

STUDENT UNREST· AMERICAN STYLE

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The growth of student unrest in American universities is outlined. Left, right and moderate positions are represented in this unrest. Student concern ranges over a wide variety of issues, from internal administrative reform to the Viet Nam war. Some possible explanations for the present unrest and agitation are considered.

Turmoil on the American campus has appeared to some observers to be nothing more than a restless urge by students to upset the normal functioning of a university with virtually little to offer of a constructive nature. Adolescent exuberance, idealism, and freedom from family commitments, it has been suggested, contribute to such activities. In the last few years, the style of student unrest has changed and colleges and universities across the nation have witnessed student discontent and apathy unprecedented in the history of higher education in America. Students have learned that violent activity, consistent confrontation with the university administration, and making headlines often accomplish what could not have been done peacefully. A glance at current news stories on education in the United States finds the following topics: 'The Decline of Freedom at Berkeley,' 'Crisis at Columbia,' 'Why Students Rebel.' The accounts are filled with expressions normally associated with unionism, warfare, civil rights, and political action groups. In general however, student demands have been manifested by such visible forms of activity as street demonstrations, protest marching, strikes, riots, picket signs, sit-ins, and most recently, lock-ins.

The fact that students resort more and more to pressure tactics and physical force to further their objectives has caused the administration to look into practical planning suggestions, and at this writing, there is some legislation being enacted in Congress to inhibit violence on college campuses. Never before have students been subjected to such intense scrutiny, analysis, and study. Several years ago, student demonstrations would have received only local coverage, but today, student activity on any college campus is reported in the mass media in great depth and with intense interest.

Historically, student unrest in the United States is not new. Student rioting goes back to the colonial colleges. One only has to read of the

activities of students at Harvard University in 1766 to note the student discontent and unrest at that time (1) What today is called a student movement has had a slow and natural evolution The silent generation of the 1950s came to an end in 1960 with the growth of the sit-in movement in the South and the peace movement of the North Groups like the Student Non-Violating Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Student Peace Union, representing peace efforts by militant students, were the first signs of the awakening of student political and social consciousness These and other campus groups made sizeable gains and grew into large organizations claiming thousands of student members with organized chapters on hundreds of United States college campuses For the first time since the depression period in the United States in 1930, students were protesting in large numbers and the main targets of protest were racial segregation, civil liberties, and poverty By 1964, the movement had taken on great momentum and was about to upset the academic world In the fall of that year the great student rebellion took place at the University of California in Berkeley, one of the country's forward and progressive institutions of higher learning (4, 6) The revolt at Berkeley sparked a continuing effort by students to become involved in foreign policy, in civil rights, and in matters concerning academic reform And it was also the beginning of a more formal involvement of students in political action Some universities immediately declared that college campuses could not be the centre for political debate and that students could no longer carry on activity of a political nature Initially, the situation seemed to be but a conflict of wills between the administration of the university and a segment of the students who formed the free-speech movement Later events and subsequent studies were to reveal that students were rebelling against more than just a directive, they were rebelling against the establishment, the whole university bureaucracy

The movement was not contained at Berkeley Students at the Universities of Chicago, Ohio, Michigan and other large state campuses as well as students at private Catholic universities staged their own revolts Ivy League institutions were not spared, Harvard, Cornell, Yale each had its quiet revolution

What students are seeking is to convince a great number of American people that all of its institutions, and the university in particular, are not perfect They find it difficult to see themselves working within the framework of present American institutions and they are making an attempt to improve and change them In their view, American society is on trial As one student at Berkeley commented 'The university is a microcosm in

which all of the problems of society are reflected, students in their idealism are confronted with a world that is a complete mess '

What, they ask, is the function of a university in modern society? What is the relationship between it and the surrounding society? To what extent should the university be an aggressive force for changing economic, political, and social institutions? Is the university preparing graduates who too comfortably fit into job requirements which no longer are relevant to contemporary human needs? What originally began then as a peace and civil rights movement, primarily to build a political and social consciousness, now took a wider focus. Student concerns began to include issues such as the political and economic status of the country, the cold war and the arms race, a repudiation of dogmatism and the establishment of a new morality. These activities became greatly dramatized in the public eye because of the movements' political activities.

STUDENT GROUPS

Although student politics in the United States embrace a variety of political ideologies, it was essentially the New Left, a group of student activists, who stimulated these protests (2, 8). This radical group has no formal ideology, no single major organization to give it structure or unity. It became characterized merely by a set of assumptions, beliefs, and goals. The main theme of the New Left is to be actively engaged for social progress (7). It is distinguished by youthfulness and idealism. The group tends to distrust its elders and expresses this distrust by alienating itself from institutions of the political, social, and educational nature. * Perhaps the most prominent group within the New Left is the Students for Democratic Society. The SDS is a fairly representative segment of the new student movement, and perhaps the largest radical group on college campuses. It has a committed number of members and is engaged in a broad range of programmes ostensibly aimed at curing the ills of modern American society, it appeals to students on essentially emotional and non-ideological grounds. It is opposed to loyalty oaths, segregation, university bureaucracy, and the Viet Nam war. In many instances, SDS has expressed its discontent on these issues by violent means. Recently, the group has had a split among its ranks and there are signs that the power it once has is diminishing.

On the other extreme of the student political movement is a group known

* Seymour Lipset states that Leftist voting is a response to group needs—security of income, need, need for satisfying work, and need for status (7).

as the Right Wing The Right offers an interesting comparison with the New Left The student Right is otherwise known as the young conservative and he generally supports the activities which the young left radical criticises (7) The right wing student is in favour of the Viet Nam policy and of retaining the loyalty provisions in the National Defence Act He is disdainful of civil rights legislation The size of membership of the right wing compares poorly with that of the left radical groups and some have already indicated that the whole conservative movement has disappeared from a number of university campuses

In addition to the left and right wing student political groups, many other groups were formed and are remarkable for the diversity of viewpoints they represent They swing from left to the right and represent a variety of ideologies, not greatly different from the main left and right wing groups The majority of these students are called moderates and have legitimate concern and interest also in dealing with abuses and problems in the American university Many of them are making their feelings and problems heard and are affecting change in very positive ways In several instances, moderate groups have been influenced by the left wing to carry on more radical programmes, but in general, the moderates are seeking change and are interested in working through proper channels to produce significant change in society and in the universities

One thing seems to be evident in studying dissent on college and university campuses in the United States The activity reveals that student discontent results from the realisation that there is a notable gap between expectations and actualities, between what ought to be and what is, and between ideals and actions The feeling of disillusionment, of distrust, of hopelessness, of alienation among college students is a serious matter Perhaps it could be explained by looking at some of the demands students have made to university administrators

STUDENT DEMANDS

It is quite evident that students want to play a more decisive role in the formation of institutional policies which determine the education they are to receive They want to be members of committees which set the requirements for admission and degrees They want to have a decisive voice in the selection, retention, and promotion of faculty members so that teaching, research, consultation, and publication are all regarded as equally important They want access to the administration and the board of trustees They want to serve as representatives of the larger society outside the campus so

that the entire programme of the institution will be made relevant to later employment. They want the freedom to bring to the campus speakers, who may be regarded as objectionable by some members of the community, but who are nevertheless qualified to discuss the critical problems of the day—the Viet Nam war, racial conflicts, the needs of the poor, and the responsibilities of institutions of higher education. Most of all they want to be treated as mature, responsible adults who have a voice in determining what kind of society they wish to create.

EXPLANATIONS FOR UNREST

It is difficult to state briefly what accounts for the changes that have come over American campuses. To say that it is a change in society or a misunderstanding of young people and the values of the older generation is too simple an explanation. Certainly the generation gap is real but it is a fairly perennial phenomenon, there has always been a generational conflict between the elders and the young. Change is a law of life, ideas and perceptions need to be flexed and renewed, and in many cases, the only way issues can be resolved is through conflict.

There are other factors which perhaps can explain the reason for present student unrest. Tanner (9) has suggested several such factors. For one thing, students entering college these days are roughly two years more mature, physiologically and emotionally, than those of previous generations. The high schools are doing a much better job of delivering academically prepared students to the colleges and universities. One way to update the system would be to admit students two years earlier. Secondly, it is common sense to assume that the more mature and experienced students are, the more they have to say. Moreover, they are willing to participate in matters that concern them. If we consider the fact that half of America's population in the next few years will be under twenty-five years old, it is not illogical to conclude that students want an increasing voice to match their growing proportions. Thirdly, higher education in the United States has become more important for a greater number of people. A larger proportion of the population, than ever before is now involved in some form or type of college education. * With rapid changes in technology and economic development, with a shift to sophisticated industrialisation and technology, the importance of the university in our national life has become

* Projected reports from the US Census Bureau indicate that by 1970 one in 6 Whites and one in 10 Blacks will have four years of college or more.

more significant. Fourthly, the Black Power Movement in America has placed pressure on colleges and universities to change their departments and structures to include Black culture studies in the American educational system. For many students, especially left wing and moderates, these demands for autonomy for Black culture studies seem reasonable. Finally, the Viet Nam war continues to irritate the young. Students' careers are interrupted, lives are sacrificed, prospects of marriage and family delayed. The upheaval that the war has caused is perhaps one of the major factors why students are uneasy and rebellious. To many students, the Viet Nam war is immoral and the Washington administration has failed to make its case to the nation.

It is a truism to say that students can no longer be taken for granted. A growing proportion of the student population has forced us to re-examine and evaluate our basic values, rules, and institutions. Dr Halleck, a psychiatrist at the University of Wisconsin has described what he sees as happening on American campuses (5). The student activists are seen as students who reject the political and economic status quo and are making vigorous attempts to change the structure of society. Other students, who can be described as alienated, completely reject the values of their society as well as the values of their own past and are developing a style of life which is contradictory to the Western ethics of hard work, self-denial, success, and responsibility. Both types of student (activist and alienated student) tend to come from affluent middle or upper class homes. They are sensitive, perceptive and highly intelligent individuals. Both types also have difficulty in relating to the adult generation. They are articulate, irreverent, humourless, and relentless in their contempt for what they view as adult hypocrisy. They turn to one another, rather than to their parents, when shaping their belief systems or when seeking emotional support. Alienated students, and to a lesser extent activist students, find it difficult to sustain goal-directed activity. Their capacity to organise for any kind of action is limited. They often fail at work or at school. Even their political efforts seem highly disorganised. Indeed alienated students live at the edge of despair. Although they may seem at times to be enjoying life, they easily become depressed and suicidal. While active students are more emotionally stable, they too are prone to deep feelings of hopelessness and self-pity.

CONCLUSION

The time for change in American society is ripe and perhaps the student movements will have a good influence on the quality of that change. If

the statements made in this paper and the statements of Dr Tanner and of Dr Halleck explain why students act as they do, then perhaps it is necessary to begin to think more seriously about ways of working within the student movement and to listen and understand their concerns and demands. It is necessary to bear in mind that the present generation of students is perhaps more intelligent, better informed, more idealistic, and more concerned with public issues than any previous generation. Students however are not given sufficient responsibility to challenge their abilities. Today's students do not want to be moulded into the image of their teachers or of other adults. They feel capable of determining their own needs and of making decisions which concern themselves. They regard a student's private life as his own concern. Thus, a student's political affiliations, his manner of dress, length of hair, should not affect his ability to undertake the educational process.

A university is a place where people come together to study, think, teach, learn and inquire. It should be the first place to sense and respond to the problems in society but it should not be called upon to serve as a shock absorber for all the problems in society (3).

Finally, we should begin to realise that higher education is no longer for the elite, nor is it a privilege. It has become a basic right and is becoming available to more and more Americans.

One thing is abundantly clear. Whatever decisions will be made and whatever legislation will be enacted, it seems that the issues are these: students are influencing the social and moral structures of our society and are forcing us to face fundamental issues in shaping the America we want. For this we may have to endure additional trials and more student unrest. To be sure, the movement is not yet over.

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