

# The New Left—Three Views

I. DENNIS HALE:

## THE PROBLEM OF IDEOLOGY

IT IS NO SECRET that the distinguishing characteristic of the American college student and his college has been their studied unconcern for any issues lying beyond the frontiers of academia. The great movements and issues of the age have left the Ivy Walls as firm as ever, planted solidly in the nineteenth century. The result—or cause—of the isolation of the university has been, for the student at least, a frame of mind that might be called “careerism,” the desire to take one’s place in the system as quickly (and as painlessly) as possible. Despite our public attacks upon “vocationalism” in education, we have fostered a vision of learning as the handmaiden to the corporations and professions of middle class life, and we have expected our students to shed any traces of social criticism for the more comfortable garments of the technocrat. Conformity—not only political, but intellectual, religious, and sexual conformity as well—has been and is the hallmark of all but a few American colleges. It is this background that must be borne in mind as we consider the “new student activism” of the late fifties and early sixties, for its origins lie as deep in the oppressively dull atmosphere of the university as in the injustices of American society.

Norman Mailer once wrote that one of the reasons motivating students who go South to work for civil rights is the incredible boredom of a normal middle class adolescence. The civil rights movement has aroused in the American student the long dormant feeling that the life of the world has something more substantial to offer than graduate school and split-level homes. American youth had been offered little else: it had been taught that all the world’s significant battles had been fought and won, and that we were now entering upon a rosy new era of love amidst abundance. The proper attitude, naturally, was to be joy; the proper expression on one’s face one of quiet optimism. All the old pieties were invoked to cover over the obvious contradictions of the new myth. Were there poor in the Garden? Yes, but they were lazy and immoral and no doubt deserved their lower status. Typical of the mentality of the time was the treatment of America’s One Great Social Problem, juvenile delinquency. The delinquent was alternately treated as a criminal or a maniac, but never as a genuine rebel.

But beneath all the rhetoric the unpleasant facts were multiplying with embarrassing speed—at home and abroad. The dispossessed were demanding a hearing—in Asia, in the Congo, in Cuba, and, inevitably, in Montgomery, Alabama. The Negro revolt was a breath of fresh air in the intellectual sick-room that American education had become, and the students responded with all the pent-up energy and emotion they had been taught to repress.

The accomplishments of the student movement in its middle phase are impressive—HUAC is dead, if not gone; the Negro revolt has succeeded in

most of its purely civil rights goals and is moving, prodded by SNCC and SDS, to broader considerations of political and economic equality; poverty is a nationally recognized phenomenon, thanks to early graduates of the movement like Tom Kahn, Tom Hayden, and Michael Harrington; American foreign policy is once again subject to public debate. All this is not, of course, the single-handed accomplishment of student activism, but it has been achieved with the massive participation—and in some cases, like SNCC, under the direct leadership—of the young.

DESPITE THE RECORD, however, all is not well with the student Left. Unsure of where it is going, or how it will get there, it is in danger of dissipating itself, like so many other radical movements, through lack of well-defined goals. What primarily distinguishes the new movement from the student Left of the thirties is its deliberate lack of ideology. The new generation fears the dogmatic implications of ideology, partly because of its misuse during the Cold War (the so-called “war for the minds of men”), partly because of the practical demands of political action. The experience of the older generation during the thirties and forties is taken note of—the fruitless disputations over the fine points of socialist theory, the endless (and continuing) personal feuds between obscure splinter groups. It is this also which explains the movement’s attitude toward the communists—Marxism, like ideology in general, is considered to be one more irrelevancy with which the old America attempts to burden its children. The substitute for ideology, consequently, is a kind of “militant pragmatism” more reminiscent of the populists than the radical movements of the twentieth century.

There is, however, one strain of thought which can be called something of an ideology, and which is in contradiction to the pragmatic approach. This is the distrust of the Establishment, any Establishment, and the feeling that it is necessary to guard carefully the “purity” of the movement. One is constantly being cautioned against “selling out.” If we are democrats, it is most assuredly with a small d. The distrust extends not only to the federal government and the Democratic Party, but to the big unions, the NAACP, the clergy, and the academic community. Anything that is close to the “power structure” is suspect. How this feeling is to be squared with the self-professed pragmatism of the movement is problematic, and the debate over working “within” or “without” the system is the closest thing to a genuine “ideological dispute” to be found among the new generation’s radicals.

Coupled with the anti-Establishment ethic is the notion of “alienation.” It is not necessary to go into the question of whether the new radicals are really “alienated” or not, but it is useful to understand what they mean when they use the word. Alienation in this sense means the perception that American society is not doing or talking about anything particularly relevant to its problems and, indeed, that it is studiously avoiding them. Out there beyond the movement there is a huge void, barren of any pretense of thought or social vision. This void, moreover, is beckoning to the erstwhile radical to come and join it. The temptation is great, and in the backs of our minds lurks the suspicion that some day we will, in spite of ourselves, be part of that hollow

world. Consequently, the movement turns inward, in a frantic attempt to convert and rehabilitate its own before they are swallowed up. I have the suspicion that many of the student groups do more good for their own members than for those in the "outside world" they are trying to help. But even that is a significant accomplishment. The graduates of the movement will refuse to love Big Brother, even though they may have to live with him.

But ideology, after all, is not synonymous with dogmatism, and sooner or later it becomes necessary to have a coherent notion of where one is going. The conscious formulation of ends and means is precisely the kind of thinking that goes into the creation of ideology. It is also, as Staughton Lynd has pointed out in the *Activist*, the "beginning of hope," in the sense that it is the beginning of the realization that society can really be changed. The need for a coherent system of values and goals is apparent, for instance, in the fate of the peace movement: after the Test Ban Treaty, a close approximation of one immediate goal of the Student Peace Union, the peace movement went into eclipse for lack of anything to talk about, until the connections between disarmament and the economy, pacifism and the civil rights movement, were reaffirmed. The connections are the substance of ideology, and they are inevitably necessary. The civil rights movement is going through a similar crisis, as its leaders attempt to orient themselves and their followers toward broader programs and alliances. The process of formulating long range goals goes on from conference to conference, but the day-to-day demands of short range programs inevitably takes precedence. At a recent conference on community-action projects among the poor, one veteran interrupted a debate with the admonition to cease the fruitless arguing, and "go to the poor." But once we have gone to the poor what shall we tell them?

The goals of the movement, as various and ill-defined as they may be, are the framework of some future ideology, as yet only imperfectly understood. In general terms, the movement's aims are well publicized, and can be read in the myriad slogans and phrases that have passed into the vocabulary—"participatory democracy," "meaningful work," "a world free from the exploitation of man by man," "freedom now!," etc. What lies behind the slogans is a common revolt against the subjection of the individual to forces which should not, in a democratic society, be irresponsible. It is fundamentally a revolt against political irresponsibility, against the failure of America to realize, for all of its citizens, the potential freedom and abundance inherent in the industrial order. Its goal is the creation, in Mississippi, Harlem, or Berkeley, of human societies where there is at present only inhuman bureaucracies or less than human despotisms.

But the movement falters where most radical movements in America have faltered, on the question of the means of social change. The dilemma is a cruel one. If the Establishment is to be shied away from, what is left? Third-party movements are a possibility, but the history of third parties in America is discouraging. Is it possible for the elite to reform itself? Can social change be brought about from below, without the imposition of laws and bureaucracy? It is a position similar to this last that the student movement has fallen back on. The young radical also demonstrates a pronounced faith in the ability

of public opinion to extort reforms from the power structure, once injustices are demonstrated, clearly, for all to see. This last solution demands constant education of the public, often a discouraging task. As Bayard Rustin has pointed out, you can demonstrate and demonstrate, but what if they just won't listen?

IT IS NOT SURPRISING, FINALLY, that this generation has difficulties understanding the nature and uses of political power. The American educational system seems purposefully designed to protect its students from the difficult experience of choosing between unpleasant alternatives. This condition—inherently degrading and dehumanizing—is what sparked the revolt at Berkeley. But it is curiously adept at producing the right kind of personnel for the corporate, affluent society of the future—like the eunuchs in the harem, the new men will be very efficient at minding the store, without ever being tempted to touch the merchandise. A similar condition exists among the new generation of activists—determined to change the system, we are often loathe to do more than march around the walls blowing our horns. Power corrupts, we have been taught, and by now we almost believe it. It remains to be seen whether the new student Left will be able to overcome the inherent handicaps of its own origins.

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## 2. STEVE KELMAN:

# TIME FOR SOME QUESTIONS

IN THE PAST FEW MONTHS there has been a surprising expansion of the strength of the student activists who have been busy for a number of years trying to build a New Left in the United States. Armed with little more than a few generalized concepts and a profound sense that "something is wrong" in America today, these students are hoping that a revived youth movement will provide a base for a viable adult force for social change.

Now that the first goal—building a *broad* student movement—is on the verge of success, a time for stocktaking has come. Let us make it clear at the outset that I am in sympathy with the New Left and that it seems to me that a number of their approaches to American problems, particularly the idea of community organization of the poor, are original and promising. But I am disturbed by a number of elements in the approach of the New Left, particularly because the ultimate test of the success of the youth activists of today will be whether they can achieve their goals. And in the final analysis these goals cannot be achieved unless society as a whole—and this means primarily the adults—is mobilized.

What seems to me to be unfortunate is that the growth of the New Left has not been accompanied by an attempt to define attitudes towards a number of basic questions. So far there has been a succession of attempts to get rid of many things the New Left doesn't like (and there are plenty of them!). But few have enunciated what is wanted to replace these evils once they're gone. Behind the slogans of "let the people decide" or "participatory democracy" has been hidden an unwillingness to confront such questions. This is fine if the only purpose is to provide an outlet for youthful rebellion or romantic anarchism. But I hope that the motivations of the New Left are more serious than that. For what hopes to be a viable political movement, able to realize its goals, such vagueness is fatal.

SOME PEOPLE ON THE NEW LEFT try to cloak the lack of a positive immediate program (as distinguished from a negative immediate program consisting of a group of things they don't like) in the sylvan garb of the American pragmatic tradition. They criticize the Old Left for being caught in the mire of a rigid ideology and view themselves as being free from such shackles and able to work from day-to-day on the basis of a moral judgment on each issue as it comes up.

But like the Old Left, the new student radical groups do have an ultimate vision of the world. This is something the pragmatists lack. The Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society, the most promising group on the New Left, specifies their ideal of what society should be like.

In a participatory democracy, the political life would be based... (on the principle that) decision-making of basic social consequence be carried on by public groupings. (Page 7)