of student activism and then will assess the specific analyses of the American student movement for the period 1900-1945. The decision to exclude the post-World War II years was made on the grounds that it seemed desirable to divorce the historical analysis from the immense pressure of the

crisis in contemporary American higher education. Given the concern for solutions to problems, the historical explanations are frequently overlaid with presentism. Also, it is useful to see how scholars of the student movement apply their theoretical constructs to historical data generally removed from our own immediate experience.

Of the three works, Feuer's is the most ambitious because he attempts a general explanatory model for all student movements. According to Feuer, student movements are characterized by a duality of motives: youthful love and generational conflict. Because of their dualistic nature, student movements have been both the exponents of altruism and generosity and the imposers of means destructive of the self and the goals of social reconstruction. As a result of this duality of motive and action, the student movements have opted "for an ethic in which the end justified any means whatsoever." Indeed Feuer claims that the "ethic of an elitist amorality . . . [is] common to all student movements" (p. 6).

In his discussion of generational conflict, Feuer uses psychological interpretation of radical student behavior. For example, he cites the psychiatric interviews of the assassin of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, Gavrilo Princip, who exhibited the "severe strain of generational conflict," that is, intense love for his mother and hostility towards his father. The social significance of the destructive, generational conflict, side of the student movement is that whenever it attaches itself to a larger and more rational movement (peasant, labor, nationalist, racial or anti-colonial), the student movement profoundly changes the nature of the "carrier" movement by deflecting it in "irrational directions." Feuer's assessment of the danger is quite explicit: "student movements are . . . among the most irrationalist in history" (p. 8).

In addition, Feuer sees the irrational predilections of student movements as generally impeding basic social change in that terrorism shocks and sickens the general public and thereby weakens support for constructive social change. Thus, the assassinations of Tsarist officials are seen as projecting on "a national political scale the emotional pattern of 'totem and taboo', the revolt and guilt of the primal sons Freud described" (p. 9).

Unlike class struggles, student movements "are born of vague, undefined emotions which seek for some issue, some cause to which to attach themselves." In contrast to trade unions, student movements are not concerned with better living conditions for themselves but rather with "a vision of a nobler life for the lowest" (p. 10-11). With the preliminary discussion out of the way, Feuer then defines a student movement as

a combination of students inspired by aims which they try to explicate in a political ideology, and moved by an emotional rebellion in which there is always present a disillusionment with and rejections of the values of the older generation (p. 11).

In addition, members of the movements are convinced that their generation has been called to succeed where others have failed.

The appearance of a student movement is "a sign of a sickness, a malady in society," of a breakdown of generational equilibrium and a devolvement

of political action from the apathetic masses to the intellectual elite. Student movements are most apt to occur in societies in which "the influences of religion, ideology, and the family are especially designed to strengthen the rule of the old"; however, more is required for their rise. The elders must be "de-authorized" by a loss of credit and moral standing.

Feuer sees mass apathy and illiteracy as being especially conducive to the formation of student movements because in such societies the only effective opposition to the military elite has been the intellectual elite, generally managerial or administrative intellectuals, and it is from the intellectual elites that the student movements are most likely to come for they are *youth movements heavily overlaid with intellectualism*. Not yet enmeshed in adult professionalism and responsibilities, the intellectual student elite are "pure ideologists whose consciousness determine their existence more wholly than that of any other group" and who "embrace ideas with full fervor of fresh discovery" (p. 14). Citing a wide range of data from various nations, Feuer argues that unless governments directly intervene "studentries" tend to be predominantly middle class and particularly prone to intellectualism, ideology, and generational disequilibrium.

Given the characteristics of youth, its intellectuality and altruism, the student movement lacks both clear immediate goals and ultimate aims. "Rising from a diffused feeling of opposition to things as they are" and driven by unconscious emotional energies, the student movement is a force seeking a cause. It seeks to be the conscience of society, claiming to act on the beliefs and ideals of the society. As social conscience, the movement seeks to identify with an oppressed class and to sacrifice itself on behalf of the exploited. For Feuer, the "back-to-the people spirit . . . [is] the most distinctive, noblest, and most self-destructive trait of student movements." Indeed, it is this populism that distinguishes the student movement from student syndicalism, which is primarily concerned with student well-being. Although student syndicalism may represent the expression of a student elite, it lacks the emotional and psychological energies of the student movement, which is both elitist and populist.

Backward societies where advanced intellectual ideas are confronted by material backwardness are particularly prone to the appearance of "back-to-the people movements" and consequently student movements. Feuer accounts for the discontinuities of intellectual and economic development by claiming that intellectuals "share a common culture, and constitute a community in a far more genuine sense than that in which there ever was an international working-class community" (p. 23). In brief, the existence of modern communications makes possible the dissemination of advanced ideas without respect to economic conditions.

Since he argues that student movements are the result of generational disequilibrium, Feuer is forced to consider the nature of "generation." He maintains that

a generation in the sociological sense consists of persons in a common age group who in their formative years have known the same historical experiences, shared the same

hopes and disappointments, and experienced a common disillusionment with respect to the elder age groups, towards whom their sense of opposition is defined (p. 25).

Although this "generational consciousness" is a necessary condition for the rise of student movements, it is not a sufficient condition since young workers who have experienced the same events are often suspicious of the youth elitists. Given Feuer's earlier comments on the more rational and instrumental character of social movements that would probably enroll young workers, one is tempted to conclude that what makes the student movement destructive is not the youth of its members but their middle-classness, which might also explain why working youth distrust them. What finally makes a student movement is generational struggle.

According to Feuer, student movements pass through a series of stages, which are not necessarily sharply defined. The first stage is that of the "circle" in which students often with the assistance of their elders search for causes. The circlehood stage commonly consists of two parts — philosophical study followed by a search for issues. Once the issue has been located, the movement "emerges" as an agency for action. The next step is back-to-the people movement, which is crucial because it establishes that the revolt is "not simply a generational uprising, a rebellion against the fathers, but a movement on behalf of the people sanctified by the very ethic which the fathers themselves have professed but betrayed". Feuer even uses the "psychoanalytic metaphor" that the identification "assuages the castrational fears aroused by the students' revolt against their fathers" (p. 38).

In brief, Feuer sees the impact of student movements as mainly destructive, both within and without the university. Driven by psychological energies, the movements deflect and corrupt more rational and instrumental social movements. Inside the academic community, they subvert the intellectual aims of the university because "wherever student movements have flourished, academic freedom has consequently declined" (p. 44).

Seymour Martin Lipset does not attempt such an inclusive model of student activism but rather builds up a mosaic of sociological data and theories by which the activism may be understood. In his discussion of the sources of student activism, Lipset argues that contemporary student movements enjoy "more common themes than differences in [their] tactics and ideologies" but that the student movements of the 1960's differ from their 1930's counterparts in that they are not linked to adult political parties but rather constitute "a genuine youth rebellion." Freed from the restrictions of political parties, the student movements have exhibited the "propensity of youth to adhere to absolute principles [and] to engage in expressive rather than instrumental politics." Thus, the New Left student movements are distinguishable from earlier student activism by their complete "rejection of an intolerable world."

According to Lipset, students (at least since the early 19th century) have been highly responsive to political and social conditions and moods and particularly to the possibilities for change. Although student activism is related to situations in which political and social values have been called into ques-

tion, Lipset asserts that once activated student unrest has a life of its own and can become the vanguard of political change. In answer to the question "why student activism?" Lipset answers that his examination of the literature suggests two sets of factors: "those which *motivate* students to action and those which *facilitate* their participation" (p. 15).

In his survey of commonly proposed hypotheses, Lipset questions their explanatory power. Of the hypothesis that sees student unrest as the result of rapid social change, Lipset asks why do some periods of rapid change lead to youth protest while others do not. Freudian interpretations suffer from the same methodological shortcomings. Lipset then examines the various psychological/sociological hypotheses that have been advanced to explain why students are prone to embrace radical and militant movements. In brief, these theorists have stressed the "marginal" role of students. For example, Erik Erikson has suggested that the lengthy adolescence of modern society places youth in a prolonged period of uncertainty, while Gordon Allport sees youth as less able to handle social and personal discontinuities and as inherently less tolerant than adults. Radical theorists argue that the "student is increasingly a member of an exploited alienated sector of the powerless strata" whose protests indicate his growing awareness of his oppressed state. Whatever the set of assumptions, the main thrust of the hypotheses is that students are subject to anxieties that derive from pressures to succeed in mass educational institutions.

Another stimulating factor is the belief in the "idealism of youth" and the concomitant willingness of society to praise youthful radicalism. For the United States, Lipset argues that this perception of youth fits in neatly with the American self-image of a progressive, reform-oriented nation in which the inheritors of the future are also the bearers of progressive ideals. Unfortunately for the bearers of ideals, they are often confronted with the imperfection of institutions and come to see the discrepancies as violations of moral principles. The basic contradiction has been further exacerbated by the fact that the American intellectual elite has stressed developmental and humanistic themes that are in opposition to the ethos of competitive capitalism. Thus, there developed an inherent conflict between the world of "equality, play, and lack of repression" and the "onerous requirements of bureaucratic industrial society" as manifested in the meritocracy of the university.

In addition, the university as the academy calls for withdrawal from the world, which Lipset sees as having several consequences. First, the students are expected not to exercise many of the freedoms accorded adults for participation in society. Secondly, because the staff, collectively and individually, has the power to certify students, it also has the power to control much of the students' life by course and program requirements. Finally, the university has tended to act *in loco parentis* by supervising the students' life outside the classroom. Thus, the university as the academy has set requirements and restrictions that "even middle-class parents have found difficult to maintain."

Lipset then proceeds to consider the proposition that student activism is the result of the need for a distinct youth culture. Drawing upon the work of scholars such as Walter Laqueur, he describes the classic youthful rebel with his "expressive style" and rejection of "a detailed, worked-out, means-ends related form of radical politics." In particular Lipset points out that youth groups with widely different social and political values often exhibit striking similarities in style. Although "expressive style" need not lead to political action, certain conditions in the American university are conducive to politics: the growing political status of the university and the increased use of academics in important social and political roles, the failure of students (particularly at prestigious institutions) to share in this enhanced status, the general left-ward press of intellectuals, and the decline of staff interest in the personal and intellectual lives of their students. In this light, student activism can be viewed as an attempt to recover lost ground.

Having examined the motivating factors, Lipset then considers "facilitating factors" in accounting for student movements. For Lipset, students are a *tabula rasa* politically, that is, they lack ideology, political commitments, and status and role identifications. The economic penalties for participating in politics are low for students who have few responsibilities to jobs or dependents. Also, the campus facilitates the mobilization of students for political action.

After this extensive survey of the literature on student activism, however, Lipset finally asserts that "the larger explanation for the rise of activism during the past half decade or so must be primarily in political events . . . [which] gave to the more radically disposed students the issues; their social situation gave them the stimulus; and the campus situation furnished them with the means to build a movement" (p. 37).

In order to more fully explain the student unrest of the late 1960's, Lipset examines the results of an extensive list of polls carried out during the decade, both in the United States and abroad. Lipset argues that the polls indicate that on the questions of Viet Nam and general political discontent, the majority of American students were moderate. With regard to the impact of university structure and policies, Lipset finds the same uncertainty. For example, using data from polls, he sees the 1964-65 Free Speech Movement at Berkeley as essentially concerned with political ideology not with the quality of education; however, with the passage of time, "political ideology becomes more closely linked to educational ideology . . . [and] those students who are disposed to the left now [1970] describe the university as a bad place" (p. 67). Thus, Lipset sees the increasingly negative response to the universities as the result of political protest and radicalization and not the deterioration of the "educational experience." There is a practical inference to be drawn from such an assessment, namely that if political discontent fires educational unrest, then educational reforms will not reduce student activism. Lipset does admit, however, that "the propensities of schools to experience demonstrations is related to various indicators of bureaucratic (impersonal) treatment of students" (p. 71).

Finally Lipset argues that although the radical or alienated students have consistently composed a small percentage of the university population, the polls have shown a dominant campus liberalism. It is this liberal posture that partially accounts for the support given to demonstrations when force is used by university authorities. A majority of students are in sympathy with the objectives if not the tactics of the demonstrators.

Lipset then attempts to answer the question "Who are the activists?" by surveying the sociological and psychological literature. Studies of the institutional correlates of student unrest suggest that three factors are influential: size, bureaucratization, and the political characteristics of students and staff. Lipset does point out, however, the "liberalizing" impact of some institutions and general social conditions on student attitudes and actions. The other area of research is the search for various political orientations and degrees of involvement based on personality traits. Lipset finds the results of these psychological studies "unconvincing . . . because few of the extant studies hold constant the sociological and politically relevant factors in the students" (p. 102).

In his survey, Lipset raises questions about the reputed psychological soundness as well as the superior academic achievement of radical activists. Almost imperceptibly Lipset moves to a muted criticism of American student activism by first quoting such sympathetic views of the "movement" as Kenneth Keniston and Robert Flacks, and then citing Paul Goodman, New Left publications, Irving Louis Horowitz, and Peter Berger, among others to highlight the similarities of Fascism and some of the advocates of the New Left.

Of the three studies, that of Philip Altbach has the least theoretical underpinning and is the least interpretive. In keeping with the title, Altbach seeks to record the development of student organization and to assess their impact on university and society in order to present a "picture of organized student activism in the United States during the period of its development as a social force" (p. 1). In particular, their "actions, values, and ideologies" received specific study. Because of discontinuities in the history of student activism, Altbach argues that the study must focus on specific organizations and on continuing themes.

Since student politics is the subject of his study, Altbach describes his criteria for selecting activist organizations. Wisely he extends the definition to include "organizations or movements composed largely of students on a college or university campus or . . . national organizations with local or regional campus-based affiliates, regardless of the outside affiliation of these groups" (p. 2). In keeping with his inclusiveness, Altbach gives "political activism" a broad coverage — ranging from publications to confrontation and violence.

Pointing out the relative ineffectiveness of student movements in the United States, Altbach offers five reasons for the lack of success. First, the large and socially diverse nature of American higher education has made effective political action difficult. Secondly, little sense of community has

existed among students as students. Thirdly, "American students have not had a strong tradition of political activism." Fourthly, the complexity of American society has made the student movement only one of many competing groups. Finally, the American student has generally lacked elite status and consciousness.

For Altbach, the student movement in the United States has been marked by political and ideological currents that have supported both continuity and organizational change. Identifying three major strands in student activism, liberal-radical, religious, and conservative, Altbach centres his study on the liberal-radical organizations because he judges that they provided the major leadership for student activism. At the same time, Altbach argues that the liberal-radical current is the most difficult to analyze because of the number of organizations and diverse ideological tendencies.

Among the enduring themes of student activism, Altbach sees foreign policy as a major concern of student organization, which leads him to speculate that the "emphasis on foreign policy may well reflect the largely middle-class base of the student movement, which has made the more abstract issues of foreign affairs more meaningful than immediate questions of domestic import" (p. 9).

Commenting on the lack of an established radical tradition, Altbach argues that student activism has been weakened by the absence of a successful radical political movement. "Indeed, on a number of occasions, activist students have sought to build an adult movement on the basis of the student movement" (p. 11).

Given the three studies, what can one say of the American student movement? First, the student unrest of the late 1960's was such a remarkable occurrence that how we view previous student activism has been radically changed. The results have been a new loss of American innocence, a realization that it can happen here, and a shock that some of the best placed youth of the society rejected its benefits. In addition, the extent and depth of the unrest having convinced both scholars and laymen of its significance have sent them off to check the sources of student activism and to examine the roots of its traditions. Earlier movements are not to be studied on their own terms but as harbingers of the "real thing" of the 1960's. Perhaps one should not be surprised that two sociologists and a comparative educationist manifest such strong presentism, but there is the impression that the overwhelming impact of Berkeley and after has distorted our perceptions.

A second observation is that the history of student activism in America remains to be written, and it remains to be written because the right questions have not been raised. One takes it that the historian is not a judge to right the failings of society by praising the righteous and censuring the wicked. One might gain points by diagnosing student movements as the sign of a malady in society or by subtly suggesting the similarities of the New Left and Nazis. One might have good reasons for outrage, dislike, and apprehension when viewing the student unrest during the 1960's; but to allow such to inform one's writings seems to be an admission of the failure of

academic perspective and discipline.

That the history of student activism in America will be difficult to write is clear from the nature of the subject. It is not difficult to secure examples of student indiscipline or even active rebellion from every period of American history; however, a study of the "American student movement" implies something more sustained and related (although not necessarily more significant) than the student rebellions at Yale in 1764-66 which "skin[ned] old Tom Clap's hide." There is a growing body of careful studies of specific outbursts of student militancy at individual institutions. But these cases of student unrest do not constitute in any useful sense a student movement and that such is the case is evidenced by the attention given by the three authors to national organized expressions of student activism.

Although national student organizations in Twentieth Century America have not had the continuity and stability of major religious, political, and business groups, their staying power has not been negligible. In particular, the Intercollegiate Socialist Society-League for Industrial Democracy-Student LID had maintained an active and skillful campus presence since 1905. Even shorter lived organizations, e.g., the National Student Forum, the National Student Federation of America, and the American Student Union, had relatively substantial existences that included national offices and officers, publications, policies and programs, and cooperation with non-student societies.

The model for the kind of history of student activism that needs to be written is available in the recent studies of a related and very similar historical phenomenon — the American peace movement. C. Roland Marchand, *The American Peace Movement and Social Reform, 1898-1918* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972), Charles Chatfield, *For Peace and Justice: Pacifism in America, 1914-1941* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1971), and Lawrence S. Wittner, *Rebels Against War: The American Peace Movement, 1941-1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), are excellent examples of the work that has been done on a "movement" and organizations that are not dissimilar from the student movement and organizations. In particular, the activist student organizations need to be made intelligible in themselves and in their relations to their times and related groups. Their publications require more intensive and imaginative analysis, manuscript collections need to be worked through, and the related scholarly studies examined.

It is unfair to even imply that the three studies should have attempted anything approaching such a thorough-going historical study. Clearly their intentions were quite different from what has been called for here. All three authors have made good use of primary published materials in their historical sections. One has to admire the tenacity and skill with which Feuer develops his theory of generational disequilibrium and his mastery of materials from a wide range of times and societies. One must also admire Lipset's superb control of social science theory and data. One must be thankful for Altbach's persistence and energies in laying out the lives of a

remarkable variety of student organizations.

But one does not sense the life, the rhythm, or the meaning of the student movement and the student organizations.

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