FORUM

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Student Activism: When Will It Return?

The story of "radical" student activism through the ages and throughout the world is one that would require countless pages to relate. It is a story which perhaps better than any other would tell us what is right and wrong with a society's values, institutions, and directions. Yet it is a story which societies, so it would seem, want to forget. Could the reason for this be that "children should be seen, not heard"?

Social reform movements may get into stride not during a sustained period of repression, but after some moderation of the political climate. So it would seem to have been the case in the United States in the late 1950's following a decline in McCarthyism and Cold War hysteria. The student reform movement of the sixties began in these years, but the geographic scope and momentum of student activism reached large proportions after the main thrust of the civil rights movement which began in 1960 in Greensboro, Colorado, demonstrating the feasibility of large-scale rebillion.[1] (Altbach, 198) After more than a decade of ferment, activism, occasional violence, some loss of life, and extensive property damage, the rebellion ended.

Writers sometimes differ in their assessments of the failures and successes of the revolt, but there seems to be general agreement on the following conclusions: (1) it moved academic policy makers to include students at various levels of university government, (2) it resulted in some (demanded) changes in curriculum, (3) it won a greater degree of academic freedom for students and professors both, (4) it swept away the last vestiges of the doctrine of *in loco parentis* on most campuses, (5) it liberalized large numbers of students,[2] (Jacqueney, 22) (6) it helped Black Americans in their struggle for civil rights, (7) it helped develop a broadly-based opposition to American military involvement in Indo-China, and (8) it was partly responsible for Lyndon Johnson's withdrawal from the presidential race in 1968. Although incomplete this list should suffice to illustrate the relatively impressive effectiveness of student activism in the sixties as compared to that in any previous period.

If the story of student activism in the sixties could end here it might be said with some relief that all's well that ends well. But, however, the vigorous and sometimes brutal opposition which student activists faced during the decade continued, as a conservative backlash, to generate repressive policies for future use. These policies were designed to spell out specifically what will be legitimate and illegitimate kinds of student and professorial activity, to deal with unlawful activism, and to punish universities where unlawful activity occurs.

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Among measures for the suppression of campus disorders is the Weapons Center Program to help law enforcement agencies obtain weapons systems and use them "discriminately" to reduce levels of violence found in routine police work as well as civil disorders.[3] (58) The Police Weapons Center "actively processes" data on firearms, chemical weapons, batons, explosives and protective equipment.[4] (58)

The most common forms of legislation however, provide for the "withdrawal of state or grant funds from any student convicted of participating in an illegal demonstration, the dismissal of faculty members involved in protests, the imposition of strict regulation to keep outsiders and suspended or dismissed students off campus..."[5] (71-72)

Such measures are not, however, surprising when it is realized that they specify what were at least *de facto* policies of the sixties. Suppression of student and faculty activism continued throughout that decade, and its severity is evident in the dismissals of professors and students and, in its most tragic form, in the "Orangeburg Massacre" of three South Carolina students in 1968, the killing of Berkeley and North Carolina A and T students in 1969, and the fatal shooting of four Kent State and two Jackson State students in 1970.[6] (Miles, 293) Students and professors contemplating participation in future campus activism deemed by authorities to be unlawful might also bear in mind a former California governor's warning in 1970 that, to contain the student movement, "If its's going to take a bloodbath, let's get it over with."[7] (293)

In a 1969 survey conducted by Educational Testing Service, over 40 percent of the trustees of selective private universities reported earnings exceeding $100,000, and 90 percent reported a figure of at least $300,000. At the "best" of the private universities, nearly half of the trustees were board members of corporations listed on the stock exchange. In comparison, only 14 percent of the trustees of selective public universities were on boards of listed corporations but nearly 90 percent were members of other corporate boards.[8] (45)

Overwhelmingly white, Protestant, and in their fifties and sixties, less than 1/6 of the trustees of public, and less than 1/4 of private universities reported their politics as "liberal". Two-thirds of these people at selective public institutions and nearly half at their private counterparts believed that all campus speakers should be officially screened. Approximately 3/4 of the trustees at universities of both kinds believed that faculty members should not have the right of collective bargaining.[9] (45-46) In addition to such built-in conservatism, trustees have been required to "vector" hardline pressures from the outside; by state governors, legislators, alumni, and various other publics. Undoubtedly, such statistics help explain the severity of the repressive policies of many university administrations toward visiting speakers, liberal professors, and student activism. Also, is it any wonder, therefore, that by 1970 thirty states had passed eighty laws governing student rebellion?[10] (48)

As for the faculties of universities, a national opinion survey for the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education by Lipset, Trow and Ladd (reported in 1970) found that nearly 30,000 of the 60,000 faculty members surveyed believed that leftist groups, trying to start trouble, created most campus demonstrations, while over 30,000 disapproved of the radical student activism. Over 45,000 thought that the radical movement was a threat to academic freedom and disruptive students should be strictly disciplined. Only 9,000 approved the means and ends of radicals.[11] (42)

Of this small group of supporting faculty the majority were untenured junior professors. With regard to university faculties in general, however, Miles concludes that, "In university politics the faculty, especially the tenured gentry, are the high conservatives, the aristocrats who are more royalist than the king."[12] (31) Given such attitudes of professors, it was likely not difficult for administrations to coopt support of faculties in purging "foreign", anti-university" elements among students and faculty.[13] (31)

Turning next to the student activists, it is evident in the literature that many researchers have already probed their personality characteristics and motivations for their activism. Reports of studies contain many disparate findings, but there seems to be substantial agreement in the more sophisticated studies on some salient characteristics of activist and nonactivist students and their parents.

Activist students tend to come from liberal, middle-class families, to be social science majors and, politically, they saw themselves as liberal but more to the left than their parents. Also, on the basis of Loevinger's stages of ego functioning, student activists were found to respond significantly more frequently at the highest stages (conscientious and conscientious - autonomous) than inactive, conventional, "constructive" and dissenting students.[14] (Block, *et al*, 168) The parents of student activists encouraged their children to be "independent and responsible," qualities shared to some degree with conventional parents. The parents of Activists encouraged "differentiation and self-expressiveness, with discipline *per se* being less critical." Activists' parents tended not to accept aggression.[15] (164)

In view of these findings, popularized single-causation explanations for the rebellion: crisis of affluence, Oedipal personalities, generational conflict, "permissive" family socialization and so on are, in the main, not taken seriously. Also, available research *in toto* implies that generalization about "activist" students is not valid for all student demonstrators.[16] (176)

What motivated the activist students? Reports of surveys which examined this question agree on the major demands of these students, but sometimes differ on the ranking of these demands. A particular problem arising from such disagreements is that although "student power" demands are reported to have been the reasons for many demonstrations, a significant relationship of these demands to the student protest movement seems doubtful.[17] (Miles, 93) There appears to be an appreciable amount of agreement on general motivations. Keniston explains that protesting students share the mood more than ideology or program. The mood says that the existing system, or power structure, is hypocritical, unworthy of respect, outmoded, and in urgent need of reform".[18] (Kaplan, XV)

In more specific terms there is also wide agreement among researchers and writers that student demands for civil rights, opposition to United States' foreign policy, disengagement of American military forces for Indo China, free speech on the campus, student involvement in the university's decision-making committees, and curriculum reform comprise the major reasons for protest, with war/peace issues forming the most important category. Some writers also place great emphasis on the "depersonalization" of the multiversity and of technology as a major cause of student unhappiness and protest, but such conclusions presently lack definition and supporting data.

During the seventies, the student activists of the sixties were no longer at the universities. They were somewhere "out there" in society, working and raising families. And, just as many of the activists of the sixties were offsprings of those in

the thirties, the children of the former group, when they reach the universities, may likewise become active in student movements should they occur.

In contrast, it should be noted that the students of the seventies were socialized in the fifties and sixties. In the main therefore these youngsters formed their basic value systems in a period when their country was being badly shaken by hot and cold wars, environmental crises, political turmoil, assassinations of prominent national leaders and growing disenchantment with the "American" way of life. By and large they did not, as did their predecessors in the sixties, experience the phenomenal chauvinistic socialization process of the early postwar period (approx. 1945-1955), and their subsequent disillusionment and anger. Anger it seemed indeed when that cohort began to see striking disparities between the myths and realities of American democracy, peaceableness, racial equality and, in many other ways, respect for the individual. It is not surprising then that a Harris poll conducted during the May, 1970 invasion of Cambodia by American troops found that 75 percent of the students polled endorsed the need for "fundamental changes," 58 percent believed that demonstrations were an effective form of protest, 44 percent felt that social progress was more likely to result from radical pressures, and 67 percent felt that student protest would speed up needed changes.[19] (Jacqueney, 22-23) Now these "extraordinarily large youth cohorts who made and supported the rebellion are...passing into full adulthood, carrying with them a greater value for openness and analytical capacity and gradually replacing older cohorts (possessed with) a more parochial and more rigid orientation."[20] (Almond, 3)

Returning to the present cohort of university students it is noted again that these youngsters grew up in a period of massive and protracted protest to the vaunted "American" way of life. Among writers on the subject there seems agreement that the experience of these young people left them with a cynicism perhaps unmatched in any previous period. They seem very much to have been "brought up not to expect very much and they are therefore not readily disillusioned or outraged. They therefore seek salvation in some small private sphere over which they can have more certain effects and control in their search for security in an uncontrollable world."[21] (Keniston, xvii-xviii) Their non-violence, however, "should not be confused with pacifism: these are not necessarily young men and women who believe in turning the other cheek or who are systematically opposed to fighting for what they believe in."[22] (Keniston, in Kaplan, 38)

If these observations are correct, it is unlikely that there is in the seventies a "new materialism" or selfishness among our university youth. It seems rather that they are confused and cynical products of a particular period of American and world history. There is also no evidence or reason, of which this writer is aware, to believe that they are any less "idealistic" than their predecessors of the sixties. Also, in view of the continuing social ferment and an accompanying parade of humanizing social changes it is likely that such "proof positive" of further progress in the liberalization and humanization of American society interacts with their cynicism in a salutary way. This is not to say, however, that there are no distressing signs. Indeed, economic conditions, particularly for the young, appear to be getting increasingly unfavorable. Will currently shrinking employment opportunities for university graduates decline to the level of the 1930s, when 75 percent of graduates found difficulty in obtaining employment of any kind?[23] (Altbach, 59) Very significantly in this regard, it is reported elsewhere that as a reason for the French students' revolt in 1968, anxiety about finding a job was given the highest rank.[24] (Boudon, 230)

Predictions about future student behaviour are, in principle impossible since behaviour depends on interactions between student characteristics (including a propensity/nonpropensity to change) and on future events in the nearby and wider world.

In this regard, however, data examined for this study indicate that (1) the university has, since the sixties, become even more interlocked with corporate and governmental establishments, (2) attitudes, policies and practices of university administrations and faculties remain essentially unchanged, (3) state governments have not learned from the several periods of student activism in the United States, and (4) the built-in propensity for brutality and bloodshed, in the event of future campus disorders is greater than it was in the sixties. It seems astonishing that while state and local politicians have prepared, with restrictive laws and arsenals of weapons, for any future outbreak of campus disorders the university's academic community has, seemingly, only gradually and reluctantly accepted student participation (token participation?) in its decision-making bodies. Like the public at large, university administrators and faculty, lacking a historical sense of student protest, appear to have even forgotten the sixties, while feeling perhaps that the student movement of that decade was only a freak event and that it is not therefore likely to recur.

Such an apparent head-in-the-sand posture may well contribute to the severity of any future student disenchantment with and protest against the university, other social institutions, and other social conditions. It is troubling therefore to note that few if any academic departments, individually or collectively, have offered so much as a single course of study on this subject. In this regard it was again students and a small number of interested and/or concerned professors who appeared to be taking the initiative, as in the aborted SWOPSI program at Stanford University,[25] (Molenkopf) where their effort failed through "lack of funding."

Not only a single course of study but a comprehensive program of studies should be developed and made available to students on the campuses of at least the larger universities and colleges. Such a program would unquestionably require much planning, articulation, research and teaching on an interdisciplinary scale, and be established in a new academic department or center, serving not only interested students but the total university community and extra-university community as well.

The history of student rebellions is a long one encompassing many countries and the severity of the rebellions has, in twentieth-century United States at least, progressively increased.[26] (Altbach, 8) This trend suggests, of course, that a future revolt will be even more costly in suffering, loss of life, and property destruction. It seems evident therefore that the university, with public support, must strive vigorously to *prevent* future revolts. The effectiveness and viability of students' efforts in university government would surely be enhanced by a symbiotic research and educational program. Even more importantly, such a program should extend the seemingly single-minded concern students presently have with "teaching" at the university (though important) to the broader concerns of the local, national, and international community. That's where the concerns were, mainly, in the sixties, and that's where they must again be if the definition of "university" is to retain its meaning.

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