

# A Class Analysis of the Radical Student Movement

by Fred Gordon

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The emergence, growth, and apparent decline of the radical student movement has set in motion the ponderous machinery of a huge establishment of academic sociologists, journalists, and free-lance intellectuals and ideologues to record it, analyze it, explain it, justify it, praise it, and damn it. Perhaps there has never been a political movement for which the bulk of commentary loomed so large compared to its physical mass and actual influence. Whatever is the meaning of this phenomenon, and we do not even try to explain it here, an examination of the many theoretical explanations will, I think, show that they fall into three basic types.

The first, and probably the most popular, are **humanist theories**. Although there are many differences, theorists of this type, e.g. Marcuse, Galbraith, Slater, Erikson, Fromm, Reich, see the radical student movement as an effort to realize "genuine human values", "human authenticity", "real human liberation", etc. Theorists of this sort have certain normative ideas of what men and women "really are", or should be. They all have a notion of a "genuine human essence", which has never been completely realized in history and understand the student movement as an effort to realize this essence, for themselves and for the whole society.

Humanist theorists understand the student movement not as the self-interested striving of one group against the egoist material and political power of another. The student movement is rather a proponent of values which are perennial human values, moral aesthetic, and sensual (though for some the realization of those values is understood to be possible only now that the basic problems of material survival have been solved). Those who oppose the student movement, the ruling class and others who support the system, are not merely defending their own interests against the interests of an insurgent and demanding group, but are opposing the rational human values of liberation and human happiness with values which are irrational, repressive and narrow. The struggle is not between the interests of one group and the interests of another, but rather between the real interests of the whole society and twisted, distorted men and women who, irrationally, wish to repress and torture life.

The second sort, and the one held mostly by conservative opponents of the radical student movement, are **irrationalistic theories**. These present

the movement as not seeking any intelligible aim, e.g. its own economic and political interests, or some humanistic vision, but rather understand it as a kind of emotional explosion which is aimless and thus exceedingly dangerous, for the individuals themselves and for the whole society. Different "irrationalists" explain the reasons for this aimless violence in different ways, e.g. as due to too much permissiveness (Agnew), because mature men and women have too much physical energy and no responsible outlet for it on the campuses (Bettelheim), or because American children have never learned to cope with their instinctual aggression (Lorenz). But they all agree that responsible men and women, those who agree that discipline is the price one must pay for civilization, must defend society against these disruptive forces.

The third sort of theory is that of **class analysis**. Class analyses frankly present the movement as the opposition of the economic and political interests of one group by those of another group; it is the interests of students against, and at the expense of, the interests of the capitalist bosses and their political and administrative lackeys.

Class analyses tend to see the student movement as the precursor of the general workers' movement, and necessarily subservient to it, since, relative to middle class students, workers have an even stronger interest in fighting the bosses. Progressive Labor Party, the Revolutionary Union, and most other "Marxist" groups understand the student movement in this way. In some cases there may be a secondary humanist theme, e.g. that after the revolution the quality of life will be different and better, but that message is almost always drowned out in the chant to "get the bosses" and take away what they have.

This three part categorization of course draws too sharply the differences between political theories. Most theories which are worth anything are predominantly of one sort but are secondarily of another, e.g. Marcuse's theory is mainly humanist but acknowledges the importance of class interests and even irrationalistic factors; a predominantly irrationalistic theory may concede that the movement is led by "human ideals" ("misled idealists"), and perhaps that "there are real grievances" that students have, etc. But the categorization is, I think, useful because theories are predominantly of one sort or another and

defining overly clear boundaries may help to clarify and distinguish political and ideological lines of division.

All of this is by way of introduction to my own understanding of the student movement which, on the one hand, is different from what has been offered before (and I hope more adequate) and, on the other hand, clearly falls into the categorization that I have just set up: it is predominantly a class analysis, though with strong humanist and irrationalist tendencies.

Class analyses have, up to this time, been the exclusive province of various Marxist sects; they have been, in my view, simplistic and silly and unable to account for actual political developments. This paper does not go out of its way to criticize them, although that is worth doing, but rather attempts to sketch the outline of a more adequate class analysis of the radical student movement.

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The key notion in the formulation that I will present is that it is impossible to understand student politics without recognizing that it has a **progressive** and **reactionary** direction. By "progressive" and "reactionary", I don't mean to draw a moral distinction between "good" and "bad". I mean, rather, that **within** that group of people who really want to change the system, there are the progressives who want to go **beyond** the present system, and there are the reactionaries who want to go back to the social realities of a previous era. But both progressives and reactionaries are genuinely radical. The present social reality is that of corporate capitalism. And both progressives and reactionaries are the radical negation of corporate capitalism.

### I. The Class Basis of the Progressive and Reactionary Rebellion

That a reactionary direction in the radical student movement should exist can almost be deduced from a consideration of changing class structure alone. From before the American Revolution, but particularly since the Civil War, large scale capital has been destroying the petit bourgeoisie. The various counterattacks by the petit bourgeoisie against large scale capital is a continuous theme in American history. One would therefore expect that today, when corporate capital represents a dire threat to the very survival of the petit bourgeoisie, the politics of the petit bourgeoisie, and all those who share their aspirations, would become increasingly militant and radical, and that this radical politics would find its way into the student movement.

At this point, someone might object and say that while the petit bourgeoisie reaction **has** been a feature of American politics, as C. Wright Mills has shown, today, the petit bourgeoisie is so weak that petit bourgeois politics has ceased to be a factor. If there is no strong petit bourgeoisie, nothing but the "lumpen bourgeoisie" which Mills describes, how can one talk about a reactionary petit bourgeois tendency in the student movement?

I would first of all point to prima facie evidence that

such a petit bourgeois direction exists. We see, for example, these days, ex-students who take to the land, who look like homesteaders out of Gunsmoke, him with his button-up dungarees, a collie dog, out working the fields, and "his woman", in a floor-length dress and granny glasses, tending the hearth, baking her own bread, and having a lot of babies. They even take to calling each other Ma and Pa. The only difference between these homesteaders and the real oldfashioned kind is that these probably smoke dope. But perhaps they do it because they know they are an anachronism, an impossibility, and therefore they need the dope.

This picture is, of course, that of a petit bourgeois ideal, the independent farmer working his own land, which is celebrated endlessly on TV westerns. We also see thousands of "hippie capitalists", long-haired businessmen who claim to be against the system. Now either we must maintain that they are all lying, or admit that it is indeed **the** system which they're against, the system of corporate capitalism, but **not** the system of small, energetic, life-loving capitalists like themselves.

A real understanding of how petit bourgeois reactionary tendencies can exist in the student movement, even though the petit bourgeoisie have ceased to be a significant economic class, must come, however, from a consideration of the economic and ideological history of the past thirty-five years.

The depression was, perhaps, the last blow to the petit bourgeoisie as an important economic and political class. The petit bourgeois nightmare, of going bankrupt, and having to work in a factory, appeared to many to be the inevitable fate of the whole class. Some petit bourgeois students prepared for their fate and chose the only apparent means of fighting back by joining the Communist Party, and going to work in the shops as revolutionary workers.

Soon after the Depression, however, there appeared an alternative which seemed to offer a way out, a way out other than the Communist Party. If the petit bourgeoisie were being pushed out of business by the millions, the growing size of the monopolies and the increased employment of sophisticated scientific, technological, and managerial methods were opening up millions of new, apparently prestigious, high paying white collar jobs. The petit bourgeoisie believed that the prospect of their worst fears could be averted for, even if they did go to work for someone else, they would be "professionals", would have autonomy and real power, would be the sophisticated keepers of science and technology.

And further, and perhaps equally important, the rapidly opening prospect of college education, the availability of which increased enormously at that time, seemed to insure that the petit bourgeoisie would be able to maintain their moral and cultural hegemony over the proletariat. The snobbish sense of cultural and moral superiority that the small town Kiwanis Club banker or businessmen felt toward the "common run of the mill" was now brought up to date and sophisticated around the notion of college education.

The petit bourgeoisie believed that with a new "professional" job and the prospect of sending their



children to college they would be able to maintain their autonomy, authority, prestige, money, culture—their whole petit bourgeois way of life. Of course, they had become a “new working class”. But you couldn’t tell that to them. The very term “middle class” became popular at this time to obscure that reality. The dying petit bourgeoisie swallowed the fiction that has been most clearly expressed by John Kenneth Galbraith, viz. that the white collar “technostructure” has the real power and control over big business and that the owners and top management had become mere figureheads.

This ideological deception, plus the vast increase in education, and the post-war prosperity tended to obscure to the petit bourgeoisie what was happening to them, and enabled them to maintain a strong sense of petit bourgeois social status after its economic base had disappeared. But if the destruction of their power was in fact real, then a rebellion was inevitable.

The first rumblings of discontent came in the '50s. The most radical phenomenon of the '50s, from our point of view, was not the emergence of the beats, or even the gang wars in the city slums. It was rather the enormous popularity of David Riesman's **The Lonely Crowd**, a book as ideological as the Bible, and which almost surpassed it in sales.

Pretty much everyone who was “middle class” read it. **The Lonely Crowd** described how an old type of individual, vigorous, independent, strong, the master of his world and of his fate, was dying out. And what was coming to take his place was a race of soulless, lost, weak conformists, each following the next, none having any direction. This woesome condition was the present state of American society, and Riesman points out in a pseudo-scientific way, always the final period before complete social collapse.

Who was the tough, old-fashioned, inner-directed, autonomous individual, the man with a clear sense of distant goals always before him, who didn't care what others thought? This, of course, was the petit bourgeois businessman, farmer, shopkeeper. With Riesman, the petit bourgeoisie, which had traditionally been satirized as an uncouth, puffed up, provincial, self-righteous, tiresome bore, had become a slighted cultural hero, whose own decline is identified with the decline of civilization itself.

Riesman's book was supplemented by William H. White's **The Organization Man**, which went a step beyond and identified the corporations as the chief cause of the general conformism and cultural degradation of the “middle class”. The enormous popularity of both—but particularly Riesman's, which was more authoritative and universal in scope—indicated the growing sense of loss and powerlessness that the “middle class” was coming to feel. The “middle class” would come to feel that it had been cheated of its petit bourgeois status, would become very angry, and would try to re-attain its lost position, some even “by any means necessary”. Thus we can explain how a petit bourgeois reactionary tendency could emerge in the radical student movement despite the fact that the economic basis no longer existed. For petit bourgeois attitudes outlived their economic basis

due to the ideological illusions we have described.

But what of the progressive tendency? Can we describe the class basis for it? I think that there are two ways that changing class structure provides the basis for the progressive direction. First, there came to be only three ways that petit bourgeois aspirations could be realized in a society so entirely dominated by corporate capitalism. The first was for a person to go into business for himself. But this had become very difficult to do. The second was to fight ruthlessly over many years to get to a position where there was real power, the top echelons of the big corporations. This too was a difficult and repressive task. And the third was to become a liberal politician and to compete with the power of the large corporations by seeking a base among the masses in a fight against them. The third needs some explanation.

Many people with petit bourgeois attitudes thought they they could attain real power and social prestige by presenting themselves to the masses as champions of science, progress, and social reform and winning a base against the unenlightened and repressive rule of the American industrialists. **They** would be supported, **they** would be admired, rather than the corporation heads, and so they hoped to attain a position of political power independent of any economic base. I think that this describes the motivation of most liberal politicians who have sought the support of organized labor and the poor.

The alternative has also, however, proven difficult. Most liberal reformers were either crushed or forced to sell out. While Ralph Nader represents a relatively successful emergence of this sort of politics, he is one of the few exceptions in recent years. (Whether Nader's overall political effect is progressive or reactionary is an independent question from that of his motivation. His motivation, and that of many young “radical” lawyers, doctors, university administrators, is petit bourgeois and reactionary. But their effect may well be progressive. I am not sure.)

The paucity of opportunities to fulfill petit bourgeois aspirations, and the high psychological cost of trying, has led among “middle class” people to psychological confusion, frustration, escapist hedonism, defeatism, drugs, and mysticism, none of which are in themselves progressive. But it has also led many young people to abandon the petit bourgeois aim of power and status entirely and pose the problem of what is a good way to live, for themselves and for other people, **beyond** capitalist considerations of power and status.

Second, the posing of this problem in real terms soon leads young people into contradictions with the predominant reality. They must live, thus they must work, and this forces them into the corporate capitalist market place where their values are contradicted at every turn. As soon as they abandon the petit bourgeois goals of power and status, they discover that corporate capitalism either tries to seduce them back, or crush them out of existence. Thus they must come to see themselves as antagonistic to the whole set of values of corporate capitalism, both around the notion of alienated labor and bourgeois capitalist culture.

This anti-capitalist perspective they share potential-

ly with the broader working class. But the emergence of identification with working class interests generally is impeded, on the students' side, by a still lingering sense of superiority to blue collar workers, and a lack of genuine anti-capitalist consciousness among blue collar workers themselves. But this identification with working class interests becomes a potentiality when petit bourgeois consciousness is abandoned and corporate capitalist priorities are seen as the chief enemy. (The mere abandonment of petit bourgeois aspirations leads merely to counter-cultural politics. But when the values of the counter-culture are recognized to be in an antagonistic contradiction to the demands of corporate capitalism, then the politics can become potentially true working class politics.)

Thus we can say that the class basis of the progressive tendency in the student movement arises from (a) the weakening of petit bourgeois values now that their economic basis has ceased to exist, and (b) an anti-capitalist and potentially working class consciousness that arises from the contradiction between the "new values" and the demands of the system.

## II. The Crisis among College Students

The crisis in the petit bourgeois outlook manifested itself among college students increasingly violently in the late fifties and early sixties, though almost no academic sociologists were able to see that trouble was brewing. The only exception that I know of was Kenneth Kenniston, whose book, **The Uncommitted**, indicated that a problem existed, though it viewed it exclusively in psychological rather than class terms.

When the petit bourgeoisie was transformed into a "new working class", there were, as I indicated earlier, two beliefs that eased the transition and enabled the petit bourgeoisie to hold onto its petit bourgeois outlook. The first was that they expected their new economic position to be that of "professionals" and to represent more power than they had had previously. And second, they expected college education to maintain, or probably increase, the moral and cultural hegemony of their children over the working class. College education, therefore, was a very important part of the "deal" that the petit bourgeoisie accepted insofar as they willingly became white collar workers. And any disappointment that the children of the petit bourgeoisie felt upon getting to college was going to be perceived as an indication that the "deal" had been a swindle.

The petit bourgeoisie tended to look at colleges as **bourgeois** institutions. College in America had traditionally been a stepping stone into the broad world of bourgeois culture. That culture, and the class position that it implied, was anticipated in what was taught in the classroom, but even more in the informal student life for which students had much more leisure than they do today. That student life centered around the fraternities and clubs; it was there that one became familiar with models of bourgeois life in the world beyond, besides making friends who would be valuable business and professional contacts later. In the fraternities and clubs, bourgeois students gained a sense of solidarity with members of their own class

and gained that delicate cultural sense of what was permitted, i.e. social chauvinism toward the lower classes, and what was not permitted, i.e. an injury to one of their own group.

In the classes and lectures of the traditional American college, the intellectual level was low, compared to today. But what was learned was appropriate to the training of the bourgeoisie. Professors, who were generally members of one's own class, projected a unified conception of the greatness of Western culture and civilization, a culture and civilization which was carried on by the upper classes and which had always to be defended from the "barbarism from below". This education gave the bourgeois youth a sense of justice about his future position of power, convincing him that his own rule was also the rule of enlightenment, culture, and "eternal values". This sense of being "cultured" was necessary for the good conscience and cohesion of the bourgeoisie.

This bourgeois world, then, was the world that our petit bourgeois youth expected to find, and integrate himself into, when he got to college. But, as everyone who has been on the campus can see, this is not the world that he found. Instead of integrating students into the cultural solidarity of the upper classes, college demanded rigorous and cut-throat competition with one's fellow students, most of whom were from petit bourgeois backgrounds. The clubs and fraternities had dwindled and what was left of them ceased to be relevant to the main part of student life. In the classroom, instead of inculcating an wholistic conception of "culture", colleges insisted upon minute intellectual division of labor. The professors were no longer quaint old men who wished to introduce students to "the culture of their class", but specialists on the make who saw teaching as a drag on the achievement of their professional goals. Our petit bourgeois student, instead of feeling that he had finally "made it" into the bourgeois world, found that he had only "made it" into a rat race, about the outcome of which, even if he won, he was rather confused.

What had happened, of course, as Clark Kerr was the first to indicate in his Godkin lectures, was that the traditional bourgeois college had been transformed into the "knowledge factory". The bourgeoisie, now dwindled in size from the monopolization of industry, did not need these institutions to prepare "their own kind". They did, however, need white collar workers, trained either in technical skills or having learned a kind of general intellectual agility which could be turned to any sort of problem, no matter how trivial in personal terms. They also needed this manpower to be sorted according to type, native ability, and perseverance. These functions the colleges had come to perform.

The "deal", then, that the petit bourgeoisie had if only grudgingly accepted, in fact turned out to be a swindle. The petit bourgeois student began to feel that college was not what he expected it to be, and not what his parents, adult friends, and high school teachers had led him to expect. He felt let down, frustrated, and though at first he would not admit it to himself, angry at the college for having disappointed him. Later, when



the radicals would talk about tearing the whole college down, he would suddenly discover that the idea was somehow exciting, somehow correct, and if he would not actually go out with them to take the office or throw the rocks, he was to feel a confused joy that someone was doing it.

These students reacted to their feeling of being cheated in two opposite ways. On the one hand, feeling that they had "arrived nowhere" when they got to college, they felt the necessity to work twice as hard now than they did in high school in order to "finally get someplace". Students tended to become more competitive and more stringent in their work habits. But, on the other hand, they began to feel that the cost of "making it", in terms of the time, and the mutilation of their real felt needs, was simply not worth it. They believed that they probably would not flunk out of school or starve afterwards and that it might be far more valuable to live the kind of life one wanted to live instead of doing what others demanded in order to get to the top. In the early sixties, students alternated between ignoring their academic work and feeling that it was not worth doing, and working furiously to get it done at the last minute. Later, the conviction that it was just not worth it was to gain in strength. These students, seeking a new way of life, beyond the world of competition and concern with status, were to form the progressive direction of the student movement.

The crisis of the petit bourgeois world outlook was initially strongest among students at Harvard, Berkeley, Michigan, and other elite schools, and for that reason those places were where the radical student movement began. A sense of crisis became less strong the closer you got to working class schools. The reason for this is that petit bourgeois attitudes were strongest among students who had competitively fought their way into the elite schools. Those who went to working class schools generally tended to have less strong petit bourgeois aspirations to begin with, thus there was less of a petit bourgeois outlook to fall into crisis. This is some explanation for the seemingly paradoxical fact that petit bourgeois values are today more intact in working class colleges than they are in the elite schools. But they are less in crisis there only because they were weak to begin with.

### III. The Progressive and Reactionary Rebellion in SDS

The radical student movement provided an arena in which both progressive and reactionary students, and most were partly both, could seek to realize their goals. For the "progressive" student, who decided that competition and distortion of his own life to achieve petit bourgeois goals of "social status" was just not worth it, the movement provided a society in which he could work out new ways of life, beyond the marketplace. In this society, he could address the question of what is a good way to live. This society would defend its way of life against the corporate capitalist world which was always trying to seduce it once again to its own values, or crush it out of existence. Eventually, the new society would be expanded to include more and more people, fighting at every step for room in which to live.

For the reactionary student, the attractiveness of the movement depended upon how much political power it had. So long as it had little, it would mean nothing to him, save perhaps as a counter-cultural amusement. The aim was a petit bourgeois notion of status, and he would pursue this, under far less favorable conditions than his parents, through the now terribly difficult task of a business, professional, or mainstream political career.

So long as the radical movement was weak, it could not offer the prospect of petit bourgeois power and status. But were it to become politically powerful, then the situation would be very different. Should the radical movement seem to vie in power with the top bourgeoisie, then such a movement would become very attractive, for it would seem to offer a quick and easy way to achieve a position which otherwise, if it were possible at all, would require half a lifetime of work.

The sudden rapid growth of SDS in numbers, but even more in political reputation (if not in power), was caused by three factors. First, the war in Vietnam and the ghetto rebellions contributed to its growth, but in an indirect way. Both contributed to the crisis in petit bourgeois attitudes that we have described. The war and particularly the draft intensified the feeling of powerlessness that petit bourgeois college students were already feeling, contributed to their realization that it was not really they (the technostructure) that ran the country. The ghetto rebellions increased the students' resentment and disdain for the people who actually did rule, for it made them appear both incompetent and incredibly brutal and inhuman.

The second reason for its rapid growth was that it grew at a time when a very powerful vacuum had developed in radical politics. The collapse into irrelevancy of the Communist Party, around which radical opposition to the system tended to gravitate, had the effect of closing down discussion of radical opposition generally, and the very idea of radical opposition to the system tended to be lost. The need for radical opposition, however, of a different sort than the Communist Party represented, still existed and was growing. When SDS began to articulate the politics of radical opposition, however crudely, all those who felt those unarticulated stored up needs tended to converge on it very rapidly.

The third reason for SDS's rapid growth was simply growth itself. Rapid growth tended to draw people of both progressive and reactionary motivations to it, and this caused it to grow still more. For the progressive student, the very existence of a powerful movement that seemed to represent his goals tended to legitimize and strengthen his feeling that the game of competition and status was not worth it, and that a new kind of society, governed by new values, was the wave of the future. It diminished his fears that someday he would be sorry for dropping out of the competitive race after having fallen irreversibly behind; for now he had comrades to sustain him.

For the reactionary student, as we pointed out above, the growth of SDS meant a short-cut to power and status. When SDS took over the President's office,

smoked his cigars, and dictated non-negotiable demands, SDS appeared to him a more attractive means to achieve his goals than the lifetime's work of trying to attain the position of that university president.

The fact that SDS was an arena in which **both** progressive **and** reactionary motivations could and did come into play enables us to understand far better than before the history of its development and its final collapse. Most leftist intellectuals tend to understand SDS only as a progressive movement, as a rebellion against the alienating effects of capitalism, and for a free, egalitarian, non-alienated society. For that reason, it is difficult for them to explain how, particularly in the last years of the organization, the leadership appeared so "corrupt", so arrogant, manipulative, and anti-democratic.

These intellectuals find it difficult to explain how a movement that was thoroughly through and through "good" and growing stronger every day could somehow turn into a movement which they felt was thoroughly through and through "bad" and which fell apart. Unable to see that progressive and reactionary directions were both working in the organization, they must explain how a progressive essence was corrupted by some reactionary accident, and each seems to come up with a new accident, some previously invisible factor, that turned "good" into "bad", growth into decay.

Some say that it was the organizational form of SDS which was at fault; others that "the role of political leadership was not understood", as if a position paper on that subject might have turned the organization around. Others blame it all on the Progressive Labor Party, whose "manipulative methods" and "reactionary politics" were abhorrent to the "real spirit" of SDS; these people, however, cannot explain how, if PL was so abhorrent, it managed to capture a majority at the final convention. Others say that the problem was that SDS became an activist organization, that that was inherently corrupting, since the revolution is simply a matter of "how you live". And still others say that the problem was that nobody in SDS was a "real Marxist-Leninist", though they never say what a "real Marxist-Leninist" means or what a "real Marxist-Leninist" would have done differently.

While there is some truth to some of these explanations, they mistake a manifestation of the problem for the problem itself. The actual situation was that two different and opposite motivations and directions were "in" the movement from the beginning, that these two motivations and directions represent opposite responses to the crisis of the petit bourgeois outlook, one trying to retain petit bourgeois status despite corporate capitalism, the other trying to go beyond petit bourgeois status **and** corporate capitalism.

That both what I call "progressive" and "reactionary" motivations became in this period "radical" is the chief differentiation between my own theory and all the others I have seen. Slater and Reich, for example, understand the changes which are going on among young people as a volitional transition from an "old" to a "new" consciousness. We see that the "old"

consciousness is in crisis, and that **both** those who wish to maintain it **and** those who wish to go beyond it are forced to take a political stance that is radically opposed to corporate capitalism.

How did progressive and reactionary directions express themselves politically in SDS? It is difficult to point to particular statements or actions which, taken out of context, appear clearly to all to be one or the other. All that I can do, perhaps, is to describe two opposing configurations that manifested themselves in innumerable ways. The reactionary configuration concentrated attention on the ruling class, and its attitude toward the rulers was one of disdain, mockery, and derision. People saw themselves as being far more capable to rule than those doddering, weak old men; they felt themselves to be more sophisticated, more intelligent, and more alive than the rulers and talked of taking power and re-making the country according to their own values. Although what those values were was never spelled out, it was clear to these people that they were the possession of the "in" people of SDS, and were not the property of most SDSers, clearly not of most students, and most certainly not of the working class.

The progressive configuration concentrated attention on "the people" and their attitude toward the ruling class was one of **hate**. Seeing the main political problem to be one of how people could live and live well, rather than disdaining the rulers, they were righteously enraged by the rulers' power to distort and crush the striving of the people to live in a free and joyful way. They understood that insofar as people had accepted the values of the system, liberation required changing their minds and showing them how they were oppressed. They envisioned not "us", but the masses of people, won to correct understanding of their situation, taking power.

If both progressive and reactionary tendencies were active in the movement, then why did the reactionary tendency win out in the end? **That** it did is to me absolutely incontrovertable. I think that there are two reasons for this. First, SDS generated too much political power too quickly, and this tempted every petit bourgeois opportunist to rush in and try to lead it. As I said earlier, the initial growth of SDS was due partly to the fact that it emerged in the vacuum left by the collapse of the Communist Party. In filling that vacuum, the organization grew very quickly. Once the vacuum was filled, it was inevitable that the radical movement would grow more slowly.

Petit bourgeois students, however, did not see that this was the case and tended to extrapolate the initial rate of growth into the future. They, along with most academic sociologists, therefore, saw SDS as growing into an enormously powerful political force within a very few years, a force that would sweep all before it. Thus they all wanted to lead it. Today, when that illusion of inevitable growth has been destroyed, most of them have simply abandoned the movement.

The second reason for the reactionary ascendancy was that SDS had no real political leadership. Thoughtful and responsible people, people with real intellectual honesty, could not grasp the nature of the rebellion that was going on. They were therefore



unable to formulate correct strategy and to grasp tactical leadership. Confused about the nature of a rebellion which nobody foresaw, they kept out of the activist movement, tried to figure things out, and dared only to write articles and deliver papers at conferences.

The only people who dared to act decisively, it seemed, were those who didn't understand what they were doing and didn't care. The only concern was whether it did work, work in the sense of producing a dramatic and powerful political impact for which they appeared to be responsible. These tended to be pragmatic egomaniacs who not only lacked a genuine political perspective themselves, but who derided anyone who tried to produce one as "bullshit intellectuals".

At Columbia, they called themselves the "action faction"; others called them "the crazies", a name which they incidentally liked. They were indeed crazy enough to try anything. Most of the time they failed, but by chance once they created an incident that triggered the mulling discontent of the majority of students. Rather than be honest about it and confess that they didn't know how or why the whole thing happened, they claimed and believed that it was the power of their voices and the magic of their native charisma that called forth the storm. Then they would claim the right to political leadership of the movement on the basis of their "success", and since this pragmatic notion of success was the only available basis of leadership in the absence of a real intellectual perspective, they would win it.

By 1968, the bunch that had taken over SDS were the worst gang of petit bourgeois egoists that I have ever seen gathered together in one place. (I naturally exclude myself from this characterization; my own entrance into the national leadership always seemed to me to be virtually inexplicable.) Fighting viciously among themselves, stabbing one another in the back, threatening to "rip off" anyone who challenged their power, they attempted to form a united front against the Progressive Labor Party. Even before the 1969 Convention they were having fist fights at their caucus meetings. After the split, Secretary Ayers called off all democratic meetings on the basis that the national leadership "knows what's best" for the people. RYM II split from the Weathermen, the "Mad Dogs" split off, RYM II then split into three and finally the women walked out. The women who were in SDS know better than anyone else just how rotten and self-serving the leadership had become.

The overriding principle that came to govern the political changes that SDS went through was the requirement that any politics achieve a sweeping, powerful, and profound political impact **almost immediately**. When one sort of politics did not fulfill this criterion, it was abandoned and new leadership put forward some "new politics" that promised to achieve this goal. When the "new politics" failed, then some "newer politics" was presented with the same promise.

In the space of seven years, SDS ran recklessly through virtually all types of political alliances which

are conceivable for a student movement, viz. students and the poor (ERAP), students for themselves (student power), students and white collar workers (new working class), students and ghetto blacks (SDS-Black Panther Alliance), and students and working class young people (RYM).

Eventually, SDS found itself in a situation of having no "new politics" to try; all the possibilities were exhausted. None of them had to date brought the revolution. As the Convention of 1969 approached, the only new, untried politics remaining was worker-student alliance (which its proponents claimed would bring "terrific" results fast). Worker-student alliance politics were the last "new politics" because, as defined by the Progressive Labor Party, it was the kind of politics that students were the **least** inclined to follow.

SDS had come, in other words, to the end of the line. Insofar as the basis for leadership had become the ability to achieve immediate power and enormous political impact, there was no rational kind of politics that had not been tried and dropped except "worker-student alliance" as Progressive Labor Party defined it. The outcome of the 1969 Convention arose from this state of affairs. The more sane members of the organization decided that if worker-student alliance, led by PL, was the only "politics that can win" that was yet untried, then they would swallow their misgivings (their "anti-working class ideas", as PL would put it) and go after it. The other half of the Convention balked and walked out; partly due to a petit bourgeois aversion to blue collar workers, and partly because they disagreed with PL on other grounds, they refused to make this next step of "exhausting all rational possibilities".

That did not induce the leadership of the Weathermen to concede that their demand for instant power was folly. So strong was their drive for short term powerful political impact that after all rational possibilities were expended, they opted for the politics of insanity—paranoid assertions of their own omnipotence, and the obliteration of the reality that so thwarted their wishes with drugs, orgyism, and insane violence.

The Weathermen had clearly gone over the brink by the time of their convention where Bernadine Dohrn celebrated Charles Manson as a revolutionary hero, and praised him for having dinner after he tied up Sharon Tate, but before he killed her, and then after killing her, sticking a fork into her pregnant stomach. Bernadine shouted "Wild!" and the crowd shouted back, "Fork 'em! Fork 'em!".

Those two factors, then — growth that was so rapid as to raise false expectations and distort the organization's development, and the lack of real intellectual leadership — favored the reactionary takeover.

What were the progressive students doing all this time, and why were they not more effective? Many were repelled by the madmen who had come to run the organization, were horrified and simply left. Some remained to try to influence the leadership. But most of those who remained sided with the Progressive Labor

party against the national leadership. PL made three points, the first two of which made sense to progressive students. They said: (1) We are not all brothers and sisters in the movement. Some people are in the movement just to build themselves at the expense of the people, while others want to serve the people. PL drew the distinction between "pro-people" and "anti-people" attitudes and after their experience with the SDS leadership, to most SDSers this distinction made overwhelming sense. The anti-people elitists had to be fought. (2) To be "pro-people", in this historical context, means to be "pro-working class". This also was convincing the progressive students for the reasons I have described above. (3) To be "pro-working class" means to concentrate exclusively on workers' economist demands and to understand "revolution" only in terms of "kicking out the bosses" and the distribution of goods, but not in terms of the qualitative transformation of the society.

The third point made many uneasy about PL at the time, and since the split has caused most of those who sided with PL at the final convention to break with them and quit SDS. PL appeared later to represent not liberation, but a narrow politics of working class chauvinism which emerged as antagonistic to radical anti-capitalist politics. At the time, however, that was not clearly apparent to many, and after the split the progressive forces were weakened and unable for various other reasons to unite against the PL leadership. They too quit SDS.

#### IV. The Prospects for a Progressive Student Movement

The entire preceding analysis is predicated on the thesis that the radical student movement has its cause in changes in American class structure, specifically in the crisis precipitated by the destruction of a class, the petit bourgeoisie, by the inexorable growth and increasing dominance of large scale corporate capital. If this thesis is true, then the future prospects of the radical student movement depend upon whether this crisis will persist. If the crisis remains unresolved, students will remain potentially willing to engage in political struggle against corporate capitalism and the state; if the crisis is resolved, the potentiality for activist student politics with this basis will be foreclosed, though there may, of course, emerge new bases for radical political activity.

What is the possibility that this crisis, which is in our view the main cause of radical student politics, will be resolved? Given the nature of the crisis, as a crisis in a petit bourgeois outlook, there are only certain ways that it could be resolved, viz.: (1) By the opening up once again of the possibility for small scale farming, business, and manufacture, and the deprofessionalization of the world of culture and intellectual work, in short, by a return to the dominance of the petit bourgeoisie. This is precisely the aim of various "right wing" groups, e.g. the John Birch Society, the American Independent Party, Ayn Rand'ers, as well as being a tendency, as we have argued, in the student movement. Given the size and power of corporate capitalism, its enormous productive potential which would be destroyed by such a reversion, and the

intellectual and cultural sophistication which it has created and which would also be lost in such a regression to provincialism, such a "resolution" is extremely unlikely. (2) An accommodation by the corporate capitalists themselves by which they would grant to members of the "technostructure" more autonomy, power, concessions which would enable people in the corporate and governmental white collar hierarchy to retain an essentially petit bourgeois sense of status, and cultural and intellectual hegemony over the blue collar working population and the poor, in short, an accommodation by which Galbraith's illusion of the social and economic dominance of the technostructure would become a reality. Such an accommodation is made very difficult because (a) it is unlikely that the rulers of the corporate world will relinquish power to the "technostructure" with any great willingness, (b) it is dubious that a petit-bourgeois sense of status, but particularly of **independence** and **autonomy**, is comparable with large scale corporate productivity, and (c) the ascendancy of the "middle class" to a position of genuine social and economic dominance would be met by resentment and opposition on the part of the poor, but particularly on the part of blue collar labor which would most likely lose by such a change. The blue collar resentment of "middle class" managers and bureaucrats should be apparent from the Wallace campaign. (3) The integration of progressive, socialist aims into the corporate structure and the establishment there of non-hierarchical, non-exploitative relations. And (4) a socialist revolution either through democratic electoral means or extra-legal militant struggle.

The prospects for the last two are difficult to determine and the reader must do his own speculation on them. However, it should be clear from the listing of these possible "resolutions" that none of them seem imminent. The conclusion, then, which is in fact a prediction by which to test the value of this theory, is that since the crisis which is the underlying cause of the student movement is not going to go away in a hurry, neither is the radical student movement, despite various ups and downs in its organizational existence. There is, of course, the possibility for a fascist repression which might reduce this movement to political quiescence, but this is no "resolution"; the basic tensions and frustrations involved in this crisis might merely manifest themselves on a more personal, instead of political level, leading to the demoralization and decadence of the "middle class". Such a demoralization would hardly be an advantage to the capitalists—it would hurt productivity and weaken the whole social structure—but that may be a price that the capitalists would be willing to pay. The possibilities for the success of such police state repression ought to be examined.

A correlate prediction based on the foregoing theory is that as time goes on, the possibilities for a **progressive** radical movement get better. The strength of petit bourgeois attitudes diminish as their economic basis is left further behind. Socialist ideas, which are after all **unfamiliar** ideas, have time to spread, and the movement learns from its disasters to recognize its own essential ambivalence.