

Youth and Revolt in Contemporary North America: A Backward Glance and a Look Ahead

By Dan Aaron

This article is a shortened version of a lecture given by prof. Dan Aaron, Smith College, Massachusetts, at the Nordic Association for American 'Studies' conference in Otnas, Finland, 1967.

In March 1967 a panel discussion, sponsored by the magazine, *The American Scholar*, took place which brought together two representatives of the so-called »New Left» and two veterans of the so-called Old Left for the purpose of provoking an exchange on the nature of the old and new radicalism. Although New Left spokesmen ordinarily disclaim any connection with their predecessors of the Thirties, the organizers of this symposium hoped that a direct exchange between the young and old panelists might point up the crucial differences that divided them and perhaps disclose a few continuities linking the radical generations.

The »confrontation» turned out to be an interesting and exasperating fiasco. Dwight Macdonald (one of our more genial polemicists and social critics) and Richard Rovere (who writes the Washington column for the *New Yorker* magazine) professed considerable sympathy for what they took to be the position of the New Left on questions of United States foreign policy and on civil rights. But they were also perplexed, and irritated as well, by the younger panelists' want of interest in yesterdays and tomorrows, their seeming anti-intellectualism, their ignorance of history. The two New Left spokesmen, on the other hand — one of them a leader in the Students For a Democratic Society (SDS), the other a director of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee)

vatives or Squares like J. Edgar Hoover but also by liberals and radicals.

Third, it echoes previous debates just as it probably anticipates those to come, although the under-thirty »nation« with its disregard for the past and future couldn't care less.

Before going any further, however, I should like to take a backward glance in order to suggest some of the continuities between the older radicalism and the newest that my four panelists neglected to consider.

I have contended elsewhere that a pattern runs through the history of youthful rebellions in the United States for the last 130 years. The 'activists or rebels from Emerson's day to our own have made almost the identical charges against their society and have protested in much the same ways. What begins as private rebellion often lends in social criticism, from attacks on the false ideas of the current »Establishment« to condemnations of its ridiculous and wicked practices. The period of alienation never seems to last very long. After his flurry of intransigence, the Rebel adjusts himself to the realities or makes his private peace at the moment when a new regiment of protestors is announcing itself with the customary flourish. The cycle, of course, does not proceed so automatically as my paradigm of rebellion would seem to suggest. Periods of engagement vary in length and intensity; the aftermath of the revolt takes different forms, and the ex-radical does not automatically repudiate his messianic hopes.

During the time of radical engagement, the protestor may conduct a one man revolution, concentrating on the search for private revelations, or commit himself just as completely to social or group experience. Or he might maintain an uneasy equilibrium between these two courses. If he chooses the first, he might settle down in some American or European Bohemia and live as promiscuously and outrageously as possible, attack his countrymen as a pack of Yahoos inhabiting a mechanized nightmare-land, make a virtue out of unintelligibility, find escape in drugs or alcohol, cultivate an esoteric religion. If he chooses the second, he probably associates himself with a radical cultural or political or economic program with the intention of changing the society and making it conform to some preconceived ideal state. He might still live unconventio-

experience. We have found that action usually dissolves in talk. Therefore we work now for immediate goals, not long-term unachievable ones. Black Power is one of them, because integration of the races won't come through liberal white intervention, not because of racial prejudice necessarily, but because most whites never have a chance even to meet Negroes.

»You ex-Leftists, burdened by old phobias, lecture to us in a paternal way, nudge us toward the Establishment; but each generation must work out its own answers. What's wrong with being alienated? You can be alienated and still work to change your society. And we don't need reports of investigations or books to inform us what's wrong with it. We have undertaken to restore it from the ground up and to commit ourselves to realizable tasks in local communities where the people concerned have some chance to keep control. We are not in philosophical disagreement with the Old Left (for we consider ourselves a continuation of the American revolutionary tradition) — only with Old Leftists now espousing a point of view that binds them to the corrupted adult world in all its various incarnations — Power Elite, Power Structure, Establishment, or, simply, »They«. »They« are the critics who condemn us for neglecting history and for failing to be tough-minded; who would paralyze action by dwelling on the magnitude and difficulty of the obstacles to be surmounted: who call for ideologies and planning; who urge coalition with Establishment-tainted liberal, labor, and civil rights groups; who raise the bogey of Communism.»

I have spent this much time paraphrasing this apologia of the young radicals not because they speak for what is popularly designated as New Left (for at the moment the movement is still unfocused and as schism-ridden as the Old Left ever was) but because the episode of which I speak is a useful starting point for my announced topic.

First, it dramatizes the widely publicized rift between what might be called today the »Two Nations, in the United States, the under-thirty and over-thirty nations.

Second, it helps to explain the barrage of criticism that has been launched against the New Left (an inexact term applied indiscriminately to the whole spectrum of youthful revolt) not only by conser-

vatives or Squares like J. Edgar Hoover but also by liberals and radicals.

Third, it echoes previous debates just as it probably anticipates those to come, although the under-thirty »nation« with its disregard for the past and future couldn't care less.

Before going any further, however, I should like to take a backward glance in order to suggest some of the continuities between the older radicalism and the newest that my four panelists neglected to consider.

I have contended elsewhere that a pattern runs through the history of youthful rebellions in the United States for the last 130 years. The 'activists or rebels from Emerson's day to our own have made almost the identical charges against their society and have protested in much the same ways. What begins as private rebellion often lends in social criticism, from attacks on the false ideas of the current »Establishment« to condemnations of its ridiculous and wicked practices. The period of alienation never seems to last very long. After his flurry of intransigence, the Rebel adjusts himself to the realities or makes his private peace at the moment when a new regiment of protestors is announcing itself with the customary flourish. The cycle, of course, does not proceed so automatically as my paradigm of rebellion would seem to suggest. Periods of engagement vary in length and intensity; the aftermath of the revolt takes different forms, and the ex-radical does not automatically repudiate his messianic hopes.

During the time of radical engagement, the protestor may conduct a one man revolution, concentrating on the search for private revelations, or commit himself just as completely to social or group experience. Or he might maintain an uneasy equilibrium between these two courses. If he chooses the first, he might settle down in some American or European Bohemia and live as promiscuously and outrageously as possible, attack his countrymen as a pack of Yahoos inhabiting a mechanized nightmare-land, make a virtue out of unintelligibility, find escape in drugs or alcohol, cultivate an esoteric religion. If he chooses the second, he probably associates himself with a radical cultural or political or economic program with the intention of changing the society and making it conform to some preconceived ideal state. He might still live unconventio-

nally, but he nonetheless becomes some kind of socialist or cultural nationalist or communist. But whether he is a Christian Socialist or Cultural Nationalist or a violent revolutionist, there is always something purposeful in his endeavor — a cause to defend, a program to launch, an evil to be attacked and eliminated.

Many examples might be drawn from youthful rebellions that broke out between Emerson's cranky generation (with its >>universal resistance to ties and ligaments,, and its »neck of unspeakable tenderness») and the apostles of youth during the first administration of Woodrow Wilson whose most brilliant spokesman was Randolph Bourne. I pass over these earlier generations, however, for the more immediate precursors of our current radical youth group.

The second World War brought to an end a radical movement that had started about 1912 and had reached its apogee in 1937—38, the period of the Spanish Civil War. A large and influential segment of the American intelligentsia had been affiliated in some way with the Left, but by 1940 — thanks to a number of disenchanting episodes that ended with the Moscow Treason Trials and the non-aggression pact between Germany and the USSR — its members and power had dwindled. The conclusion of the war found American radicalism in a feeble state, and during the first Eisenhower administration, no resurgent youth group arose to challenge the old order. In the timid and anxious 1950's, Mc Carthyism hung heavy over the land and discouraged revolt. Only the youth organizations sponsored by the religious denominations provided safe outlets for reformist zeal. No wonder the majority of the college generation born between 1925 and 1935 remained quiescent. Influenced in many cases by teachers, among whom were disillusioned ex-radicals, and taught to distrust a liberalism that — so they were told — had sentimentalized and falsified human nature, the college youth of the Fifties responded to the importunities of their elders. They were asked to be »mature», to be »responsible» urged to work contentedly within bourgeois society. To be alienated was to be old-fashioned. Bohemianism on the campus was *passé*.

Social historians have detected other reasons for the prevailing conservatism of the Fifties, but it can be demonstrated, I think,

that young people (a number of them veterans who had spent their yews of post-adolescence in the army) did seem to want to settle down, marry early, and raise families. And few cared to take on the risks of opposing McCarthy and Cold War politics. This defection of an entire generation interrupted the tenuous radical continuity that had linked preceding dissident groups.

And then the Beat Generation suddenly materialized, representing the antithesis of everything I have been describing, and made news. To their angry critics, they seemed undisciplined, irresponsible, and ignorant, given to naive simplifications and pseudo-philosophies, and mulish in their unwillingness to settle down to what they called »the rat race«. A recent and sensitive recorder of the Beat generation let it be said — the novelist, John Clellon Holmes who was a part of it, has rejected this stereotype. The authentic Beats, he argues in his book of memoirs, were not a social movement at all but a literary group not to be confused with their »Beatnick« ousins who have come to epitomize for the viewers-with-alarm everything sick and unwholesome in American life.

Be that as it may, the self-styled »Holy Barbarians« were symptomatic of the ever recurring tendency to reassert feeling, emotion, and sensation against sterile refinement and heartless intellectuality. Thoughtful observers can't agree on the importance or unimportance of the Beats (a question full of interest but too complicated to enter into now), but to dismiss them as hooligans or as an ephemeral artistic cult is to miss the point. Paul Goodman sees the Beats as a kind of by-product of an economy of abundance, as that part of a surplus population for whom there was no man's work. Since the old values of 19th century America no longer hold, Goodman maintains, such questions as >>>success for what?« or even »what is success?« (the same questions Thoreau asked) had a real pertinence, because young people in the United States — and all over the world for that matter — were fighting against the »phony« style of *Life* incarnated for the Beats in the phrase, »Madison Avenue.,

Even as the vogue of the Beats was passing (after having been thoroughly exploited, with the Beats' compliance if not acquiescence, by the Mass Media), a new revolt was brewing in the universities: the New Left. What connection, if any, did it have with the Beats?

John Clellon Holmes offers a categorical answer to that ques-

tion:»If there has been a new tide running in the nation these past years (he writes in his book, *Nothing More to Declare*) a tide of dissent, activism, and involvement (in civil rights, disarmament, poverty and freedom of speech): a tide that bluntly calls into question the quality of our life at home, and challenges mere anticommunism as a sane foundation for our policy abroad; a tide that has noisily erupted in the universities, the magazines, the public forums and the streets themselves—this tide is urged on by a new generation, which grew to awareness in the last half of the fifties, and was exposed to the example of a fragment of my generation, whose fixation with the idea that the Emperor had no clothes led to proclaim the bald and unruly 'No', without which the Free Speechers, the Ban-the-Bombers, and the white (at least) Sit-Ins might not have been able to say the challenging 'Yes!' we are hearing at last in the land. For if politics are back 'in' among the young, they are a very different sort of politics than those of the thirties or the forties — a much tougher-minded, pragmatic, life-grounded politics, a politics of personal witness and nonviolence, a politics that tries to replace bloodless ideology with the living body interposed between the finger of the Establishment, and the various buttons of the Society. All in all, it is a time of possibilities, for which the Beat revolt is not a little responsible.»

As will be clear shortly, I do not agree with his estimate of the New Left's >>life-grounded politics, nor am I convinced the New Left would not have emerged without the fructifying influence of Ginsburg and Kerouac. Yet the ties between the Beats and the New Radicalism are as unmistakable as their differences. Both found more sustenance in Sartre than in Marx, but, to quote Holmes again, »it was existentialism's conception of the nature of man that spoke so clearly to *us* . . . it is existentialism's engagement in the community of men that appeals to *them*.» The Beats, he says, practiced non-violence and pacifism not for political reasons, not in order to change institutions, »but because it was the only way of remaining a human being.» And he adds that the squirming dances and »the androgynous *fin de siècle* mops of the 1960's» suggest »an inner dislocation more psychiatric than eccentric,.

But let us return to the transition from Beat to New Left. The following time-table has been suggested:

1. The Caryl Chessman execution, May 2, 1960 after Chessman's twelve year fight to escape the gas chamber—a flagrant case of society's unwillingness to understand the juvenile criminal.
2. The Cuban revolution and the United States government's efforts to stamp it out. Henceforth the New Left would sympathize with popular revolts anywhere in the world whether communist led or not.
3. The demonstrations against the House Un-American Activities Committee and the showing of the film, *Operation Abolition* in which policemen are seen clubbing students.
4. The Southern Sit-Ins and the wide-spread consequences of the Negro revolution in the South (and later in the North) which followed the momentous Supreme Court decision on school integration in 1954 and the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott the next year.
5. The riots at the University of California at Berkeley which dramatized the dissatisfactions of students in the American »multiuniversities« elsewhere.
6. Student involvement in activist programs to remedy the plight of the urban poor.
7. The war in Vietnam and the controversy over the draft that produced a spate of draft-card burnings, marches, »teach-ins,« and riots.

Put in more general terms, it could be said that the New Radicalism was partly a consequence of massive social changes occurring in American life since the Fifties: the relaxing of cold war tensions, the increasing fear of atomic attack, the expanding atmosphere of tolerance, the Negro rebellion. Although this radical revival resembled previous ones, it had its distinguishing features. For one thing it was pretty much confined to a student generation which had never before existed in such enormous numbers. For another, it had no affiliation with organized labor or any one political group. It was at once pragmatic and visionary, suspicious of any single goal. It sought to organize the poor, to set up centers for slum dwellers, to call rent strikes, boycotts, sit-ins, teach-ins, marches, protests of all kinds, political and cultural. And it did all of these things at a time when the country had never been so affluent.

You will notice that I use the past tense. I have done so advisedly, not only because »history» in the United States today is what has happened yesterday, but also because the New Left—that amorphous thing to begin with — is now in the summer of 1967 splintered and disorganized. Although still a subject of intense interest to a minority of students and of solicitous concern to liberal academics and a small number of other Americans, it is no longer featured so prominently as it once was in the press, television, and radio; and for the moment, at least, it carries less weight than it supposes in the civil rights and anti-war movement. *Time* magazine's »essay» on the New Radicals (April 28), a pastiche of everything that has been thought and said about the New Left in the past few years, reads like an obituary.

Just as the Civil War of 1861—65 engulfed the reform movements of the 1840's and 1850's; and just as American involvement in World War I brought to a close the apostolic youth movement and general reformist ferment that effervesced between 1932 and 1917; and just as World War II concluded the already fading protest of the Depression decade—so the undeclared war in Vietnam has all but smothered the student rebellions of a few years ago, the civil rights fight, and the anti-poverty campaigns. Moreover, the attempts on the part of some student organizations and Negro groups to combine anti-war and civil rights agitation do not look promising.

If we review the past five years, some tentative ideas about youth and revolt in the contemporary United States suggest themselves:

1. That the current contingent of rebels seems to be repeating the cycle of previous rebellions: incubation, excited emergence, and reabsorption into the hitherto rejected society
2. That in retrospect, the New Left may very well be remembered, in the words of one of its analysts, as »a fleeting moment in which radical 'energies' were released into the larger society.»
3. That its rebelliousness, for all its color and idealism and dedication, and for all of its alleged 'pragmatism,' was at bottom a romantic protest against not only the failures, prevarications, stupidities, and pomposities of its elders but against Adulthood itself.

At the moment, the so-called New Left is divided roughly into a radical and conservative wing. The former or purist wing fastidiously withdraws from corrupt America in the spirit of the early 19th century communitarians. It distrusts organized labor, is alienated, in fact, from all major institutions, and is studiously a-political, activist, unideological, ad hoc. There is something evangelical about it, something anti-intellectual, too, as if convinced that intellectuals are always being corrupted by their own ideas and are adept in finding good reasons for immoral acts. The conservative or coalitionist wing shares some of these assumptions, but it splits with the purists over such issues as planning, cooperation with liberals, and communism. Neither group commands much power or influence.

What I have said thus far may seem patronizing as well as pessimistic, and I should not want to leave the impression that I undervalue the activists of the early Sixties who testified at great personal risk against racial prejudice, poverty, and war and by so doing called attention. (as their predecessors had done) to the unsolved problems and contradictions in American life. But a handful of saints and heroes does not constitute a movement nor do pertinent diagnoses of national ailments necessarily end in purposeful organization. The New Left has not yet been able to follow up its criticisms with a sustained course of action. Too often its protest merely re-states in the same generalized vocabulary the iniquity of institutions and personalities or ends in symbolic but pointless gestures.

To judge from some articles and books (dozens have appeared in the last few years) written by journalists and academic popularizers who make a living explaining the »Youth Scene« to Youth itself and to the uncomprehending »non-Swingers« over thirty, the New Left is only the political expression of a larger and unfocused rebellion. The anti-war and civil rights agitation, in short, is somehow bound up with the campaigns against »multiuniversities,« the demands for unhampered access to »pot« and sex, and the inalienable right to say »Fuck it!« If this assumption is even partially true, it may help to explain why the radical ferment of the Sixties has so quickly dissipated into generalized and often feckless protest, and why demonstrations and marches and psychedelic »happenings«

(twentieth century equivalents, in some respects, of nineteenth century revivals) that make the headlines and produce the illusion of accomplishment also funnel off energies that might have been more effectively canalized. Certainly they are no substitute for the hard and boring drudgery that reform projects inevitably demand if they are to achieve lasting results.

Of course I speak as an outsider and as one looking at the New Left in the light of older Lefts, but it seems to me that the New Left is repeating old blunders and committing a few new ones. America's problems are momentous enough to engage as many people as possible, but the New Left thus far (possibly because of its own disproportionate sense of alienation) has arbitrarily excluded a large portion of the unregenerate from its crusade. Moreover, in subsuming the enemy as the »Establishment,,it has conjured up something even more abstract than »Wall Street, or »the Interests, of the 1930's. For example, one New Left interpreter I read recently characterized the »Establishment» as embodying »such cornerstones of conventional society as Christianity, 'my country right or wrong,' the sanctity of marriage and premarital chastity, civil obedience, the accumulation of wealth, and the right and even competence of parents, the schools, and the government to head and make decisions for everyone., This is a pretty comprehensive (one might almost say »solipsistic«) definition of the enemy. Another defines »Establishment» as a term »pointing in the direction of *whatever one thinks* (italics mine) is the center or centers of socio political power in this system plus the necessary agents, mouthpieces, and hangers on.» The majority of the New Leftists, uninterested in nice designations, envisage the Establishment as a kind of huge computerized conspiracy diabolically frustrating every »swinger's» quest for freedom and equality.

In saying these things, I bear in mind the following words of an Old Leftist who is now a friendly counsellor of the New:

»The new-radicals have in their mind's eye an image of the 'old leftist' as a grey-bearded fuddy- duddy sternly rebuking them for departing from the hallowed days of their ancestors. These caricatures do actually exist in life, and they truly deserve no attention. Any old radical who thinks that an American socialist movement can be reborn simply by resolutely picking up where he came in,

by going back to business at an old stand, is dreaming senile dreams. The problem is *how* to work out the new.»

This is true enough, but it may also be true that a closer look at the failures and accomplishments of the Old Left might help the new radicals to walk around a few of the pitfalls their predecessors tumbled into or at least to consider themselves for the moment under the aspect of eternity.

New Left spokesmen rarely allude to the radicals of the Thirties, and when they do, it is never with nostalgia and seldom with respect. Certainly they can find good cause for this rejection. The Old Left was much too dependent on the European radical heritage, and the most important segment of it—the Communist Party—slavishly followed Soviet dictates. Its leaders, furthermore, permitted ideological distinctions to distort their vision of American realities and to blur their judgments. The Party lied. It fed on delusions. It indulged in heresy hunts, betrayed and devoured its own followers—often the most dedicated, and it cynically manipulated groups and individuals it despised. None of these charges can be brought against the New Left.

But if the Old Left was so imperfect, morally and intellectually, how could it have made as much headway as it did? How did it succeed in winning the loyalty of thousands of Americans of all classes and ages, not merely the alienated and the rebellious? Because, among other reasons, it presented a philosophy of history, an explanation for social change, and political and economic objectives; and because it tried conscientiously to persuade the uncommitted to accept its diagnosis of social ills and its solution to cure them. Events were to prove its diagnosis inaccurate, its simplistic solutions out of tune with American conditions. But perhaps the Old Left was right in reasoning that no revolutionary change could be effected without the support of organized labor and correct in its policy of concentrating its energies on that sector. Besides taking an important part in organizing trade unions it hoped to capture, the Old Left also pioneered in the fight for Negro civil rights and as much as any other group in the Thirties helped to dramatize the exploitation of the Negro in the North and South. Most important of all, for a short time at least, it managed to coordinate the idealism of hundreds of thousands of people who — although they were not

under Party discipline — willingly collaborated as students, artists, writers, and ordinary citizens against what they took to be the common enemies of democracy.

If the New Left is more »pragmatic« than the Old and less hampered by paralyzing theory; it is also less representative of the populations as a whole. Made up almost entirely of the college generation and, with the exception of a small number of Negroes, drawn largely from the middle class, the New Left is the ungrateful beneficiary of middle-class affluence. For this reason, it has been said, its response to poverty is quite different from the response in the 1930's when poverty wasn't confined to packets of misery but hung over a third of the population. No one in the 1930's spoke of »the culture of poverty*»; the Party regarded the >,Lumpenproletariat), as unsalvagable and the poor and unemployed as subjects for communist indoctrination. In short the Old Left was part of a revolutionary movement that in theory, at least, reached into every area and aspect of American life. It offered a way of life and a career to young radicals, a career that did not stop with graduation. It embraced people of all ages and backgrounds, and it produced its own brand of culture. It remains to be seen whether the New Left, without a long-term program or ideology, can sustain its membership or whether it will produce its own artists and writers.

I do not make these contrasts invidiously. I only wish to point out some crucial differences between a radical movement that was primarily political and economic, whose philosophy was Marxist rather than existentialist, whose concerns were predominantly social rather than personal, whose activities were not discrete, not piecemeal, but regulated and directed according to a design—and a radical movement that spurns long-range objectives for the immediacies of today, that is somewhat evangelical, even mystical, and unprogrammable. Most reform movements in the United States as well as elsewhere have been plagued by factionalism and torn by the counter-tendencies of accommodationism and ultra-radicalism. Sometimes these polarities have been called Arminian and antinomian, sometimes right and left-wing deviationism. Today the New Left, divided between coalitionists and anti-coalitionists, is succeeding no better than the previous Lefts in holding to the vital center.