

The New Left

By STAUGHTON LYND

ABSTRACT: The American New Left is actually part of an international political tendency. Despite differences in form, student movements of the 1960's in the United States, West Europe, and Japan share common concerns: rejection of both capitalism and bureaucratic communism, anti-imperialism, and an activist orientation, violent or nonviolent. The main intellectual emphases of the American New Left appear to be anti-scholasticism, utopianism, and activism, as is illustrated in representative works by two authors whose ideas have greatly influenced the New Left: C. Wright Mills and Howard Zinn. The single most characteristic element in the thought-world of the New Left is the existential commitment to action, in the knowledge that the consequence of action can never be fully predicted; this commitment has survived all changes in political fashion. More concretely, the members of the New Left condemn existing American society as "corporate liberalism," and seek to replace it with "participatory democracy." American New Left theorists, however, made the implicit assumption that the United States would not turn toward overt authoritarianism, overlooking the possibility that their own success in unmasking "corporate liberalism" would change the character of the situation and force the Establishment to feel a need for more vigorous controls. The New Left's assessment of American reality was, in this sense, not too negative, but too hopeful. The prospect is not bright, but the trend toward repression does not necessarily mean the end of the New Left. Its origins go back to the thought and action of resistance against the fascism of the 1930's and 1940's. Therefore, the spirit of resistance, perhaps even, possibly, of nonviolent resistance, may yet rise to the occasion.—Ed.

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WHAT is the New Left? It may provisionally be defined as that movement, largely of young people, associated with the Student Nonviolent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). But even this common-sense definition has obvious limitations. It ignores the origins of the New Left in the period before the Southern student sit-ins of 1960. It does not deal adequately with the most recent phase of the black liberation movement, during which SNCC has declined. Above all, it is restricted to the New Left in one country, the United States.

This American New Left is actually part of an international political tendency. Differences in form notwithstanding, the student movements of the 1960's in the United States, West Europe, and Japan share certain common concerns: rejection both of capitalism and of the bureaucratic communism exemplified by the Soviet Union; anti-imperialism; and an orientation to decentralized "direct action," violent or nonviolent. And, clearly, such movements in the so-called free world are related to the heretical communisms of Tito, Mao Tse-tung, and Fidel Castro, to the libertarian currents in East Europe, and to various versions of "African socialism."

The year 1956 offers a convenient chronological peg for comprehension of the international New Left. That was the year of Khrushchev's condemnation of Stalin at the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist party, and the year of the Soviet invasion of Hungary. These events put an end to the hegemony of Soviet communism in the world radical movement. Response was immediate. In France, Jean-Paul Sartre broke with the French Communist party. In England, former Communists and other radicals created the journals *Universities and Left Review* and *The*

New Reasoner, later merged as *The New Left Review*. In China, Mao Tse-tung "suddenly changed course." According to a possibly apocryphal anecdote now current in Peking, "he made his decision after his journey to the USSR where he was appalled by the ideological level of foreign Communist leaders, and realized the ravages that bureaucratization had made in the Communist elite of the European socialist countries."¹ In the same year, 1956, contrasting New Left charismas were launched in the Western Hemisphere. Fidel Castro and his handful of followers landed from the *Granma* to conquer their Cuban homeland, and Martin Luther King led the successful bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama.

The history of this revitalized Left in America is, in its general outline, well known. Its political philosophy is more controversial.²

¹ K. S. Karol, "Two Years of the Cultural Revolution," *The Socialist Register, 1968*, ed. Ralph Miliband and John Saville (New York, 1968), p. 60.

² The older histories of the movement are generally by sympathetic part-time or former participants, rather than by full-time activists. In this category are Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964); Paul Jacobs and Saul Landau, *The New Radicals: A Report with Documents* (New York: Random House, New American Library, 1966); Jack Newfield, *A Prophetic Minority* (New York, 1966); and, in a more analytical genre, Richard Flacks, "The Liberated Generation: An Exploration of the Roots of Social Protest," *Journal of Social Issues* (July 1967), pp. 52-75. More recently, the activists have begun to write their own history. See, for example, C. Clark Kissinger, with the assistance of Bob Ross, "Starting in '60 or From Slid to Resistance," *New Left Notes*, June 10-July 8, 1968; and Richard Rothstein, "ERAP: Evolution of the Organizers," *Radical America* (March-April 1968), pp. 1-18. An excellent bibliography is available in three articles by James P. O'Brien, *ibid.* (May-June 1968), pp. 1-25; (September-October 1968), pp. 1-22; (November-December 1968), pp. 28-43.

INTELLECTUAL EMPHASES: ANTI-
SCHOLASTICISM, UTOPIANISM,
AND ACTIVISM

In 1960, the year of the Southern sit-ins, C. Wright Mills wrote a "Letter to the New Left," first published in England in *The New Left Review* and then reprinted in America by *Studies on the Left* and SDS. In 1967, the year of massive demonstrations against the Vietnam war in New York City and Washington, and of bloody black "riots" in Newark and Detroit, Howard Zinn spoke on "Marxism and the New Left" in a forum series sponsored by the Boston SDS. Mills was the theorist who most influenced early SDS. Zinn was the only white person to be elected an adviser by the early SNCC (later Zinn wrote a history of that organization, entitled *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, and also the widely circulated *Vietnam: The Case for Immediate Withdrawal*). Together, the two presentations suggest some generalizations about the characteristic intellectual emphases of the New Left.³

First, then, the New Left opposes what Mills terms "a fetishism of empiricism." By this, Mills means "the disclosure of facts" which "are neither connected with one another nor related to any general view." Similarly, Zinn condemns intellectual activity which amounts to "the aimless dredging up of what is and what was, rather than a creative recollection of experience, pointed at the betterment of human life." Zinn's condemnation of such "scholasticism" continues:

³ All quotations in this section of the essay are taken from C. Wright Mills, *Letter to the New Left* (New York: SDS, 1961); and Howard Zinn, "Marxism and the New Left," in Alfred L. Young (ed.), *Dissent: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1968), pp. 357-371.

We are surrounded by solemn, pretentious argument about what Marx or Machiavelli or Rousseau really meant, about who was right and who was wrong—all of which is another way the pedant has of saying: "I am right and you are wrong." Too much of what passes for theoretical discussion of public issues is really a personal duel for honor or privilege—with each discussant like the character in *Catch-22* who saw every event in the world as either a feather in his cap or a black eye—and this while men were dying all around him.⁴

According to Zinn and Mills, the allegedly nonideological enumeration of unconnected facts (as in "academic journals which would be horrified at being called either Left or Right") is itself ideological. One can be content with uninterpreted minutiae only if the fundamental pattern of things-as-they-are is satisfactory. As Mills says:

Underneath this style of observation and comment there is the assumption that in the West there are no more real issues or even problems of great seriousness. The mixed economy plus the welfare state plus prosperity—that is the formula. U.S. capitalism will continue to be workable; the welfare state will continue along the road to ever greater justice. In the meantime, things everywhere are very complex; let us not be careless; there are great risks.⁵

"Empiricism," or "positivism," represents the self-image of intellectuals in the affluent West. "The end-of-ideology is a slogan of complacency, circulating among the prematurely middle-aged, centered in the present, and in the rich Western societies. . . . It is a consensus of a few provincials about their own immediate and provincial position." Mills adds that Western empiricism performs exactly the same function of

⁴ Zinn, *op. cit.*, p. 361. Here and elsewhere, I quote from the manuscript version of Zinn's talk, which differs slightly from the edited published version.

⁵ Mills, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

blunting critical discourse about basic things which dogmatic Marxism accomplishes in the Soviet Union.

As the New Left views the intellectual situation, Western empiricism and "socialist realism," liberal academics and Old Left theorists, share an exaggerated interest in methodology at the expense of content. In the Soviet Union, essentially stylistic matters, such as the citation of correct authorities, and repetition of a limited basic vocabulary, complement the fact that "pessimism is permitted, but only episodically," that in place of "any systematic or structural criticism" there are "criticisms, first of this and then of that." In the West, "a pretentious methodology used to state trivialities about unimportant social areas" accompanies "a naïve journalistic empiricism" and "a cultural gossip in which 'answers' to the vital and pivotal issues are merely assumed." Complexity of manner and paucity of substance characterize official thought in both West and East for the very good reason that, in Mills' words, "the end-of-ideology is very largely a mechanical reaction . . . to the ideology of Stalinism. As such it takes from its opponent something of its inner quality."

Empiricism, however, is rejected not so much in the name of theory and analysis, as in the name of values. Thus, Zinn warns: "Because the New Left is a successor to the Old Left in American history, and because it comes, to a large extent, out of the academic world (whether the Negro colleges of the South or the Berkeleys of the North), it is always being tempted by theoretical irrelevancies." Zinn thinks that many of Marx's detailed economic propositions represent such irrelevancies.⁶ Zinn would keep in focus the

⁶ Zinn adds: "The Marxian economic categories have long provided material for academic controversy—and I doubt that Marx intended this. But he was only human—and

broad outlines of Marxist theory: "Instead of discussing the falling rate of profit, or the organic composition of capital, I would concentrate on what is readily observable—that this country has enormous resources which it wastes shamefully and distributes unjustly." In Zinn's view, the kind of theory which the Left most needs is "a vision of what it is working toward—one based on transcendental human needs and not limited by the reality we are so far stuck with."

In the same spirit, Mills, too, defends being "utopian." To be Right means "celebrating society as it is," Mills says. To be Left "means, or ought to mean, just the opposite": structural criticism of what exists, at some point focusing "politically as demands and programs." Mills insists:

What now is really meant by *utopian*? And is not our utopianism a major source of our strength? *Utopian* nowadays, I think, refers to any criticism or proposal that transcends the up-close milieu of a scatter of individuals, the milieu which men and women can understand directly and which they can reasonably hope directly to change.⁷

Both Mills and Zinn are content to define the moral criteria in terms of which change is demanded as "humanist." Mills speaks of "the humanist and secular ideals of Western civilization—above all, the ideals of reason, freedom, and justice." And Zinn refers to a "consensus of humanistic values that has developed in the modern world" which "Marxists and liberals, at their best (and they have not usually been at their best), share."

In summary, New Left intellectuality

perhaps he fell prey to the kind of temptations that intellectuals often succumb to—his research, his curiosity, his passion for scheme-building and for scientific constructions ran away with him."—Zinn, *op. cit.*, p. 368.

⁷ Mills, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

looks beyond existing empirical reality to what Zinn terms "a vision of the future." But this orientation still does not sufficiently delineate the New Left mind. A certain kind of liberal, for example, a Lewis Mumford or an Eric Fromm, shares the orientation just described. What decisively distinguishes New Left radicalism from all varieties of liberalism is its insistence on action.

Mills ends *A Letter to the New Left* with a hymn of praise to young radicals the world over who, in the face of the pessimism of theorists, nevertheless act.

"But it is just some kind of moral upsurge, isn't it?" Correct. But under it: no apathy. Much of it is direct non-violent action, and it seems to be working, here and there. Now we must learn from the practice of these young intellectuals and with them work out new forms of action. . . .

"But it is utopian, after all, isn't it?" No, not in the sense you mean. Whatever else it may be, it's not that. Tell it to the students of Japan. Tell it to the Negro sit-ins. Tell it to the Cuban Revolutionaries. Tell it to the people of the Hungry-nation bloc.⁸

Zinn develops a rationale for action-oriented radicalism at greater length. For instance:

The contributions of the Old Left—and they were considerable—came not out of its ideological fetishism but out of its action. What gave it dynamism was not the classes on surplus value but the organization of the CIO, not the analysis of Stalin's views on the National and Colonial Question, but the fight for the Scottsboro boys, not the labored rationale for dictatorship of the proletariat, but the sacrifices of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion.⁹

And again:

There has been much talk about a Christian-Marxist dialogue, but if such a

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁹ Zinn, *op cit.*, p. 361.

dialogue is to be useful perhaps it should begin with the idea that God is dead and Marx is dead, but Yossarian lives—which is only a way of saying: let's not spend our time arguing whether God exists or what Marx really meant, because while we argue, the world moves, while we publish, others perish, and the best use of our energy is to resist those who would send us—after so many missions of murder—on still one more.¹⁰

Zinn finds the New Left's concern for action similar to Marxism in some ways, different in others. He approvingly quotes Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach ("The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.") He notes the resemblance between the Marxist vision of the withering away of the state, and the attempt of the New Left "to create constellations of power outside the state, to pressure it into human actions, to resist its inhumane actions, and to replace it in the carrying on of voluntary activities by people who want to maintain, in small groups, both individuality and co-operation."

At the same time, Zinn criticizes the Marxist claim that the vision of a society in which men could be free and unalienated "springs not from a wish but from an observation—from a scientific plotting of an historical curve." Zinn observes that "we don't have such confidence in inevitability these days" because "we've had too many surprises in this century." Because a desirable future is not inevitable, commitment to action is all the more important. Zinn concludes:

It is very easy to feel helpless in our era. We need, I think, the Existentialist emphasis on our freedom. . . . To stress our freedom . . . is not the result of ignorance that we do have a history, and we do have a present environment. . . . Existential-

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 362-363.

ism, knowing of these pressures on us, is also aware that there is a huge element of indeterminacy in the combat between us and the obstacles around us. We never know exactly the depth or the shallowness of the resistance to our actions. We never know exactly what effect our actions will have.¹¹

The existential commitment to action, in the knowledge that the consequences of action can never be fully predicted, is the single most characteristic element in the thought-world of the New Left. It has survived all changes in political fashion. Thus, in 1968, Daniel Cohn-Bendit defined the role of a political *avant-garde* as setting an example, "to light the first fuse and make the first breakthrough."¹² And Huey Newton of the Black Panther party declared:

The large majority of black people are either illiterate or semi-literate. They don't read. They need activity to follow. . . . The same thing happened in Cuba where it was necessary for twelve men with a leadership of Ché and Fidel to take to the hills and then attack the corrupt administration. . . . They could have leafleted the community and they could have written books, but the people would not respond. They had to act and the people could see and hear about it and therefore become educated on how to respond to oppression.

In this country black revolutionaries have to set an example.¹³

"PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY" VERSUS "CORPORATE LIBERALISM"

So much for the New Left's general intellectual orientation. More con-

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 371.

¹² An interview between Jean-Paul Sartre and Daniel Cohn-Bendit, quoted from *Le Nouvel Observateur*, May 20, 1968, by Liberation News Service, May 30, 1968.

¹³ An interview with Huey Newton, *The Movement*, August 1968.

cretely, the New Left condemns existing American society as "corporate liberalism" and seeks to replace it with "participatory democracy."

Participatory democracy is a phrase coined by Tom Hayden in drafting the 1962 Port Huron Statement. It is an easy concept for Americans to understand, because the vision of a society administered by direct town-meeting-style democracy is widespread on both Right and Left. (For this very reason, most New Leftists would now add that the good society which they have in mind would be socialist, too).

Corporate liberalism is a more complex idea, which became current among the New Left only when early hopes of quick advance toward racial equality and international peace began to fade. Carl Oglesby explained it in this way to an antiwar demonstration in Washington in 1965:

We are here to protest against a growing war. Since it is a very bad war, we acquire the habit of thinking that it must be caused by very bad men. But we only conceal reality, I think, to denounce on such grounds the menacing coalition of industrial and military power, or the brutality of the blitzkrieg we are waging against Vietnam, or the ominous signs around us that heresy may soon no longer be permitted. We must simply observe, and quite plainly say, that this coalition, this blitzkrieg, and this demand for acquiescence are creatures, all of them, of a government that since 1932 has considered itself to be fundamentally *liberal*. [Italics in original.]¹⁴

Corporate liberalism, Oglesby went on, justified corporate exploitation with liberal rhetoric. "It performs for the corporate state a function quite like what the Church once performed for the

¹⁴ Carl Oglesby, Speech on November 27, 1965, published in Jacobs and Landau (eds.), *The New Radicals*, p. 258.

feudal state. It seeks to justify its burdens and protect it from change."¹⁵

Other young radicals discerned the same phenomenon in other areas of social life, such as education. The Berkeley Free Speech Movement (FSM) of 1964–1965 discovered that behind the liberal rhetoric of Berkeley president Clark Kerr stood the corporate power of Senator William Knowland and the California Board of Regents. Students were free, FSM insisted, only so long as they did not attack that power. As Mario Savio stated in a speech on the steps of the university administration building during a sit-in there: "Students are permitted to talk all they want so long as their speech has no consequences."¹⁶

Corporate liberalism, then, is understood by the New Left as an ideology which makes reactionary power appear to be liberal. It is an instrument of mystification, which solicits the oppressed to accept their oppression willingly because oppression describes itself as freedom. This aspect of power in modern America was partially perceived by the New Left as early as the Port Huron Statement of 1962. "The dominant institutions," SDS then declared, "are complex enough to blunt the minds of their potential critics. . . . The American political system is not the democratic model of which its glorifiers speak. In actuality it frustrates democracy by confusing the individual

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 232. Sometimes the demystifiers are themselves bemused. Witness the fact that the Foreword to the only collection of New Left writing edited by student radicals themselves, published in 1966, illustrates the mood of radical youth with a long quotation from a commencement address by—President Grayson Kirk of Columbia University!—Mitchell Cohen and Dennis Hale (eds.), *The New Student Left: An Anthology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), pp. viii–ix.

citizen, paralyzing policy discussion, and consolidating the irresponsible power of military and business interests."¹⁷

Accordingly, the celebrated New Left revolt against authority is especially a revolt against paternalistic, indirect authority which hides the iron hand of power in the velvet glove of rhetorical idealism. A notorious instance is the so-called channeling policy of the Selective Service System (SSS). According to an official SSS memorandum, withdrawn only after it had been discovered and publicized by the New Left, a major purpose of the conscription system is to guide young men into occupations "considered to be most important" by using "the club of induction." The memorandum itself makes the explicit point that "pressurized guidance" is an alternative means for accomplishing what outright coercion achieves in other societies.

The psychology of granting wide choice under pressure to take action is the American or indirect way of achieving what is done by direction in foreign countries where choice is not permitted. . . . Selective Service processes do not compel people by edict as in foreign systems to enter pursuits having to do with essentiality and progress. They go because they know that by going they will be deferred.¹⁸

The New Left's perception of corporate liberalism as a pattern evident in the exercise of authority by universities and draft boards has been buttressed by the work of sympathetic social scientists of an older generation. The historian William Appleman Williams and his students, at the University of Wisconsin, document the use of liberal rhetoric to mask expansionism throughout American history. Educators such as Paul

¹⁷ Jacobs and Landau (eds.), *The New Radicals*, pp. 152, 160.

¹⁸ "Channeling," *Ramparts* (December 1967).

Goodman, John Holt, and A. S. Neill argue that the mistake of "progressive education" was to abandon overt coercion only to substitute for it, in Holt's words, "the idea of painless, non-threatening coercion."¹⁹ Introducing Neill's *Summerhill*, Erich Fromm stresses the similarity in the exercise of authority within the classroom and in society at large.

The change from the overt authority of the nineteenth century to the anonymous authority of the twentieth was determined by the organizational needs of our modern industrial society. The concentration of capital led to the formation of giant enterprises managed by hierarchically organized bureaucracies. . . . The individual worker becomes merely a cog in this machine. In such a production organization, the individual is managed and manipulated.

And in the sphere of consumption (in which the individual allegedly expresses his free choice) he is likewise managed and manipulated.

Our economic system must create men who fit its needs; men who co-operate smoothly; men who *want* to consume more and more. Our system must create men whose tastes are standardized, men who can be easily influenced, men whose needs can be anticipated. Our system needs men who *feel* free and independent but who are nevertheless willing to do what is expected of them. . . . It is not that authority has disappeared, nor even that it has lost in strength, but that it has been transformed from the overt authority of force to the anonymous authority of persuasion and suggestion. . . . Modern man is obliged to nourish the illusion that everything is done with his consent, even though such consent be extracted from him by subtle manipulation. His consent is obtained, as it were, behind his back, or behind his consciousness.

The same artifices are employed in progressive education. The child is forced to swallow the pill, but the pill is given a

¹⁹ John Holt, *How Children Fail* (New York: Dell, 1964), p. 179.

sugar coating. Parents and teachers have confused true nonauthoritarian education with *education by means of persuasion and hidden coercion*. [Italics in original.]²⁰

The single, most comprehensive, scholarly statement supporting the New Left analysis of corporate liberalism is undoubtedly Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*. Marcuse's pessimistic thesis in this influential work is that contemporary industrial society "seems to be capable of containing social change," indeed, that traditional forms of protest are "perhaps even dangerous because they preserve the illusion of popular sovereignty."²¹

The New Left counterposes to the subtle coercion of corporate liberalism a participatory democracy in which individuals "control the decisions that affect their lives." However, at this writing (August 1968), the sentiment is growing in the movement that participatory democracy, like nonviolence, may have been the product of a naïve early stage of protest, before the magnitude of the movement's task was fully recognized. Nonviolence and participatory democracy will exist in the good society created after the revolution, it is increasingly said. But the work of transformation requires tools suited to this age of blood and iron: insurrectionary violence and a Marxist-Leninist party.

This new tendency to return to a dogmatic Marxism and to Bolshevik forms of organization reflects a weakness in the New Left's central concept of corporate liberalism. The theorists of corporate liberalism believed their main enemy to be, not the reactionary Right, but the liberal Center. Their attitude

²⁰ Erich Fromm, Introduction to A. S. Neill, *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child-Rearing* (2nd ed.; New York: Hart, 1964), pp. x-xi.

²¹ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), pp. xii, 256.

may be compared to that of the German Communist party in the early 1930's, which directed more hostility toward its Social Democratic competitor than toward the Nazis. American New Left theory made the implicit assumption that capitalism in the United States would not turn to overt authoritarianism. It overlooked the possibility that the very success of the New Left in unmasking corporate liberalism, the very growth of a serious internal opposition, would change the character of the situation and force upon the governing class a felt need for more rigorous controls. The young radicals' assessment of the American reality has been, in this sense, not too negative but too hopeful.

THE FUTURE

The prospect is not bright. But some hope is justified when it is recog-

nized that repression, far from being alien to the new radicalism, is the medium in which the New Left first emerged. Not only is it the case that the first major action of the white New Left in America was the May 1960 demonstration against the House Un-American Activities Committee, and that in Europe the New Left began as a response to repression in the Soviet Union, but it is also true that the origins of the New Left go back beyond the mid-1950's to the thought and action of the resistance against fascism in the 1930's and '40's: to men like Sartre, Camus, Silone, Buber, Bonhoeffer, and, in America, A. J. Muste. Therefore, the trend toward repression does not necessarily signify the end of the New Left. The spirit of resistance, even, possibly, of nonviolent resistance, may yet rise to the occasion.