

THE FAILURE OF NEW LEFT
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The decade of the 1960s was a time of far-reaching changes in America. Yet, in spite of the political, social, economic, and cultural movements that arose during those years and the lasting transformations they brought about, many have concluded that the New Left was a failure. This is sometimes attributed to the turbulence during the late 1960s, when the New Left’s anti-authoritarian outlook became more radical and the radical left took hold. The New Left seemed to lose direction, ultimately failing to establish any centralized, organized institutions or strategies to maintain these struggles in the decades that followed. And, in fact, some argue that the excesses of the activists during the Sixties unleashed a conservative backlash that hinders progressive causes to this day.

I would argue, instead, that to judge the New Left solely by the troubles and excesses of the late 1960s misses the essence and contributions of the New Left during the early and mid part of the decade. During those years, they launched a new dialogue of criticism and questioning of many of this country’s established political, economic, and social institutions, as well as began to take positive steps to change those institutions. And although the New Left was not successful in overcoming many of the conservative attitudes that were already ingrained in American society, the movements that took root in America during the 1960s – the Civil Rights Movement, the Free Speech Movement, the anti-war movement, the women’s movement, the struggles by Chicanos, Native Americans, Asian Americans and others – did change many lives for the better. The people who participated in these movements also caused many Americans, if not all, to question the blind acceptance of the status quo, as well as to consider the need to take some kind of active role in their communities and government – concepts that are still relevant today.

As the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) stated in the 1962 introductory note to *The Port Huron Statement*, their much-discussed and debated document which later came to be known as the “manifesto” of the New Left movement in America, “It is presented as a living document with which SDS officially identifies, but also as a living document open to change with our times and experiences. It is a beginning: in our own debate and education, in our dialogue with society.”¹ And in the introductory note to the second printing just two years later, they already acknowledge “changes in the American and world scenes, and in SDS as well. And although few of its original writers would agree today with all of its conclusions, it remains an

essential source of SDS direction, a continual stimulus to thinking on campuses and in the movement, and one of the earliest embodiments of the feelings of the new movement of young people which began in the sixties.”² It is this idea of an on-going dialogue in which we think about and question our world that was one of the most valuable legacies of the New Left. Even when we think we have the answers, and maybe especially when we think we have the answers, it is important to question the prevailing opinions and institutions. (At least I think so!)

The baby boom children of the 1950s and 60s who authored *The Port Huron Statement* had grown up in America’s new post World War II “consumer economy.” As they reached young adulthood, many of the fortunate students who were given the opportunity to attend college found themselves “looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit,” as “their comfort was penetrated by events too troubling to dismiss.”³ Two issues that molded much of their thinking were the “permeating and victimizing fact of human degradation, symbolized by the southern struggle against racial bigotry,” and “the enclosing fact of the Cold War, symbolized by the presence of the Bomb, brought awareness that we ourselves, and our friends, and millions of abstract “others” we knew more directly because of our common peril, might die at any time.”⁴ When they looked at America and the world, these students witnessed many paradoxes – lack of equality for the Negroes, nuclear power used for annihilation instead of powering cities, two-thirds of the world suffering undernourishment while American upper classes “revel amidst superfluous abundance,” uncontrolled exploitation of the world’s natural resources, and a belief that “although mankind desperately needs revolutionary leadership, America rests in national stalemate, its goals ambiguous and tradition-bound instead of informed and clear, its democratic system apathetic and manipulated rather than “of, by, and for the people.”⁵

These students had long been told by their parents that because they had been given so much, they had a responsibility to give back to the world. At school, their education included courses in subjects like existentialism, which led them to question the meaning of life and existence and to believe that they were defined by their actions. They were exposed to writers like William H. White, whose *The Organization Man* maintained that the corporate ladder robbed man’s soul, and Mills and Wright, two professors at Columbia University who wrote *The Power Elite* and *Men of Power*, which argued that people in the corporate power elite were immoral. Students took the ideas that emphasized the hypocrisy of American life and the need to lead an “authentic life” to heart. They worried that the “worldwide outbreak of revolution against

colonialism and imperialism, the entrenchment of totalitarian supertechnology – these trends were testing the tenacity of our own commitment to democracy and freedom and our abilities to visualize their application to a world in upheaval.”⁶

Rather than believe that “Americans feel contentment amidst prosperity,” they argued “might it not be better be called a glaze about deeply-felt anxieties about their role in the new world? And if these anxieties produce a developed indifference to human affairs, do they not as well produce a yearning to believe there *is* an alternative to the present, that something *can* be done to change circumstances in the school, the workplaces, the bureaucracies, the government?”⁷ And so the SDS set out to present a constructive alternative to the apathy they saw around them by debating, discussing, arguing, and writing *The Port Huron Statement*. They had grown up listening to the 1950s “Old Left” discussions of their parent’s about the merits and problems with socialism and communism. The New Left grew out of those debates as the students of the 1960s wanted to move beyond the old arguments and create a new form of government that they referred to as “participatory democracy,” which meant a taking part in the political process by *all* levels of involvement, from top to bottom.

With participatory democracy, the members of the SDS were seeking the establishment of a “democracy of individual participation, governed by two central aims: that the individual share in those social decisions determining the quality and direction of his life; that society be organized to encourage independence in man and provide the media for their common participation.”⁸ This brings to mind the civil rights “beloved community” created by Ella Baker and the early members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), another organization of young people that worked to fight injustices in America. And, in fact, as Clayborne Carson notes, Tom Hayden wrote the first draft of *The Port Huron Statement* shortly after he attended a 1961 meeting of the SNCC staff in Mississippi, combining “an infatuation with SNCC’s revolutionary élan with a belief that all activists should move beyond civil rights reforms and join in a movement for broad social change.”⁹

In some ways, the New Left created its own paradox, which made it difficult to sustain the movement. Their belief in existentialism, “your actions make you who you are,” reflected a sense of action, while on the other hand, participatory democracy requires a great deal of dialogue to come to a consensus. At one point, Berkeley students involved with the Free Speech Movement found this to be true as they remained together for over 18 hours trying to come to a

consensus on what their next action would be.¹⁰ This level of participation, in reality, is almost impossible to maintain within society, and is part of the reason it was so difficult for the New Left to sustain develop any kind of organizational strategies. But, that doesn't mean that the efforts to achieve it should be abandoned or be considered a failure if it is not easily achieved.

The disintegration of the leadership of Free Speech Movement and the New Left were caused in part by the same stresses and strains felt by SNCC during the later part of the decade. Internal frustrations, along with an influx of new people with more extreme ideas on how to get results, affected each of these movements. SNCC and other civil rights organizations began to face pressure from more radical groups who were pushing for more extreme measures, including black separatism and the ouster of whites from the organizations. Early leaders like Bob Moses and John Lewis and even later, Stokely Carmichael, were pushed aside, and no leaders stepped up to pull them together or articulate a clear vision or purpose. As Clayborne Carson writes, "following the lifecycle of other social movement organizations that began to splinter as they lost their ability to mobilize large numbers of people, SNCC came under control of ever smaller factions of its staff." Veterans who might have provided some continuity and leadership were exhausted after years of constant external and internal stresses, and there was never a cohesive strategy adopted in the later years.¹¹ As black struggles moved from the south to the urban north and violence followed, "SNCC became one of the many black militant groups offering black people the doctrinal residues of previous struggles while failing to fully comprehend the novel ideological implications of the new black urban revolt against white domination and existing black leadership."¹²

Mark Lytle makes much the same argument in discussing the failure of the SDS to maintain a significant strategic role in the anti-war protests, noting that although the SDS seemed poised as the organizers of future anti-war protests after the April 17, 1965 March on Washington, the group never capitalized on the opportunity. SDS leadership was unsure of how to organize antiwar efforts in any large-scale, systematic way, and "many of them were depressed that the march had no impact on Johnson's war policies."¹³ At the same time, a "new breed of 'prairie power' radicals" looking to rebel from their staid Midwestern and western conservative, Republican parents and communities, had begun to become active in the SDS and took a "non-cerebral and anarchic" approach to protest, unlike the mainly intellectual founding members of SDS. According to Lytle, "the combination of dissent within SDS, the more spontaneous

approach of the prairie radicals, and the reluctance of old SDSers to redefine themselves as an antiwar group, resulted in a decision to let antiwar protest develop on its own.”¹⁴ He continues, “so at the moment of its coming of age, the New Left was barely organized and often deeply divided.” And it is the disintegration of these movements that is often used to judge the New Left as a failure.

Not only was the leadership of the New Left and other social movements splintering during the late 1960s, what came to be known as the counterculture took hold and for many Americans at the time seemed to epitomize all that was wrong with the attitudes of many of the youth of the day. In reality, thumbing your nose at the older generation has always been a part of the American culture, but perhaps it was the dramatic, visible excesses by this generation and their daring mantra of “sex, drugs, and rock and roll” that made some Americans worry so much about their kids. As Jay Stevens notes in *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream*, kids didn’t seem to be listening to their parents anymore. “If your way of life is sanity, then give me crazy, they [the kids] were saying, which led a lot of people to revise their estimate of Godless communism as American’s number-one enemy.”¹⁵ And in Guy Straight’s 1967 essay, “What is a Hippie,” he argues that part of the reason for such fear and anger by the straight community when confronted with a group of hippies is due in large part to the refusal of the hippies to conform to the “most sensitive middle-class dogma: the neutral appearance.” The hippies (who didn’t like being labeled by that term) refuse to play the straight game, and in their rejection of many of the things their parents’ held most dear – steady, lucrative employment, the accumulation of wealth through years of buying more and more possessions – they both angered and scared them.¹⁶ The impression of uncontrolled sexual freedom, LSD, unintelligible, loud music, and VW vans with flowers painted all over them, is what many remember when they think of the youth of the 1960s. That does a great disservice to the committed youth that began the decade with a commitment to making America a better place to for everyone.

It would have been nice if the New Left had been able to put together a plan to convince everyone in America of the value of participatory democracy and to create an organization capable of doing just that, but to do so would have been an amazing feat on many levels. Participatory democracy takes a lot of effort and a great deal of discussion, in a nation known for preferring to act quickly. In addition, to make wholesale changes in the bureaucratic establishment would mean that many of those in entrenched power positions would have lost

their positions and authority, which would never happen without an incredible fight, as the conservative backlash that many speak of attests to. But to say that the inability to accomplish this makes the whole movement a failure ignores the New Left's success in creating a new dialogue of critical discussion about democracy and injustices in our institutions and leadership – as well as the contributions of the movements themselves in bringing about lasting social, economic and political changes.

Although it may be a cliché, history can and does repeat itself unless we examine and learn from the past. In focusing on the disintegration of the New Left during the later part of the 1960s, it is sometimes forgotten what was accomplished during the early part of the decade, and the legacies they did leave for today remains today. The movements of the 1960s – civil rights, free speech, women's, social and economic rights for Mexican-Americans, Native-Americans, Asian-Americans, and movements that have since grown out of these forerunners such as gay rights – are part of the New Left's legacy, and have changed America for the better forever. Many people throughout America have benefited from these struggles without truly understanding the sacrifice and courage they took to accomplish. Even beyond the many accomplishments of these specific movements, however, the New Left introduced America to the idea and need to establish and maintain an ongoing dialogue that isn't afraid to challenge established ideas and institutions, especially in times of supposed prosperity, moral complacency, and political manipulation. The New Left insisted that it is our right, actually our duty, to question authority and to strive to build a democratic community in which everyone takes part. These are living concepts that we cannot forget, no matter how difficult they are to achieve.

¹ Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), *The Port Huron Statement*, First Edition 1962, Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing, 1990, 6.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, 7.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, 8.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid, 9.

⁸ Ibid, 12-13.

⁹ Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1995, 176.

¹⁰ Berkley in the Sixties. Notes from film viewed in class, 4 Nov 2003.

¹¹ Carson, 293.

¹² Ibid, 300.

¹³ Mark Lytle, *The Uncivil War: America in the Vietnam Era*, Manuscript, to be published 2004, 19.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Jay Stevens, *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream*, New York: Harper & Row.

¹⁶ Guy Strait, "What is a Hippie? In "Takin' it to the streets," Editors Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines, New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, 304-06.

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A&S 513: Methods of Inquiry
Decade of Dissent: the 1960s
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