

# *new university thought*

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## Symposium

# The student movement

*Editors' comment: We continue our discussion of the "student movement," which we began in the last issue of New University Thought. We present here three divergent views of the student movement—its prospects, significance, and relation to society at large.*

*For the record, the editors would like to note their disagreement with the positions presented. In particular, we would like to take serious exception to a number of Frank Kofsky's comments on race relations; we will treat this in a future issue.*

## In defense of the student movement

*by Herb Mills*

*Editors' comment: At the time of writing, Herb Mills was a graduate student and Research Associate in political science at the University of California at Berkeley, and vice-chairman of Slate, the Berkeley student political party.*

Those who first wrote on the blossoming of political activity on the American university campus were content, by and large, to simply document the startling reality of such activity. More recent observers, no longer feeling the need to prove to themselves or to everyone else that something really is happening, accept the reality of "the student movement" and proceed immediately to a discussion of what seems to them to be its main characteristics, virtues, and failings.

While phrased in a variety of ways, one of the most frequently advanced observations is that student political activity on a given issue is usually based on a minimum amount of "analysis" of that issue. This

observation is almost invariably followed by the further remark that students frequently ignore the "connections" or "relationships" which exist between the issues upon which they are active. A third characteristic of the student in politics which is seldom, if ever, overlooked is his apparent fondness for "direct action."

These observations, however they may be formulated, do describe the objective, *public* character of almost all student political activity today. The difficult question is how such characteristics are to be interpreted. In the light of them, almost all observers have concluded that the student "movement" is "issue-oriented," rather than "ideological" in character and/or that it is basically a "moral" protest and not "political" at all. In less grandiose terminology, others simply contend that the heavy reliance on "direct action" means that too little attention is being paid to "research" on the issues.

### "Direct action" as a tactic

It seems to me, however, that such conclusions are, at a minimum, both vague and misleading. To begin with, how is the use of "direct action" to be interpreted? That such a tactic de-emphasizes "research" will not be denied. The adoption of such a tactic does not necessarily mean, however, that the students involved are either uninterested in "research" nor that they are ill-informed on the issues. This being the case, the widespread adoption of the tactic cannot be explained, as some have attempted to do, by arguing the presence of a "know-nothing" component in the student movement. On the contrary, there are two basic and related reasons which very largely explain the employment of this tactic, and neither of them supports the contention that the "movement" is simply "moral," simply "issue-oriented," or simply "action-oriented" in character.

First of all, and perhaps most basic, there is widespread feeling among politically active students that regardless of the research they do and regardless of how well informed they are, their position vis-a-vis the power structure of society is such that their views and opinions can be (and are) very largely ignored. Feeling this, yet feeling a very urgent need that the issues they are concerned with be faced and dealt with by society, they are prone to adopt a tactic by which they can raise those issues in a manner which cannot be ignored by the society around them. At the same time, however, "research" is continued by many, articles are written and read, and informal and formal discussions held. There is, in short, a continuing effort made to become more fully informed. This is partly due to the fact that the persons concerned are *students*; but, more importantly, it is done in the hope that, should they be successful in "forcing" at least some sections of society to face the issues, such knowledge and thoughts as they do possess may constitute an important contribution to their solution.

The second factor which enters into the use of direct action, while being of the utmost importance, has been almost totally overlooked by the commentators on the student movement. Direct action is also a comment on the nature of the power structure. Such action constitutes a "short-circuiting" of the present political institutions and thereby makes

manifest the grave doubts which many students have regarding the viability of those institutions to raise and deal with the problems which they feel that American society faces. In short, the use of direct action is frequently a very conscious and radical comment on present political institutions. At a minimum, we may hope that an awareness of these factors underlying the adoption of the tactic may put an end to the very annoying view that the student movement is simply a "moral" protest.

### Issue orientation and ideology

As was remarked earlier, the policy positions adopted by many student groups do not include, except very infrequently, a developed political analysis of the issues upon which the group is working. While this characteristic is particularly true of the student "political party," such is also the case with many "single-issue" groups. At the same time, the student political party does not publicly stress the "relationships" which its members may feel exist between the various issues upon which they are working. With this said, the question is still open as to whether or not such characteristics justify the conclusion that the student movement is "issue" oriented, rather than "ideological," or that it is basically "moral" and not "political."

Whatever the reasons for these erroneous conclusions are, the outstanding fact which has been missed is that "the lack of analysis," the concentration on issues, and the heavy reliance on direct action are in almost all cases the consequence of a consciously adopted strategy. Indeed, the decision on the part of students to give to the *public* dimension of their activities such qualities as these is a major clue to what the student "movement" is all about and to what the student thinks and hopes he may achieve by his political activity. The most basic desire and hope which lies behind the political action of *both* the liberal and "radical" student is that by raising and acting upon certain basic issues he can do something to create an atmosphere where political debate and discussion is again possible. Reacting against a period during which political debate was suffocated by an all-pervasive McCarthyism and complacency, the student has an urgent desire to make politics—*almost* any kind of politics—legitimate once more.

Such students are very much alive to the continued denial of civil rights to millions of Americans, to the continued infringement of civil liberties, to the economic and social misery of the farm laborer, the unemployed, the slum-dweller, and others. As a consequence, these students are nauseated by the hypocrisy and cant of a society whose official and semi-official pronouncements continually sound its claim that it has realized the freedom, equality, and dignity of the individual, and a material well-being which is universal. The student wants, in short, to politically energize whatever remnants remain of the progressive forces in American society. Having this most basic desire in mind, and being acutely aware that he thus far remains a very small minority on the campus, the student, both liberal and "radical," feels that the major task is still that of involving yet more students in his activities. It follows that *both* the liberal and radical have refrained from insisting that the

student group within which they are working take a public position which includes a lengthy and highly developed political analysis of the issues.

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## The liberal student

With the above remarks serving as a broad outline, the internal workings of this movement can be approached in somewhat greater detail. While it was argued earlier that the "public" character of much of today's student activity may be very misleading as regards the nature of the student "movement," that character does reflect a very real force, namely, the presence of the liberal student.

There are, first of all, a great number of liberal students who participate in the kinds of political activities which go to make up the student "movement." These students are active simply because they have come to take the ideals of liberalism seriously and wish to make them a reality. They are anxious to register their protest against a society which, while loudly and continuously proclaiming such ideals, has a very long way to go before they are realized. While their participation in direct political action reflects an anxiety regarding the unresponsiveness of "the liberal community" to basic issues, these students retain a faith that the present institutional structure of American society is such that these ideals can eventually be realized within and through it. In their acceptance of the values of liberalism and the institutional structure of society, such students are full-fledged adherents to the liberal ideology. This, by the way, makes nonsense out of the procrustean bed which is offered by such analytical notions as "issue oriented" versus "ideological" or "political" versus "moral." Be that as it may, such students are content with—indeed, many of them would insist upon—the present character of the public positions taken by the group within which they work. On the other hand, so long as the group's public analyses and positions on issues remain liberal in character, the liberal student is more than willing to work with the student to the left of him.

There are two reasons for this. First, the liberal student, stimulated by his sense of urgency, wants to enhance the political impact of his activities by reason of the numbers involved. More fundamentally, his willingness to work in the same organization with students to his left is explained by his desire to introduce into the student community that which he most urgently desires in society at large—a willingness to listen to and debate political ideas.

## Liberals and radicals

While a great many of the politically active students are liberals, many others consider themselves "radical." The "radical," unlike the liberal, is led by his analysis to the conclusion that without basic institutional changes the values which he wishes to be realized in social life cannot be achieved. (Because of the myriad of "organized" and "unorganized" student radicals which are active in politics, to become more

explicit would demand a historical, rather than analytical, approach.) Not only are there a great many radical students active, but the leadership of student groups is, by and large, somewhat more radical than is the membership and its periphery. What, then, is the attitude of the radical student toward the public character of the political activities undertaken by the student political party and/or the single-issue group of which he is a member?

First of all, because these students agree with the liberal that the major task is to involve more students in political activities, they are "content" to work on the basis of what is frequently referred to as "the lowest significant common denominator." On the other hand, the radical, whether organized or unorganized, continues to formally and informally present his views to the membership. This is very much welcomed by the liberal. At the same time, of course, the "organized" radical continues to present his views through his own party organization.

While agreeing upon a tactic which they both feel can build the movement, the liberal and radical students engage in a refreshingly open exchange of views. Indeed, the desire for the *open* confrontation of views is one of the things which both the liberal and radical student consider to be "new" about the style of politics which they have developed. Such openness is viewed as the corollary of their defense of civil liberties and the introduction into their own political arena of the type of discussion and debate which they want to see in the society at large. It follows that in those few instances where such openness has not been practiced a severe political price has been paid. The other side of the coin to this is, of course, a revulsion against McCarthyism and what the student considers to be "red-baiting."

### Whose failure?

The above discussion has conveyed, I hope, something of what the student movement is all about and how it functions. The task which the student has assumed, that of being the "leaven" in American society, is, of course, enormous. While there are many things in American life which make the reintroduction of politics difficult, certain factors are of overriding importance. The style of American politics, and more especially the character of its party system, has always made the raising of issues and sharpening of political debate difficult. An increase in the economic well-being of many sections of society has introduced a complacency into many of the forces which were previously very much more concerned about social, political, and economic questions. The increase in economic well-being on the part of many has been paralleled by a veritable campaign to propagate and advertise the middle class suburbanite as the self-image of society. This has had an immense influence in reinforcing a distaste for conflict and smug, self-satisfied, feelings of complacency. At the same time, moreover, this development, along with the astonishing growth of the various narcotics peddled by the mass-media, has assumed such proportions as to command almost all of the attention of the few social critics who remain. Metaphorically, it seems to many that the "enemy" has moved his office from Wall Street to Madison Avenue. It is difficult to get behind the facade. Finally, of

course, the cold war has enormously stimulated the tradition of ignoring issues and has made political debate and discussion all but impossible.

Faced with such formidable obstacles as these, it is not surprising, perhaps, that the student has thus far failed, by and large, in his effort to energize the presumably liberal and progressive force of the society. This "failure" is, however, not so much the fault of the student as it is of those sections of society which, while never ceasing to lay claim to the name "liberal," have thus far been unresponsive to the students' attempts to establish contact with them. The reasons for this unresponsiveness are many, and the previously discussed factors which militate against the reintroduction of politics into American society are of great importance.

There is, however, another important reason why the "liberal" sections of society have failed to respond to the student: they have not understood what the student is trying to do. This is largely the result of the erroneous ideas which observers of the "movement" have popularized. But, it is also due in part to the fondness some liberals (as well as commentators) have for viewing the political activities of today's student in the context of the 1930's. Of the reasons for the lack of politics in America today, only the first was also true of the thirties. If nothing else, an awareness that the environment is totally different should at least suggest that the two periods are to be compared only with the greatest caution.

How serious some students, at least, view the failure on the part of other sections of society to respond may be imagined. There is a serious doubt, on the part of many, that a student "movement" can ever be built when surrounded by an all-engulfing apathy. Indeed, even if such a "movement" were to be built, the raising of issues and their solutions must ultimately be the work of many sections of the society. Without this, not only is there little hope that basic domestic problems can be addressed with vigor and imagination, but the shadow of the bomb can only loom larger.

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