The Prospect for Radicalism

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Erich Fromm has the distinction, among others, of being one of the small number of people who helped to keep radical ideas alive in the unpropi-tious climate of the 1950s, and thus to prepare the way for the renewal and diffusion of such ideas in the following decade. It will not be inappropriate, therefore, for us to consider what the new radicalism has so far achieved and what is the prospect for the future.

There is evident, at the present time, in all the industrial countries, not only a strong reac-tion against radicalism but also a loss of vigor and a proliferation of internal divisions in the radical movement itself. Indeed, there has been a very rapid and bewildering fluctuation in the character and fortunes of the new social move-ments ever since they first emerged in the late 1950s, after the Anglo-French attack upon Suez and the Hungarian revolt. The "New Left" which developed at that time in the European coun-tries was still deeply involved with traditional radical and socialist movements, through mem-bership of labor organizations and through par-ticipation in a community of ideas derived from Marxism and other socialist doctrines; it pos-sessed, therefore, many elements of continuity with earlier forms of radicalism, and particularly with those of the 1930s.

A notable change occurred with the rebirth of radicalism in the United States of America. This began with the civil rights movement of the early 1960s, in which there appeared the two elements which were afterward to dominate the whole movement: the students and the Ne-groes. At the outset the two groups cooperated in what was essentially a militant reform move-ment, but divisions soon appeared as the more radical Negroes moved on to "black national-ism" and "black power," while the students be-came [314] increasingly involved in the antiwar movements and in the confrontations within the universities. By the end of 1968 the separation of the two movements was almost complete. At the same time each movement came to repre-sent quite a striking departure from previous forms of radicalism: in one case, radicalism as an ethnic, "nationalist" movement, loosely con-nected with ideas about revolution in the Third World; in the other case, radicalism as a youth movement, associated with cultural dissent and innovation which encompassed such phenom-ena as pop and folk music and the cult of "mind-expanding" drugs.

In the following discussion I shall concen-trate upon the student movement which has an international character and is less specifically tied to American conditions.[1] Some aspects of its de-

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[1] Some important features of the Negro movement have been well analyzed by Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: William Mor-row & Co., 1967). Quite recently, the movement has taken another new direction with the emergence of the Black Panther party, which seeks to establish a broad alliance with white radical groups and has pro-posed an economic program which is closer to social-ist ideas than most of the new radicalism has been.

velopment were foreseen and given an intellectual justification by C. Wright Mills, who argued from the absence of a radical labor movement in the United States of America to the need to envisage possibilities of radical change in terms of a cultural criticism animated by the young intellectuals. This American style of radicalism assumed a definite form in the Berkeley Free Speech Movement of 1964, and soon thereafter it spread widely in many countries. Its influence resulted to some extent from the world involvement of the United States of America; without question, the single most important unifying element in the radical student movement has been the opposition to the Vietnam war. But there were also other factors at work. One, which has itself to be explained, was the growing sense of a generational identity among young people in the industrial countries, and the particular feeling, among university students, that with the accelerating technological revolution and the rapid increase in their own numbers which is a part of this process, they were coming to occupy a position of crucial importance in society. Another factor was the apparent decline of some older kinds of radicalism, which manifested itself in what the students regarded as the spread of "consensus politics," whether this took the form of an actual coalition of parties (as in West Germany) or simply the diminishing radicalism of left-wing parties. During the 1950s there seemed to be spreading in Europe a style of nonideological politics resembling that in the United States of America, and insofar as this could be attributed to changes in the [315] character and role of the working class in the European countries the conclusion followed that a new basis for dissent and opposition had to be found in other social groups.

The student movement, as the new animator of political conflict, developed with extraordinary rapidity between 1964 and 1968, reaching a climax in the revolt of May, 1968, in France. Since then it has suffered a decline. In the United States the principal radical organization, Students for a Democratic Society, has become divided into a number of conflicting groups; in France the student movement has reverted to the pre-1968 welter of campus sects (largely along the lines of left-wing groups outside the university) and has lost much of the public support it enjoyed for a time; the German SDS has recently been dissolved and its erstwhile leaders, have dispersed; in Britain there is no longer an effective radical student organization. It is possible that this represents no more than a temporary setback. If it is true, as some have argued, that the "scientific and educational estate" now occupies a crucial place in society and is in the process of elaborating an ideology and forms of political action appropriate to its situation, as the industrial working class did in the nineteenth century, then recent events may be seen as the first tentative steps toward organization and action of a more durable kind. On the other hand, the decline may correspond with a characteristically rapid fluctuation of mood, interest, and orientation in student movements, resulting from the high degree of mobility of their members.

However we interpret these phenomena it is important to recognize some of the weaknesses in the student movement, which tended to be overlooked in the excitement of the late 1960s when students presented in a dramatic way new ideas and attitudes, helped to produce a much needed revival of intellectual and political controversy, and animated the protest movements. One of the weaknesses arises simply from the fact that the student movement is a *youth* movement. The social influence of a younger generation may be considerable, as Karl Mannheim noted, in bringing a novel approach, a new mode of thought and experience, to the assimilation, use, and development of the cultural heritage which it encounters. But it is highly improbable that the structure and course of development of any society at any time will be determined mainly by the ideas and aspirations of its very young and inexperienced members. In most spheres, the "young Turks" who bring about important innovations do not belong to the age group of university students, but are in their late twenties or early thirties, having passed beyond the period of confused seeking and striving [316] which characterizes younger age groups. Moreover, this kind of innovation is very largely a matter of individual discoveries, rather than an activity of a whole generational

group. When we consider the nature of broad social movements and of major changes in the structure of society it becomes apparent that these depend upon quite different bonds from those of an age group—upon nationality, economic interest, class membership, or religious community. Thus, even the argument about the growing importance of the "scientific and educational estate" as an active social and political group (which I mentioned earlier) concerns the future role of the scientific and academic professions much more than it concerns the students.

These disabilities of the student movement are enhanced by other factors. One is the rapid circulation of members, which renders difficult the maintenance of a consistent political style or organization. Others arise from the connection between the student movement and some aspects of a wider "youth culture" including pop and folk music and drugs, which have very little radical significance at all. It is true that these phenomena have sometimes been regarded as forming part of a general movement of liberation, but this is largely to misinterpret them. Pop music expresses, generally in the most banal language, the universal doubts and uncertainties of adolescence. It has little critical content, and what it had at the outset has diminished with the growth of commercial interests. The most that can be said for it as a cultural innovation is that it may reflect, especially in such activities as pop festivals, a desire for greater community, or even, in a religious sense, communion, and thus a drift away from acquisitiveness and self-aggrandizement. In folk music there is a larger element of social criticism and protest, but by comparison with earlier periods the protest is vague, ill-formulated, individualistic, and sometimes counterfeit, as in the case of those folk singers who use protest songs merely in order to further their own careers.[2]

The cult of drugs can also not be regarded as liberating; for what enlargement of human freedom can possibly result from making one's mental states and experiences totally dependent upon chemical substances? It is rather the ulti-

mate alienation of one's human powers to a world of objects. Like alcoholism, the use of drugs is an action expressing despair, revulsion, withdrawal from the public world of social issues into a private [317] world of personal troubles and fantasies. It reflects, no doubt, a dissatisfaction with the state of society as seen from an individual point of view, and at the same time a malaise of society itself; but it does not lead to any kind of movement for the radical reconstruction of society.

It is not very clear, at present, how closely these different aspects of the "youth culture" are related, but insofar as the student movement lays stress upon its own generational character it is certainly affected by the prevailing outlook of the whole age group to which it belongs; and there is evidently a considerable degree of cultural exchange between the "hippy" and the "activist" groups within the younger generation (though more obviously in the United States of America than elsewhere). This mingling of radical and nonradical tendencies undoubtedly adds to the ideological confusion which reigns in the student movement; but the confusion is in any case a phenomenon which, on more general grounds, we should expect.

The student movement became active at a time when radical social thought was passing through its still unresolved crisis, which originated in the criticisms and revisions of Marxist thought,[3] in the confrontation with doctrines elaborated by revolutionary movements in peasant societies (for example, in China, in Cuba, in North Africa, and in other areas of the Third World), and in controversies with the exponents of new theories about the nature of modern industrial societies.[4] The students, con-

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[2] See the discussion in R. Serge Denisoff, "Folk Music and the American Left: A Generational-Ideological Comparison," *British Journal of Sociology*, 20:4 (December, 1969).

[3] It is impossible, here, to review all the criticisms and reinterpretations of Marxism during the past twenty years. Among the important contributions to this debate are the writings of Leszek Kolakowski, Stanislaw Ossowski, Gajo *Petrović*, and others associated with the Yugoslav journal *Praxis,* C. Wright Mills, Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen Habermas, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Eric Fromm himself.

[4] For example, Raymond Aron, *18 Lectures on Industrial Society* (New York: Praeger, 1967), and J. K. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* and *The New Industrial State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1958).

sequently, drew their ideas from very diverse sources; from the thought and experience of revolutionaries in the Third World as well as from the extraordinarily varied interpretations of present-day society offered by social critics in the Western industrial countries. It is not to be supposed that students themselves are capable of producing a coherent social theory from this mishmash, although they may, as they have shown, raise critical questions and shadow forth a new social outlook which will help to direct the work of critical social thought. Unfortunately, this valuable activity has frequently been perverted into purely political campaigns, carried on with the aid of simple slogans, which have brought the movement into conflict [318] with most of the rest of society, including a large part of the labor movement,[5] and have considerably reduced the effectiveness of the social criticism which emanates from universities.

The future of radicalism—in thought and in action—depends upon whether or not the limitations imposed by the recent predominance of the student movement can be overcome. The student movement has to be seen, and to see itself, as only one section of a growing intellectual movement, best described as socialist humanism, which is directed (unlike most earlier forms of dissent) against a multiplicity of enemies—against capitalism, against technocracy, and against totalitarian socialism. In this movement there are several important objectives which students can help, and in some degree have already helped, to attain. The first is to equip themselves—and this applies above all to those in the social sciences—as effective critics of society. The second is to establish this critical, and so far as possible radical, outlook securely enough for it to persist and develop outside the university, in the scientific and professional occupations which students will enter. The third is to

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[5] This has occurred in many West European countries, where the radical student movement has had strained relations, and sometimes open conflicts, with socialist parties and with the trade unions. This was particularly evident in West Germany in 1968. In the United States the gulf between workers and students has been even more marked; the most recent illustration is the demonstration of New York construction workers against the peace movement.

defend intellectual freedom and autonomy in the universities, or to reestablish it in those societies where universities have fallen under the domination of businessmen, civil servants, or party officials. In this area, though, I think the main responsibility falls upon university teachers, and it has been their defection in many cases which has thrust an impossible burden upon students. There is a further objective, closely connected with this, which is to examine carefully and thoroughly what are the alternatives to the "multiversity" or "knowledge factory." It is somewhat surprising, in view of the importance which students themselves attribute to their opposition to bureaucratization, that there has been so little serious consideration of what needs to be done in order to create a human atmosphere in the university, and to restore its character as a community of scholars in which critical thought can flourish unhindered—if indeed that is what is wanted. One necessary step would obviously be to limit the size of universities, another (in many countries) to reform the system of university government; but beyond this there is the task of thinking profoundly about the proper character of universities in [319] the twentieth century, in the context of a rapid expansion of higher education of very diverse kinds, and at the same time experimenting with different forms of organization. Far from aiding this process of reflection and transformation, some student activism in the last two or three years has seemed more likely to destroy the universities, by its contempt for intellectual life, its intolerance of divergent opinions, and its obsession with purely political questions. This has been extremely damaging to the radical cause, not least because no good society is conceivable without universities, or equivalent institutions, in which men can practice and exemplify free intellectual inquiry for its own sake.

Even if intellectual dissent flourished, as it began to do in the 1960s, and even if it took shape in a coherent critical theory, as it has not yet done, this would still be inadequate for the transformation of society. In order to bring about radical change there is needed a social movement which embodies the practical experiences and interests of large numbers of men. In most of the Western industrial countries the la-

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bor movement still occupies this place, and outside the labor movement there can be no radical politics. There are, in fact, many signs that this movement is itself becoming more radical again—the rapid extension of a general strike in France in May, 1968, which, far more than the student movement, threatened the Gaullist regime; the wave of militant trade union activity in Italy at the end of 1969; the increasing militancy of workers in the most technologically advanced industries in many countries; the considerable revival of interest in the ideas and practices of workers' control. It is not at all improbable that the intellectual radicalism in the universities and the new orientations in the labor movement will come together to produce great social changes in the course of the next decade.

In the United States of America it is much more difficult to foresee the development of a broad radical movement. Since the end of the First World War there has been no mass labor movement committed to bringing about radical changes in the structure of American society. Is it conceivable that this should change now, in conditions of growing prosperity and declining trade unionism? There are, as radicals have frequently pointed out, many groups in American society which do not share in its material advantages, and which constitute potential nuclei of opposition. Some of them, notably the Negroes and the Mexicans, have engaged in increasingly militant, though not necessarily radical, action. There is also a revolt of at least a considerable part of the younger generation against the condition of American society. But the American working class remains aloof from any [320] kind of radical politics. I do not think this state of affairs will change quickly. Nevertheless, if the present intellectual dissent, and the various opposition movements, could be brought together in a political organization—a new radical party—it does not seem impossible that such a party could eventually attract many workers to its policies and actions, especially those workers in the more advanced industries, who are likely to have a growing interest, in the United States of America as elsewhere, in directing more fully the work process in which they are engaged. These possibilities can only be tested in practice; at all events, the endeavor to create a new radi-

cal party would offer greater hope than a continuation of the present fragmented dissent and sporadic protest.

Equally difficult is the assessment of possible changes in the Soviet societies of Eastern Europe. It is clear that there has been, since 1956, growing intellectual dissent, and it can scarcely be doubted that the kind of social outlook which was formulated by Czechoslovak intellectuals and students during the socialist renaissance of 1967-1968 would also find expression in the other Soviet countries if the opportunity presented itself. We should note, however, that in the instances where there has been a radical movement in these countries—in Hungary and Poland in 1956, and in Czechoslovakia in 1967-1968—it has arisen out of a conjunction between intellectual dissent and working-class, trade union opposition to the regime. If there is to be progress, on the basis of an economy which is already collectivized, toward a socialist society in which men are genuinely liberated, not subjected to the rule of censors, party officials, and the secret police, then both these elements will be necessary—the intellectuals who demand freedom to speculate and to criticize, and the workers who demand control over their working conditions and a real voice in the determination of social policy.

In all modern radical movements there has been this close link between ideas and interests, most fully developed when a theory of society such as Marxism becomes inextricably involved with a powerful social movement. The contribution of radical intellectuals to this process is both negative and positive. On one side it is to show, in a critical way, the character of existing society; its injustices, limitations, and conflicts. This work of criticism, when it becomes sufficiently widespread—when the established order is largely deserted by the intellectuals—is one of the elements which prepare the way for a new society. But it is not complete unless it can also show the possible directions of change, interpret the emerging social movements, and prefigure the new social order. It has to accomplish [321] the work which Marx, as a young man, set himself when he wrote: "We develop new principles for the world out of its own existing principles. ... We may sum up the outlook of our Journal

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(the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher)* in a single phrase: the self-knowledge (critical philosophy) of the age about its struggles and aims."

This positive vision, the development of new principles out of existing principles, is what appears weakest and most obscure in present-day radical thought. If we search out the reason for this weakness we can hardly fail to reach the conclusion that it is above all the disillusionment with socialism, which began at the end of the 1930s and has been intensified by the development of the Soviet version of socialism since the end of the war, through the closing years of the Stalinist terror to the *Realpolitik* of the military occupation of Czechoslovakia. Radical thinkers have now to criticize both capitalism and socialism as existing forms of society, and they are often tempted to direct their main criticism against industrialism itself. The idea of an alternative form of society becomes faint and shadowy, because what was once the ideal—socialism—now exists as a problematic reality. What we have to do in order to meet this situation, as some are already attempting, is to rethink socialism, both in terms of the institutions appropriate to an egalitarian society,[6] and in terms of the social movements and political actions which are capable of bringing it about without the disfigurement which it has suffered from violence and repression.

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[6] I have in mind, particularly, the serious study of problems of management and participation in large-scale industry, of reforms in social administration which would bring the social services more under the control of those affected by them, of changes in educational institutions which would diminish the authoritarian elements in them and provide a better early experience of self-government. Too little thought has been devoted to the possible forms of new institutions, and too little attention has yet been given to the available practical experience of more egalitarian types of organization, such as workers' self-management, communities of work, and some community development projects.