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FROM REVOLUTION TO APATHY – AMERICAN STUDENT ACTIVISM IN THE 1970s

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ABSTRACT

The contrast between the widespread activism of the 1960s and the relative calm of the 1970s in the American universities is dramatic. In general, American students are not now politically active, although there have been a small number of demonstrations. The political traditions of American students are important to understand in order to analyze the current situation. The first period of widespread activism was during the 1930s, with the decade of the 1950s returning to political calm. The sixties was the zenith of American student activism, and the impact of the counter culture and of some of the political struggles of this period continues to influence the campus. The lack of a clearly threatening foreign policy issue, economic problems, disillusionment with past politics and other factors have all contributed to the political quiet of the seventies. The paper concludes with a description of current campus trends.

The 1970s has been seen as a period of student political apathy in the United States. Scholars, university administrators, and students seem just as surprised by the present period of political quiet on campus as they were by previous waves of activism [1]. The present decade stands in especially sharp contrast to the "revolutionary" 1960s, clearly one of the most active periods on campus [2]. The general public, which at one period in the sixties label student activism the issue of greatest national concern, no longer takes much interest in campus life. While explanations of the previous wave of activism were numerous if diffuse and often unconvincing, few social scientists have posited hypotheses concerning the current campus calm (Woodward, 1974; Lipset, 1976, pp. xxvii–1).

The contemporary campus scene is much more complicated than is immediately apparent. Compared to the 1960s, the seventies has indeed been quiet. No major student movements have emerged, disruptive demonstrations have been rare, and in general students have not seemed to be politically oriented. Yet, basic student attitudes do not seem to have changed dramatically from the sixties, according to opinion surveys. Students remained on

the liberal to radical end of the political spectrum. In the past few years, they have grown somewhat more conservative on political issues and somewhat more liberal on life-style questions, but without major shifts. Some sporadic student activist currents were apparent during the decade as well. Kent State University erupted briefly in 1977, resulting in almost 200 arrests. American foreign policy in South Africa – and university investments there – stimulated demonstrations at perhaps fifty universities, with some violence occurring in California. And some new forms of political action, such as the environmental movement, the Public Interest Research Groups, and state-wide student lobbying efforts emerged in the seventies. Those involved in activism were more politically sophisticated, having learned from the mistakes of the sixties.

In many ways, the seventies are much more typical of American student life than was the previous decade. Viewed in historical perspective, university students have not been notably politically active in the United States. Yet, the campus has from time to time played a role in shaping American politics. The major political events of the seventies, such as Watergate, the so-called "taxpayers revolts" and others were played out basically without campus participation. Foreign policy issues, the main stimulus of major student activism, have not been a major factor in the public consciousness during the seventies.

Student activism was also not a major political force in most of the European industrialized nations during the seventies. The dramatic West German and French student movements of the 1960s have virtually disappeared from the scene. Small groups of students continued to be politically active, and the focus of the activism that remained was leftist. Italy has been an exception to the rule of quiet, as students have sporadically responded dramatically to Italy's continuing economic and political crisis. Students have been key political forces in a number of Third World nations, and thus there are relatively few cross-cultural generalizations that can be made. Thai students helped to topple a regime, and students constitute a key oppositional force in South Korea. Iranian students were a key element in overthrowing the Shah, and students in India and Latin America remain politically involved. The patterns of student activism differ substantially around the world, although the period of relative quiet which is observable in the United States has been repeated in most of the European democracies.

This article will describe and analyze the current status of student activism in the United States and will offer some tentative explanations for the lack of political concern on the campus. It will also seek to contrast the present situation with the period of more intense activism in the 1960s. It is my conviction that the present lack of activism tells us much about the state of campus life.

Historical Perspectives

American student activism must be seen in historical perspective (Altbach, 1974; Altbach and Peterson, 1971, pp. 1–14). While students were involved in political and other activities at earlier periods, the history of ideologically-based activist movements and organizations stems from the early years of the twentieth century. Students were, for example, sporadically involved in political and other activism in the period following the War of 1812, and later in the anti-slavery movement of the nineteenth century, but no identifiable organizations emerged from these movements (Novak, 1977). In this century, one can see both organizational continuity and several distinct phases of activism. The Intercollegiate Socialist Society (ISS), founded in 1905, was the first self-consciously radical student organization. It survived, under various names until the 1960s. Its last incarnation, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), was the most successful national student organization of the sixties (Sale, 1973). The saga of the SDS and its predecessors, while beyond the scope of this article, illustrates the themes of some organizational continuity and changing campus political styles and orientations over a half-century period.

The twentieth century has seen several distinct waves of student activism. The "progressive" period prior to World War I saw the emergence of the first ideological student organization. The ISS and other groups, such as the Young Intellectuals, saw themselves as educational enterprises, and were not activist in orientation. They were liberal or radical in their views, and conservative student movements had little impact at this time. The nascent movement was strong mainly in the elite colleges and universities and on a few campuses located in large metropolitan areas, so most students were basically unaffected by these groups.

World War I and the ensuing period of the "roaring twenties" brought an end to the ISS and related groups, although glimmerings of political and social concern continued on campus, especially in the moderate and liberal religious campus organizations which were active at the time (Fass, 1977). The focus of these early student organizations was mainly on broader social, political and cultural questions, including foreign policy. Students had a considerable interest in cultural matters and followed the writings of such commentators as H. L. Mencken. Students sought cultural self-definition and separated themselves from what they perceived as a shallow popular culture of the period. In an effort to stimulate widespread support, student activists focused on intramural questions such as ROTC, the censorship of the campus press, and similar issues (Fass, 1977, pp. 339–43). Despite major efforts by the small minority of activists, the large majority of the student population was unaffected by either the political or cultural stirrings of the period. Without question, the twenties was a period of general campus apathy.

The decade of the 1930s was the period of the most intense student activism prior to the sixties. While the decade began with a feeling of social crisis, there was relatively little student activism until late in the decade. As the combined impact of the economic depression and a growing awareness of foreign policy issues such as the rise of fascism in Europe and the changing role of the United States in world affairs, students became increasingly involved in political activism. This period saw the emergence of large-scale ideologically-oriented organizations on the left. While communist and socialist student groups grew modestly during the early thirties, the major student organization of the decade was most active in the late 1930s. The American Student Union (ASU) was for most of its history a united front of socialists, communists and liberals (Wechsler, 1935).

The major motivating force for activism during the thirties was not the depression with its attendant economic dislocation, the rise of the labor movement, or the other dramatic changes in American domestic life, but rather it was foreign policy which most effectively mobilized students. This emphasis reflected the largely middle class nature of the student population. Peace demonstrations, including several annual national peace "strikes", constituted the main thrust of the movement. While politically conscious students were almost uniformly anti-fascist, there was a strong campus sentiment against American involvement in the war in Europe in the late 1930s. The Stalin–Hitler pact further confused liberals and radicals and damaged the student movement. Unlike Europe, there was no significant right-wing student movement during this period.

American entry into World War II brought student activism to an abrupt end. For the most part, previously anti-war students eagerly joined the war effort. Only a small minority of pacifists and socialists continued to oppose the conflict.

The immediate post-war period saw a revival of interest in politics on campus and the growth of considerable idealism about the United Nations, the possibilities for world peace and in general for the future of the post-war world.

There was a short-lived revival of the student movement in 1947 and 1948. Thousands rallied to groups like the United World Federalists, and the presidential campaign of Henry Wallace of the Progressive Party drew substantial student support. The bubble burst quickly. Wallace gathered few votes in the 1948 election and the bright promise of world government, the United Nations and Soviet–American cooperation ended even earlier. The Cold War, which probably began in earnest with the Truman Doctrine in 1947, dealt a serious blow to student activism, which did not resume to any significant degree until the end of the 1950s. Most Americans were convinced that the Soviet Union constituted a real menace and any social movement that was even peripherally related to communism became deeply

suspect, even on the fairly liberal university campuses. The Korean conflict, while never a popular war in the United States, focused clearly on an external enemy and made campus activism increasingly difficult. Outright repression during the 1950s also inhibited political expression of any kind. Loyalty oaths were instituted in many states. Communists and others were hounded from jobs in universities and elsewhere while the campaigns of Senator Joseph McCarthy, the House Committee on UnAmerican Activities and other right-wing "communist hunters" were in full force [3]. As a result of these pressures plus a notable careerism among students in the aftermath of World War II, political activism virtually came to an end.

Student activism began slowly to revive in the late 1950s. McCarthy's repression was gradually discredited and the expression of political opinion of an unpopular nature became less risky. The Sino–Soviet dispute and a growing political awareness in general made the "threat" of monolithic communism less dramatic. America was in a relatively relaxed period of economic prosperity and peace. Yet, on the campus, there was a growing unease. Triggered at first by a fear of nuclear weapons and somewhat later by growing liberal sympathy for the emerging civil rights movement in the South, student political awareness and activism grew in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The election of John F. Kennedy in 1960 was marked by a rhetoric of liberalism and involvement. America was in a mood for change, and the student community wanted to make sure that the rhetoric was translated into action. While it is not possible here to chronicle the early years of the revival of the student movement, it is clear that the combination of a liberalization in the society generally, economic prosperity and growth, a new understanding on campus of the problems of world peace, and the emergence of the civil rights movement as the "conscience" of many white liberals all combined to stimulate a revival of student activism (O'Brien, 1971, pp. 15–25; Altbach, 1974).

The Legacy of the Sixties

Like previous times of intense activism, the major motivating force of the sixties was foreign policy, specifically the Vietnam War [4]. Other elements added intensity to the activist thrust. The civil rights movement stimulated a new consciousness among blacks and an awareness of America's racial dilemma among some whites, especially on the campuses. Higher education, for a number of reasons, assumed an unprecedented position of importance in American society and this focused increased attention on the universities. An academic degree was seen as the key to professional status and a middle class life-style. Enrollment in post-secondary education also kept a student out of military service. Thus, enrollments grew rapidly, and

unprecedented amounts of money were spent on higher education. At the same time students saw themselves as part of massive and bureaucratic universities at odds with the traditional spirit of American higher education.

Important changes were also taking place in American youth at the time which, at least temporarily, gave rise to notions of generational conflict and stimulated dissent. The growth of rock music coincided with the dissent of the sixties and in some ways reflected it. Rock music was an artifact of youth. The growing use of marijuana and other drugs at this period, on campus and off, was also a powerful symbol of youth dissent. Drugs became an accepted part of the youth subculture, although they were illegal and their use involved some risk. An unprecedented proportion of post-high school youth was going on to higher education, and the traditional middle-class consensus concerning the value and the norms of higher education was breaking down to some extent. While only a small minority of the students considered themselves radicals (5% in 1969 and 1.8% in 1978), this group was a numerically significant one on many campuses. Further, a much larger minority embraced elements of the "counter culture". Despite the minority status of radicalism, campus culture became identified, in the public mind, with dissent and cultural alienation.

The war in Vietnam was the key factor in stimulating what was the largest and most militant student movement in American history. However, the movement did not appear in a vacuum. The experience gained in the civil rights movement, the peace movement, and the willingness to engage in activism because of a more liberal political atmosphere in the nation all provided the background to the anti-war movement. But it was the war, and especially the draft, which directly touched the student community and stimulated massive activism. The war convinced many that the entire American political system did not work. Because students were unable to effect political change through peaceful means such as demonstrations, teach-ins, and other tactics, the movement increased in militancy through the sixties. Discontent with the educational system and a feeling among some students that the universities were an integral part of the dreaded "system" grew along with frustration. As a result, there was a willingness to attack the universities themselves as well as other societal targets. Unreasonable responses to activist demonstrations by university officials often further stimulated militancy and increased the numbers of students involved.

While the student movement was a major force on the campus in the sixties and had some impact on American politics, it was seen by many of its participants as a failure. Ideologically committed student leaders had as their goal major social change or revolution, and this did not occur. The rank and file participants in the movement were committed to ending the Vietnam War, and while it can be argued that student pressure was responsible, at least in part, for altering public opinion, students did not end the war.

The history of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the major radical student organization of the sixties, dramatically indicates currents in the student movement. The SDS grew increasingly strident in its political and tactical approach, culminating its volatile history with organizational splits and an ideology which called for violent revolution. One element of the SDS, the "Weathermen", went underground and attempted to stimulate urban guerilla warfare. These tactics alienated the leadership of the movement from the large majority of students, and within a year greatly weakened its impact on campus and in society. Issues became complicated and in some cases the responses of the student movement unsatisfactory to most students. For example, the movement's increasingly strident anti-Zionism and sympathy for militant Arab radicals alienated many Jewish students, who had previously been sympathetic. The changing nature of the black movement and the response of the student movement to it also confused many white middle class students.

The student activism of the sixties marked the first time that university students became involved in militant, sometimes revolutionary and violent, political activism. And it was the first time that students turned on the universities as a target for attack because of academic complicity in an "evil" social system. For the first time, "university reform" was raised as one of the slogans of the student movement. Students proved during the 1960s that they could have an impact on national politics, that they could attract and to some extent use the mass media, and that thousands could be mobilized for demonstrations.

The Vietnam War did not come to an end as a result of student pressure (although one American president, Johnson, did not run for a second term in part because of student pressure), the black power movement emerged and rejected the support of white liberal and radical students, and the revolutionary rhetoric and militant tactics of the student movement did not, in the long run, attract much support off the campus and only a minority support even in those universities where the movement was strongest. In the end, the leaders of the movement despaired of inducing social change through campus activism in any case, and the student movement virtually came to an end by 1972. The legacy of this movement is, thus, one of ambiguity; there were successes and failures, but in the last analysis the movement left mainly a history on which future generations of activists might build at a later time.

The Current Student Scene

The seventies, with considerable justification, has been called a period of apathy on the American campus. Virtually all of the political organizations which flourished during the sixties have disappeared, and few new

groups have taken their place. There have been relatively few activist demonstrations or campaigns, and student energies seem to flow in non-political directions. At least some of the "image" of apathy is a reflection of the lack of interest of the mass media in student affairs – especially in contrast to their hyperinterest during the late 1960s. I do not claim that activism is at a high level, but the campuses are not entirely devoid of political consciousness or organizations either. For example, in 1976, 18.6% of undergraduates indicated that they had engaged in some form of activism.

With the bifurcation and disappearance of the SDS as a campus-based movement, there was a general agreement among many radicals that organizational efforts should be based elsewhere, such as in the working class or the trade union movement. The campus, it was argued, had not proved to be an effective springboard to revolution. At least in terms of continuing ideologically committed radical student groups, the campus reverted to a political level not unlike the 1950s, prior to the emergence of a large-scale student movement. Even the traditionally most active campuses, such as the University of California at Berkeley, Harvard, and the University of Chicago, have only a few small, relatively inactive and usually weak student political organizations functioning. Most American universities had no functioning political organizations at all.

During the 1960s, a large number of student-oriented newspapers and journals contributed to political debate and consciousness. At present, relatively few of such journalistic efforts exist. Several serious publications which at one time were to some extent campus based have shifted their focus – and often their editorial offices – away from the universities. *Socialist Revolution* (which changed its name to *Socialist Review*), and *Radical America* are indicative of this trend. To help the emergence of a mass based radical movement, left journalists have placed many of their recent efforts in trying to start mass-circulation newspapers and magazines. Such publications as *Seven Days, Mother Jones,* and *In These Times* are in this category. The underground press, which was popular on campus during the 1960s and reflected alternative political and cultural perspectives, has virtually disappeared. Underground newspapers continue to exist in a few university locales, but in general these publications collapsed. Thus, not only has the organizational base of the student movement declined seriously but the communications nexus which helped to shape ideologies and communicate views has virtually ceased to exist.

While neither the numbers of demonstrations nor their militancy can compare to the sixties, instances of sporadic activism indicate that political consciousness on campus is not entirely absent, and that dramatic issues can mobilize students. Demonstrations in 1977 at Kent State University protesting the proposed construction of a gymnasium at the site of the 1972 shootings resulted in the arrest of almost 200 students. Students in California

and in several other parts of the United States have protested against American policy in Southern Africa in general and against the investment policies of universities in particular. Although these demonstrations resulted in several hundred arrests, they led to no lasting movement and were confined to a small number of campuses.

The news media has not paid much attention to local student activism, and this has helped to limit its national impact. The issues have been diverse, the events sporadic and somewhat unpredictable, and the scope of demonstrations and other activities significantly smaller than was the case in the sixties. The Kent State demonstrations were covered by national media but the South Africa protests received little attention despite arrests. And other demonstrations, such as the substantial but ultimately unsuccessful efforts by students at the City University of New York to retain free tuition in the face of fiscal crisis, were hardly reported at all. The internal communications networks of the student movement, except for campus newspapers, had declined and the mass media was no longer much interested in campus affairs.

In the traditional sense of leftist student activism and organizational activities, the present period is a particularly barren one. Some vestiges of the "old left" student groups still exist and are active on campuses with a strong political tradition, but these groups are very small and have a tiny following. Students are occasionally aroused by a political issue, although even in these cases demonstrations tend to be small and no ongoing organizations or movement are created.

In part because of the lack of other student organizations, the established student government structures have assumed a greater role in campus affairs. Like the fifties, when student governments were among the few organized forces on campus, these organizations again play a more important role, if only by default. The collapse of *in loco parentis* and a widespread recognition that students should have the major voice in determining their own extra-curricular life has given a greater role to student governments. In recent years, student governments have been given control over substantial sums of money allocated to extra-curricular activities and this has further increased their power. Further, one of the legacies of the sixties has been a grudging agreement by universities that students should have some role in governance and policy. Student governments are often the agencies which appoint students to academic committees and they have become involved in discussions of academic policies.

On relatively few campuses are student governments concerned primarily with political questions, but in some cases politics constitutes a part of the concern of governments. This too is part of the legacy of the sixties, when political issues intruded on the once placid student governments. Thus, while student governments have not become primarily political entities in

the seventies, the political consciousness and the power of student governments has been enhanced. Although student government bodies are elected by students in open elections, they have not traditionally had much rank-and-file input. This trend continues – and both the elections and the other activities of student governments are not taken very seriously on campus.

At the state and national levels, student government organizations have been active. The U.S. National Student Association (NSA), which almost collapsed after its links to the CIA were exposed in 1967, managed to stay in existence and moved significantly to the left. It took a strong anti-war position in the late sixties, and continues to be well to the left of the general American student population. Its annual national congresses have consistently taken liberal or radical positions on civil rights, drug legalization, and on other topics. The NSA never had much impact on the local campus, and it remains virtually unknown to most students (Altbach, 1973, pp. 184–211).

Student governments have also engaged in lobbying efforts to protect student interests. These student lobbies have been active in state capitals and recently at the federal government level. Student lobbying organizations in New York and California have hired lawyers and professional staff, and in general have brought student issues to the attention of legislators and government officials. The lobbies have been especially concerned with financial questions and issues of student rights and have kept away from ideological issues. As in the case of the NSA, the student lobbies are generally little known on the campuses.

Very recently, the National Student Association and the National Student Lobby, the main national group coordinating lobbying efforts, have formally merged into one national organization. This new group has affiliations from about 360 colleges and universities – not a very impressive number since there are more than 1,000 such institutions in the United States. But it is the first time in a number of years that there is a nationally coordinated student organization.

Significantly, American conservative student movements have never achieved the prominence of their European counterparts, where they have been powerful forces in the past (Steinberg, 1977), and as a consequence they have been largely ignored by analysts of student activism. During the 1950s, a substantial conservative student movement was active in the United States and threatened to take over the National Student Association, normally a liberal bastion. Groups like the Young Americans for Freedom attracted some media attention, perhaps because campus conservatives were an oddity. There is no active conservative movement on campus at the present time, although the Intercollegiate Society of Individualists (ISI) has a large "paper" membership and an active publications program, including *Modern Age*, a respected conservative intellectual journal. It is not so much that American students appear to have moved to the right, but rather that they have ceased, at least for the present, acting on their political views.

Campus attitudes do not seem to have dramatically changed since the 1960s. As S. M. Lipset (1976, pp. xxxix) has pointed out, students were radicalized during the sixties, and their politics has remained somewhat to the left of the American political spectrum. In 1977–8, for example, 27% of college and university freshmen reported that they considered themselves liberal or radical while only 16.4% labelled themselves conservative [5]. Liberals and radicals were even more dominant in four-year institutions and in universities, the prestige segments of the post-secondary educational system. When queried on specific social questions, such as the use of marijuana, abortion, and similar issues, students were even more dramatically to the left of the general population. Students have unquestionably remained liberal to radical on questions of life-style and culture. Politics, in general, have become a less important concern of American students during the seventies.

Several campus currents which are not directly related to activism deserve attention and can only be mentioned here. Religious groups have had a significant revival in recent years, and have had some impact on students (Judah, 1974). While the established Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish groups have seen only modest growth, "new" religious movements have been most successful. For a short time, varieties of Hinduism flourished on some campuses, especially those which had previously seen a great deal of political activism. Yoga, vegetarianism, and various schools of Eastern spiritual consciousness all have had some impact. While these groups have declined in influence, they still retain some impact on students and maintain a presence on many large campuses. Of wider significance is a modest revival of fundamentalist Christianity on smaller campuses. It is impossible to estimate the numbers of students involved in these religous movements, or to indicate whether they will become a permanent part of the campus scene. But for the present, they are an integral part of campus life. And if the well publicized "conversions" of former radicals like Rennie Davis and Eldredge Cleaver are any indication, the religious groups are attracting some support from students who might otherwise be attracted to radical politics. The fraternity and sorority movements have also regained some strength on campus in the seventies, after being severely threatened during the sixties. Although they have not reassumed their dominant role over the social and extra-curricular life of many campuses that they held prior to the sixties, they have increased their membership as students continue to look for a sense of community.

The religious revival, and especially interest in personalistic Eastern religions are part of a widespread concern evident on campus as well as in the middle class for psychological "self-improvement". The popularity of books like *I'm OK, You're OK,* the EST movement, transcendental meditation, and similar currents are all indicative of this significant strain in campus life. In a

sense, the idealism which was focused on political and social concerns in the sixties has been directed toward the "inner life" in the seventies. Even the most popular campus social causes of the seventies, the environmental issue, is very much related to this current.

While the environmental emphasis and such related issues as the struggle over nuclear power, Earth Day, and solar power has not succeeded in becoming a continuing movement, it has been one of the foci which has attracted student attention. Campus newspapers are filled with environment-related stories, and the sporadic movements related to the environment attract substantial student support. There is a heightened awareness of the issues involved, and considerable interest in the technical aspects of environmental questions. Most recently, the struggle against nuclear power facilities has attracted student involvement. The small minority actively involved in the issue has related environmental questions to broader social and political questions but most students do not see the relationship. It is significant that the environment is the issue which seems to have attracted the widest student interest during the decade.

Some elements of the sixties retain their viability on campuses in the United States. Perhaps in historical retrospect, the major contribution of the 1960s will be the women's movement and the black student movement. During the 1960s pressure from these movements created academic programs in many colleges and universities, as well as political and social organizations. These academic programs, although under attack from conservative forces and threatened by efforts to cut university budgets, by and large continue and are a focus for community. The organizational aspects of the women's and black movements have survived better than have the general political student movement although they are significantly weaker than they were during the 1960s. Although the "counter culture" has disappeared from the headlines, it also remains an important force on campus. If anything, elements of the counter culture have been accepted by the broader society. Recent steps in a number of states to legalize marijuana, the pervasiveness of rock music, and social concern about homosexuality and psychological well-being all reflect concerns which were only a few years ago limited to a small, largely campus-based minority.

The Causes for Decline

Since 1972, very little attention has been given to student activism. The spate of books and articles on the subject has virtually come to an end. And since there are few demonstrations disrupting the campus or causing public concern, neither academic administrators nor government officials express much interest in understanding the causes for the current decline of student

activism in the United States. Yet, some of the factors which have contributed to the decline of student political concern and activism are clear.

The most dramatic change in the American political scene which has affected the campus is the decline of foreign policy as an issue of acrimony and of direct concern to large numbers. Specifically, the end of the Vietnam War and of the draft has taken much of the moral outrage from the student movement. The widespread involvement of large numbers of students – and the support of a significant section of the middle class ended when it became clear that the war was ending, although it should be recalled that it took several years for the conflict to actually end. This is not surprising, since American students have historically been motivated largely by foreign policy issues, and the Vietnam War, which directly affected the student population through the draft, was an especially dramatic instance. The war effectively combined a moral question with one of political expediency. Liberals, pacifists, radicals and many students who were just outraged by government lying could participate in the anti-war movement. While the movement's leadership tried hard to give a dominant political tone to the struggle, most students seem to have been "radicalized" only to the extent of opposing the war itself, and sometimes some of the institutions, like the universities, which seemed to be supporting the war effort. Once the war issue was resolved, the movement, as a mass effort, was blunted.

Although the leadership of the student movement attempted to broaden the anti-war struggle to a multi-issue political movement, it had little success. Indeed, the frustration of the leadership either to directly influence American foreign policy or to "convert" rank and file activists to radical politics led to increasingly strident rhetoric and extreme tactics. These emphases alienated most students, and limited the effectiveness of the movement. The history of the SDS, mentioned earlier, is a good example of the effect of tactical militancy and ideological squabbles. Tactics moved from teach-ins and freedom rides to disruptive campus demonstrations which resulted in some violence (often precipitated by the police) to massive direct confrontation with the authorities such as at the Democratic Party convention in 1968 and the demonstrations in Washington, D.C. against the war in the following several years. The final tactical stage was underground urban guerilla warfare which included the bombing of buildings. These fluctuating tactics, and an increasingly strident student rhetoric indicated to most students that the movement had lost its grasp of American political reality. While large numbers of students rallied for specific anti-war demonstrations after 1968, they no longer took the ideological leadership of organizations like SDS very seriously. There is no question but that the tactics of the movement contributed to its isolation and speeded its decline.

A basic fact of the 1970s is a massive demographic shift which affects the university in many ways. The generation of the sixties was an "abnormal"

one. It was quite large, reflecting the post-war "baby-boom". The American population was, at that time, statistically "younger" than it had been for some time, or will be in the forseeable future. Thus, numerically, youth was a force to be reckoned with. At present, the absolute size of the college-age generation is somewhat smaller, and the American population is "aging".

The sixties was the culmination of a period of tremendous growth in higher education. Enrollments had steadily expanded, faculties were growing, and there was a sense of optimism about the future of higher education. This growth placed severe strains on the universities. Traditional norms, such as *in loco parentis*, elements of the undergraduate curriculum, and others were under attack. A younger generation of academics did not, in some respects, share the older values of the professoriate. Increased emphasis on research and graduate education and newfound affluence in higher education all placed strains on the system which undergraduate students felt. The academic scene of the seventies is very different. Gone is the optimism in the face of the "steady state", declining enrollments, and the loss of confidence by public authorities in higher education. Fewer young people are entering the universities, and there is a severe recession in most academic fields at the level of graduate education.

The demographic crisis was accompanied by economic recession. The sixties began with unprecedented economic prosperity, with ample employment opportunities for college graduates at all levels. The economic reality for college graduates is by no means optimistic, particularly in the traditional liberal arts fields – the hotbeds of student activism in previous years. There is a major unease among students about future career prospects. Students have abandoned the liberal arts for professional fields, where they assume that career opportunities are better. The careerism of the seventies is, in part, a reflection of the changing job market. Student interest in innovative courses in the social sciences and humanities has been replaced by demands for majors in accounting, business, pre-medicine and similar fields. Many of the liberties taken with the traditional grading system during the sixties have been eliminated as the "sorting" function of higher education has reemerged in a tight job market. The current trend toward general education in the undergraduate curriculum is in part a means of reestablishing control over collegiate life. The economic realities of the seventies have impinged not only on the curriculum but have also made students less willing to engage in political activism.

The role of the universities has also changed. No longer are the "best and the brightest" emerging from the Ivory Towers to save society. Public confidence in education in general and in higher education has declined to some extent, and the "taxpayers revolt" has directly affected allocations for higher education. Universities have lost much of their self-confidence as well, and without question they have moved from the center stage of society.

Research funds have declined, and neither students nor faculty expect that higher education is the wave of the future.

Events in American politics generally have not been favorable to student activism. The movement of the sixties achieved some impressive victories and, in a sense, set the stage for other societal developments. Students were instrumental in bringing the war in Vietnam to public attention, in building an anti-war movement and in creating an atmosphere in which the public is much more skeptical of foreign policy initiatives by the executive branch of government. Students were especially crucial in the changing social mores of the period – a gradual public acceptance of the use of marijuana, the end of *in loco parentis* on campus, and the growth of rock music as a social force. But as was pointed out previously, the movement itself perceived failure in its actions, and most students did not see the struggles of the sixties as victorious. Thus, in a sense, the legacy of the movement is one of success and failure, and it is therefore rather ambiguous.

There is no question but that the political realities of the seventies have been less favorable to student activism. The Nixon Administration proved especially unreceptive to both the substance and style of student demands, and the movement had no sympathetic ear in Washington. Indeed, administration leaders repeatedly attacked student activism and the academic community generally, and played a role in creating public opposition to the students. Without some sympathetic attention in the corridors of power and in the mass media, it is difficult for the student movement to become a national force. Even the Watergate affair provided few opportunities for student involvement. The opposition to Nixon was centered in the Congress and seemed to be functioning effectively. Thus, there was little need for intervention by the public, which remained on the sidelines as interested spectators. In general, when the "normal" political institutions are functioning effectively, there has been relatively little role for student activism. In Europe, for example, the massive student movements of the sixties developed mainly when many saw a need for an "extra-parliamentary opposition" to political systems which had no other viable opposition.

Student efforts at participation in the electoral process showed the combination of victory and defeat which disillusioned many participants. While students were credited with helping to force Lyndon Johnson to step down in 1968, they were unsuccessful in pressing for the presidential candidacy of Eugene McCarthy in that year, and strong support for George McGovern in 1972 did little to insulate him from massive defeat at the polls. Perhaps as a result of these unsuccessful efforts at participation in the electoral process, students did not take part in the 1976 presidential election. With the exception of electoral politics in a few local areas in which students are a significant part of the population, they have taken little interest in local politics. And even in places like Berkeley, California and Ann Arbor, Michigan,

student political participation has in recent years been limited and mostly ineffectual.

The key mobilizer for student activism in the United States has been foreign policy, and there have been no foreign policy issues in the seventies which aroused much student interest. The Vietnam War was seen as a moral issue. In addition, it affected the student community quite directly through the draft. No current issue has this clear moral tone nor does any affect Americans directly. Small numbers of students have opposed America's policies in Africa, but even here Cuban involvement, international power politics, and very complicated socio-political questions blunt the moral force. And of course, American military forces were not involved. Other foreign policy issues seem too complicated; human rights is a laudable goal, but many see it as possibly damaging to detente, also a positive element. The oil crisis, balance of payments, and inflation are difficult to understand. No foreign policy issue touches a large number of students, and those questions which are important are seen as complicated. Significantly, the only issue to arouse even modest concern on campus is Southern Africa, which is the most clearly moral question in contemporary American foreign policy.

These are some of the reasons for the current lack of student activism on the American campus. Most liberals – and the campus community generally – are not enthusiastic supporters of President Carter, but they do not actively oppose the Administration. There is substantial fear of a conservative current in the United States and concern about the impact of tax-revolts, recent Supreme Court decisions, and similar trends. Student movements have, in general, been most active and successful during periods of liberal power in Washington. The movement of the thirties contended with Roosevelt and the more recent period of activism began during the Kennedy Administration. Conservative administrations, and conservative trends in public opinion, have not in general been salutary for the growth of student activism. And the key moral issues which have aroused students in the recent past: race relations, Vietnam, and the like do not now exist. The direct problems of the student community: competition for grades in order to enter remunerative professional fields, unemployment of graduates in some of the liberal arts and widespread employment problems at the doctoral level, cutbacks in scholarship assistance, research funds, and in public assistance to higher education are all serious concerns for students, but have not led to student political unrest.

Despite the unlikelihood of the emergence of major student activism in the very near future, the sixties had an impact which is as yet incalculable on American students and on American culture and politics generally. The unprecedented amount of direct-action protest in a sense made such protest familiar to large numbers of Americans. Issues such as racism, imperialism, and some basic questioning of the direction of American society and policy

were raised by the student movement and reported in the mass media. The environmental movement, for example, got its start on campus. The student movement and the largely campus-based underground press first raised questions about the life-style of Americans; rock music, the use of drugs, homosexuality, male–female roles, and other issues. These matters continued to be widely discussed.

There is, at present, no significant surge of student activism in the United States, although campus political life is not totally dead. And it seems unlikely that a major movement will emerge unless some external force, most likely a foreign policy issue, stimulates it. Yet, the impact of the most recent American student movement, that of the 1960s, continues to influence American life in indirect ways. If the campus has indeed moved from the revolution of the 1960s to the apathy of the 1970s, some of the intellectual residue of that revolution still has relevance. The causes for American student activism are complex, and the reasons for the decline of activism, as indicated in this analysis, are similarly complicated.

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Notes

1 This article provides further analysis and elaboration of research reported elsewhere (Altbach, 1974; Lipset and Altbach, 1969).

2 The press has in general ignored events on campus in recent years. For some recent analyses, see Fiske (1977); Nordheimer (1976) and Semas (1976). The *Chronicle of Higher Education* is probably the best source for following national campus trends.

3 While repression did reach the campus in the 1950s, it is probably the case that universities protected freedom of expression better than most other American institutions, although their record is far from spotless. See Caute (1978, pp. 403–86).

4 The sixties have been analyzed more closely than any other period. For a selection of references, see Philip G. Altbach and David Kelly (1973, pp. 211–260).

5 This data is from the American Council on Education's annual survey of American students, and included almost 200,000 in its sample. (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 23, 1978, pp. 12–13).

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