

## SOME ASPECTS OF THE ORIGINS OF THE NEW LEFT

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The origins and development of two organizations, the Progressive Labor Party and the Students for a Democratic Society, are examined as illustrative of the rise of the new left.

The 1960s have proven to be one of the most violent decades in recent American history. A great deal of attention has been focused on the activities of a group of students, called the new left, who have been responsible for the student riots at Berkeley, Columbia, and Chicago. The purpose of this paper is to present a history of some aspects of the origins of the new left, with a special focus on two organizations, The Progressive Labor Party and the Students for a Democratic Society.

The term "new left" is almost impossible to define to everyone's satisfaction. For the purpose of this paper, the term "new left" is defined as: a group of people dedicated to bringing about a violent change in the American society and government. The new left is different from the old left in that the new left is more willing to use violence in order to bring about this change, and membership in the new left consists of people who are younger than those in the old left.

The origins of the new left are many and varied. The beat generation of the fifties became a recruiting ground for radical causes when its members began to discuss politics. The beatnik was a person who rebelled against the society of his parents. He felt that the amount of money spent on armaments, the poverty in the cities, the treatment of the blacks, and the suppression of unpopular opinions showed the hypocrisy of the society. The beatnik was characterized by his beard, old clothes, coffee houses, and poetry (1).

As the university became a "megaversity," the personality of the individual became lost in the maze of IBM cards. This depersonalization of the individual caused some students to rebel against the society that created the IBM punch card (2).

The influence of the civil rights movement is of major importance when considering the new left. Many of the members and leaders of the new left are members of the civil rights movement. As the movement began to achieve its goals, the participants began to look for other causes. Some began to feel that, although there had been laws passed to insure equal rights, somehow real equality had not been achieved. The philosophy of civil disobedience turned into the politics of confrontation, as was first shown in the Columbia riots of 1968 (3).

One of the earliest leaders of the new left, and in a very real sense the ideological founder of the movement, was C. Wright Mills, former professor of sociology at Columbia University. In September, 1959 he wrote "A Letter to the New Left," which appeared in the *New Left Review*, a British publication. In this, he called for a rebirth of ideology and the formation of a new movement to replace the old left (2, p. 15). In December, 1960, Mills wrote "Listen Yankee," a letter published in *Harper's Magazine*. This was written in Cuba, and it praised the revolution of Castro, while denouncing Yankee imperialism. It condemned in vivid terms the rich American who came to Cuba to lie on beaches which the Cubans themselves could not use. Cuba was called an economic colony of the United States until the revolution. Post-revolution Cuba was seen as a center of the revolution against oppression and as a symbol of new hope for the future (4).

Castro and his revolution caused a great deal of romantic idealism among the youth in the United States. In 1960, the Fair Play for Cuba Committee was formed. This committee was the first real new left organization. One of its purposes was to organize student trips to Cuba where participants

were shown the wonders of the revolution and received indoctrination in the Communist method of revolution. This committee came to an end in 1963 when it was taken over by the Trotskyite Socialist Workers Party (2, p. 64).

Trips to Cuba were a major activity of the early new left. The National Guardian, now called the Guardian, sent several groups to Cuba. Some of these trips were financed by the Cuban government which delivered the money through the Cuban Mission to the United Nations. Students, who were prevented from direct travel to Cuba by the State Department, traveled to another country, such as Czechoslovakia, and then to Cuba. Fred Jerome and Milt Rosen of the Progressive Labor Party helped organize several trips. In August 1963, the Student Committee for Travel to Cuba was organized. The executive board consisted of two members of the Progressive Labor Party and three non-members. When the Vietnam war became a major issue, interest in Cuba fell until it ceased to be a significant issue, although several student groups have recently gone to Cuba to help with the sugar harvest (2, pp. 66-80).

The first major organization to be considered, the Progressive Labor Party, had its beginnings in the Communist Party. In 1959, Milt Rosen and Mort Scheer ran unsuccessfully for membership in the National Committee. After their defeat, they formed a faction dedicated to the Pro-Peking Albanian line. The two advocated that the Communist Party change its name and move underground. They also wanted to move the national office of the party from New York City.

In October, 1961, the National Committee sent Ben Davis to order Rosen and Scheer to cease their anti-Moscow work. They refused to do so and were expelled from the party. They then founded a periodical, Progressive Labor, and began to develop ties with other pro-Peking Communists in other countries. In April, 1961, the Progressive Labor Movement was formed. The name was changed to the Progressive Labor Party (PLP) in 1965. (2, p. 83).

The party is controlled by the National

Committee, led by Milt Rosen, William Epton, Fred Jerome, and Mortimer Scheer. Membership estimates vary but the figure of 700 active members seems to be closest to reality. The membership is 20% black, and the average age is 25. The PLP has opened five neighborhood club houses: two in Harlem and three in the Lower East Side of New York. It is strongest on the East Coast, very weak in the Midwest, and stronger in the San Francisco area. (5).

The PLP requires varied activities on the part of its members. Each must belong to a local chapter and attend weekly meetings. He is required to attend meetings of a study group in which Lenin's State and Revolution is the chief text. Each member is required to sell the party newspaper for 2 hr a week (2, pp. 98-109).

The war in Vietnam has caused the new left to take a radical turn. In March, 1964, Milt Rosen called for action against the war in a speech at the Yale Socialist Conference. After the speech, the May Second Movement was formed to lead a demonstration on May 2, 1964. Russel Stetler was made head of the organization. Peter Camejo of the Trotskyite Young Socialists Alliance, and Levi Laub of Progressive Labor were chosen coordinators. Through a series of moves the PLP faction was able to seize control of the organization. After May 2, 1964, the organization became permanent. A national magazine was established, The Free Student, and the organization has held anti-draft clinics (2, p. 111).

The major contribution of the May Second Movement was the formation of the Free University of New York (FUNY) in the summer of 1965, headed by Dr. Allan Krebs, a traveler to Cuba and former professor of Sociology at Adelphi College. The faculty included Herbert Aptheker, of the Communist Party, Lee Baxandall of Studies on the Left, (a publication of students at the University of Wisconsin), Allen Ginsberg, a poet, Calvin Hicks, a black nationalist, Charles Johnson of the black nationalist and Maoist Revolutionary Action Movement, Levi Laub of PLP, Victor Perlo of the Communist Party, Milt Rosen of PLP, James Robertson of the Trotskyite Sparti-

cist League, Dick Roberts, Roger Taus and Russel Stetler of the May Second Movement and PLP, and Sue Warren of PLP. The courses taught at FUNY were Anarchistic and Synergetic Politics; Imperialism; a Marxist-Leninist View; Poetry and Revolution; College Ethics and Revolution; Life in Mainland China Today; Marxist Geography; Art and Communism (2, p. 115). Similar Free Universities were set up, after the 1964 riots, at Berkeley, Stanford, and San Francisco State, where academic credit was given for the courses (6).

The largest group of the new left is the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). The SDS was formed in 1959 when the youth section of the League for Industrial Democracy changed its name (1, pp. 212-213). On June 11, 1962, 59 persons representing 11 colleges and universities met at Port Huron, Michigan. This meeting was responsible for the national foundation of the SDS. The Port Huron Statement, written by Tom Hayden, at the time a student of the University of Michigan, was adopted and became the statement of doctrine of the SDS. It declares that the goal of the SDS is to create:

... democracy of individual participation where each person shares in those social decisions determining the quality and direction of his life (7).

Originally the SDS was an organization of liberal and non-Marxist radical students. It supported Johnson in the 1964 presidential election (8) and fought for the recognition of the Freedom Democratic Party (2, p. 144). The SDS has cooperated with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in organizing demonstrations. It has also participated in several unsuccessful efforts to organize the poor into programs of participatory democracy (2, p. 158).

Since 1965, the major activity of the SDS has been opposition to the war in Vietnam. The war caused the SDS to radicalize and to form a united front with other anti-war groups. The first major SDS demonstration against the war was in Washington, D.C. on April 17, 1965. Support was sought from other groups, but the SDS refused to allow anyone else to help plan the demonstration (9). This radicalization reached a

high point in 1966, when the national convention called for all members to develop themselves into a movement for change in the society. (8, p. 53). This new radicalism and the removal from the SDS Constitution of a section banning Communists from membership led to a break with the parent League for Industrial Democracy (10).

The political ideology of the membership of the SDS contains all aspects of new left thought. The Port Huron Statement, although long outdated, has never been changed because of a lack of agreement on change. The SDS consists of a large number of former members of the right wing Young Americans for Freedom, as well as persons representing all shades of Marxist opinion, Anarchists, and pseudo-hippies. The SDS has been anti-ideology, anti-depersonalization, anti-liberal and anti-old left (9, p. 653).

As a result of the removal of the constitutional provision banning Communists, many members of the Progressive Labor Party entered the ranks of the SDS. This caused a polarization into two factions, the theoretical activists and the activists. The theoretical activists have begun to read the works of Marx and other socialists. The activists are not concerned with ideology. They believe that action must be taken and that revolution is the only answer (11). They place an almost religious faith in spontaneity. They believe that the people will revolt and destroy a society that is seen as oppressive of individual rights. The activists are not well read in the works of Marxism (12).

This polarization of opinion has led to a major split in the SDS. The occasion for this was the national convention during the week of June 16, 1969, when 2,000 delegates met in the Chicago Coliseum. There followed a fight between the two factions. The theoretical activists, or Worker Student Alliance, led by the Progressive Labor members, sought to turn the SDS into a coalition of students and workers for the purpose of carrying out a Marxist class struggle revolution. They wanted the activists to shave off their beards, cut off their long hair, and discard their jeans, because they

felt that these things drove away the workers (13).

Out of the activist has grown the very militant Weatherman faction. The term Weatherman is from a song by Bob Dylan. After the convention, the Weathermen seized control of the national organization and expelled the Progressive Labor faction. The Weatherman faction is dedicated to revolution and considered the workers too racist to work for that cause (14). Their leader, Mark Rudd of the Columbia riots, advocated street warfare in order to build up a revolutionary consciousness. Recently, the Weathermen have split into two new groups, the "Narodniki" and the "Nihilists." The "Narodniki," named after the Russian populists of the 1870s, believe that it is necessary to engage in activity designed to win the people over to revolution. The "Nihilists" believe in acts of terrorism and have been responsible for several fires and bombings (15). Another faction of the SDS is the Revolutionary Youth Movement II, which considers the Weathermen too violent and advocates non violence (16).

The new left began as a revolt by a few from the old left, which it saw as inactive and out dated. The new left has undergone a process of change in which many factors have played a role. Castro and Cuba had a major effect on the early new left. The civil rights movement led many into the new left out of discouragement when the passage of laws failed to achieve real equality. The major reason for the growth and radicalization of the new left has been the war in Vietnam. Opposition to the war has led many to come to the conclusion that a society that could create such a war must be destroyed. The failure of the McCarthy campaign of 1968 enhanced this belief. The riots at Chicago played a major role in shaping the new left as it is today. When the police returned the provocation of a few militants on the

crowd, it radicalized many who were previously non-violent. The generation gap has also been a factor. Many youths cannot communicate with their elders and, because of this, turn to the new left as a way to relieve emotions.

Today, there are several groups fighting for control of the new left. It remains to be seen which group will emerge the leader. It is impossible to write a true conclusion to this paper, because the new left is still in a process of growth. It cannot now be said for certain if the new left will succeed in bringing about its goals. It can only be said that, regardless of what happens, the new left has had a major effect on American history.

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