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The Student Movement in the '50s

a reminiscence

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I've been asked to write about the organization that immediately preceded SDS, the Student League for Industrial Democracy, and to attempt to describe some aspects of student politics in the fifties. I discover that to do so really entails writing history, certainly a difficult task. It is one thing to reminisce orally or to look through the old files of organizational correspondence and publications: it is quite another matter to guess at the reasons people acted as they did and discover what may be learned from their experiences.¹

SLID in my time was always fascinated by its own history (reaching back, ultimately, to the Intercollegiate Socialist Society in 1905), and some decent research was done. But a great deal was happening about us which we were never able to investigate -- and, of course, we lacked the historical perspective which might make a great deal more understanding possible now. Without any such research, and in fact lacking much good work of any kind on the McCarthy years, much that I say will be simple guesswork based on the miniscule sample that was represented by the student left in my time.

In fact, I doubt that it would be an exaggeration to say that in the early fifties all of the activists in every student group to the left of center numbered under one hundred. When I first joined SLID, in 1954, its total active membership was in the dozens. Of course, figures were inflated by leaving people on membership lists, allowing older, part-time students to stay on "at large," etc., but the Yale chapter that we started that year was the first real SLID campus group at the time. This undoubtedly represents a low point, and a few years later one could point to several hundred members and an aggregate student left of perhaps a thousand or more. The only national group of any size other than SLID was Students for Democratic Action, but much of its time during those years was spent in the throes of combating Shactmanite² (a brand of Trotskyism) infiltration, which finally succeeded in killing off SDA and having it replaced by college ADA chapters under much tighter organizational control. The Shactmanites were too miniscule and were effective only because they spent so much of their energy in search and destroy operations (though they had some very able leaders, a few of whom have become major figures in today's "Establishment" left).

The rest of the left consisted of a barely existent YPSL, a largely paper Labor Youth League that had a chapter in Wisconsin, and various groups that one heard of as existing in California but whose existence was never tangibly manifested. Finally, there were scattered Marxist discussion groups on individual campuses and the occasional gathering of students around a popular radical teacher, such as Mulford Q. Sibley or Hans Gerth.

Under these circumstances, it took several basic characteristics to have existed at all, one of which was a sense of humor and of proportion. No one would have dreamt of using an expression like "the movement," and phrases connoting mass action were usually voiced in a heavy Yiddish accent, suggesting Union Square revolutionary rhetoric of the thirties.

The size of the student left is a major factor in what I am going to describe. People felt very differently from the way students (and others) do now: their world was far more limited and much, much less was done, attempted, or even contemplated. My intention is neither to apologize for this nor to suggest that in our way, we did all that could have been done. But I think it is important to examine the very different context and to see what if anything this may suggest for today or for the future.

Why were there so few of us? The first answer is simply that, as is still the case, we were a microcosm of the society as a whole. There was no left to

speak of anywhere in the fifties. No groups, no magazines, practically no individuals spoke up for values that would have been considered on the "left" at that time, much less now. (Only a few of us in SLID thought of ourselves as socialists of any kind. Most of our members were liberals, though, interestingly enough, they were willing to belong to a group that was meant to be a coalition of the left and were willing to consider and discuss the socialist ideas and solutions that we put forward. I suspect that most of us, liberals or socialists, have moved considerably to the left in our thinking since the fifties, as have most people.) At the time, however, SLID came close to representing the left in the universities partly because there simply weren't any groups to the left of us, sizeable as that ideological area may now seem to have been.

I suspect that we can accurately think of an immediate postwar wave of reform in which every country seriously considered the possibility of a more equitable social reconstruction. In their different ways, the 1945-47 governments of both halves of Europe manifested this, and the Truman administration had the germs of a genuine program of this kind. SLID and other groups in the late forties seemed to represent this and they were part of a national reformist mood. It may seem difficult to believe at this date, but one of the national debate topics in my high school years was whether the railroads should be nationalized. Truman, after all, had proposed a genuine national health plan, civil rights, housing, etc., which were still subjects of debate; and this is what the left had concentrated on.

By the time the Korean War and Senator McCarthy had had their influence, not only ideology but almost any other issue had died. The extent of the national fear (and consequent silence) was extraordinary and, as in any period of crisis, one could see how profoundly homogeneous our society really is. There was practically no one left, by the early fifties, to contradict the national mood. True, a few left-wing papers managed to survive but were rather pathetic. Not only were they financially poor and abandoned, but they had relatively little to say (and it must be obvious that one is linked to the other). I can still remember the May Day issues of the Socialist Party's Socialist Call, by that time reduced to a monthly magazine, with its meagre inches of "greetings" from a few unions (the Oil and Chemical Workers, and several I.L.G.W.U. and Amalgamated Clothing Workers' locals), and the Berks County (Pennsylvania) party branch. The back pages of all the left-wing papers boasted their skeletal constituency: in all, a poverty of supporters that should have moved even with the FBI and the few others who bothered to keep up with the radical press.

THE STUDENT GROUPS

How did this affect the students? In the predictable ways. Kids often join political groups according to their family loyalties (thus a good percentage of SLID members had socialist backgrounds), and those who need to rebel must have a place to turn. A paper, a magazine, or even a pamphlet is a sign of life, an indication that one is not utterly alone, that the crazy ideas which you have nurtured in your adolescent head and elaborated over long discussions in the schoolroom cafeteria actually exist in reality, are demonstrable, appeal to others, can move kingdoms and powers. I suspect that there are many who share the appetite for printed material that has always been with me; judging from the crowded literature tables that still abound, this is still the case. To draw from my personal experience for a moment, I still vividly recall the difficulty with which, in high school, I found any radical or socialist material at all. Communist bookstores still existed, but other types were rare indeed. I lived largely off imported goods, Fabian pamphlets on the problems of nationalized industries, and British Labor Party manifestoes. I remember the excitement in SLID with which we received the utterly staid mimeographed bulletins of the (social democratic) socialist international. When the Korean War started, I spent several days at the UN library trying to read the reports from all sides to discover what had happened. New York, in that respect, was still a haven, and I suspect it was partly because of this that various radical groups could still maintain tiny "New York Regional groups." Together, all the resources of the left, domestic and international, could encourage a handful of youngsters who then joined the fraction of their choice and headed off throughout the

country to create at Yale or Wisconsin, Antioch or Reed, the "national" organization that would give hope to those who stayed behind.

I mention all this partly because the foreign aspects of SLID in those days were an important factor. For a while, all our national officers, myself included, were "foreign born" (to use that thirties expression). Not that we were children of socialist politicians in exile. We were all pretty average Americans by the time we reached college age. But for whatever reason, whether our own alienation, our refusal to accept America as it was, or a feeling that it was our moral duty to help our new country back to sanity, we opted out. Coming from New York, as much of the left then did, I suspect we were closer to Europe in our search for solutions and in our outlook if not our ideology. SLID's foreign policy, for instance, for many years centered on the Gaitskell plan, which called for the neutralization of a united Germany and Eastern Europe as a start of a great power detente (a plan which I suspect still makes excellent sense but never seems somehow to have entered the mainstream of American politics). SLID also greatly valued its associate membership in the International Union of Socialist Youth -- "associate" because as part of the tax-exempt LID we participated only in educational activity, a tax exemption which in turn got the LID the meagre trade union funds which kept the whole house of cards from collapsing then and there.

Membership in IUSY was valuable for all sorts of reasons, the major one being the maintenance of morale. I came to think of an International as a group consisting of people able to say "Ah, but elsewhere we represent a mass movement." An awful lot of our fellow IUSY members, we were to discover, were not much better off than we but the contacts were valid and we found a wide choice of comrades, many of whom were our genuine counterparts, just as some of them proved to be harrassed party bureaucrats trying, as in England, to keep the Trotskyists from taking over their youth movement for the nth time.

Our nearest comrades were the Canadians and though in the early fifties the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation was no great force it did represent a real socialist achievement, one of which I still feel vicariously proud. (See the recently re-issued paperback Agrarian Socialism, written by Seymour Lipset before he changed his mind about life.) The Canadians suggested that politics as we then thought of it could still succeed in North America, that people could still redirect as the CCF had done in the province of Saskatchewan the economy to serve their needs, that American exploitation, as in oil, could be kept out, that social services could be improved, and even (we were, after all, the student league for industrial democracy) that factories could be turned over to the workers who manned them.³

The economic issues that I have just mentioned are rarely discussed nowadays. Nationalization and public ownership seem to have totally disappeared from the scene and though I think I understand the reasons why this has happened, I am sorry about it. One of SLID's major preoccupations, abstract as it must now seem, was the debate of this question and it is a debate that should, I think, still be with us. The ownership of America is still central to all else that follows as, in a curious way, is beginning to be recognized in discussions of ghetto economics. Of course, we are not likely at this point to nationalize anything, and in the kind of corporate state that we have developed, a nationalized industry is likely to be like any other. Yet I still feel that it is only by developing entities that work for other than profit, whether local poor people's corporations, parallel institutions in the public or quasipublic sector, or even national bodies that we can use our resources as they should be. This is really not the place to elaborate on this kind of discussion; my insistence on it probably suffices to give a feel of the old-fashioned economic issues that concerned us and that we felt were central to altering the power structure of our country.

PARALLELS

For it should also be added that in many ways, our analysis of the society in which we lived resembles that which has been developed since, and though one

can point to a great many differences, there are also many continuities. The question of participatory or industrial democracy is one. The role of the professions and of professionals is another -- this was among the last projects that we initiated and it is obviously a problem still very much with us. Concern with the university and its social role was another; the opposition to colonialism yet another. Though the passage of time is obvious when one realizes that we were still talking about freeing the colonies and though somewhat embarrassed by its dated slogans, we nonetheless joined with the movement for colonial freedom in having meetings on Dependent Peoples Freedom (sic) Day -- a festival which I've always imagined had been baptized by an Indian or Burmese comrade.

Well, then, what did we do? If we had all these interesting ideas, how effective were we?

To answer this, we have to return to the national mood which I described at the beginning of this article and to another related factor: people were scared. I think that this, more than anything else, mattered, and it must not be underestimated. McCarthy's major achievement had been to scare everyone, down the line. People were afraid to join anything, to sign anything, to lend their names to anything. You had to assume that the University would turn over membership lists to the FBI and that, at some point, your turn might come before some committee or other. Of course, compared to much that has been done since, this was small pickings. We were never in danger the way SNCC workers are everyday, we always stayed meticulously on the side of the law, and civil disobedience was not even discussed. Times were different and that is all that one can say. Yet, ours was practically the only form of dissent available on campus and no matter how respectable it all was, it drew few takers. People would come to meetings; at Yale we were, for instance, the first sign of public debate that had been around for a very long time. A speech by Norman Thomas or a debate on the need for national health insurance (our first two meetings) were hardly revolutionary actions, yet they drew counterpickets from the followers of William Buckley, countless expressions of consternation and disbelief and finally enough sympathizers so that a viable group could survive from year to year.

Public meetings were about all we did do, along with discussion groups, debates, leaflets, newspapers, research and the usual paperparaphernalia that surrounds any organization. In those days, one of our major difficulties was to prove that there was a poverty problem, that not all Americans were rich; one of our first pamphlets (by Gabriel Kolko) was on the subject. Of course, we tried to work with local groups, such as they were, and we did a decent job of informing and educating our membership. We did a certain amount with other campus groups and eagerly joined that national coordinating committee of youth organizations that only much later we discovered had been set up with CIA help to "represent" American youth abroad.

Looking back on my experiences with the Yale group, rather than as officer of the national group (which was a mere ephemeral business in many ways), what strikes me is the degree to which our effectiveness was conditioned by the limits of the larger society. We were able to raise questions and provoke debate on a number of issues but in the end I suppose our real import was in reasserting the existence of dissent, in simply breaking the silence and suggesting to others that, at some point, on some issue, they might follow suit. In our values, we were opposed by the large majority; I can still remember the real hostility and vehemence we met when we proposed that James Farmer, then our field secretary and later head of CORE, debate the then attorney general of Georgia who'd been invited to Yale. The college newspaper twisted our action into suggesting, rather ludicrously, that we were trying to keep the Southerner from speaking on campus. The support given this charge served to remind us how opposed people still were to what we were trying to do; how much they had disliked our rocking their boat ever so little.

On the other hand, the only time that we can claim to have helped lead a mass action was when we found ourselves in agreement with a majority sentiment,

in the case of the Hungarian refugees. In this instance, our anti-communism was not that different from anyone else's, and people were willing to join with us in a common cause, though they probably would have refused to go along with the much less effective anti-colonialist gestures that we proposed.

ANTI-COMMUNISM

I have no doubt that our intense anti-communism helped SLID survive in those years; but several amendments must be made to this suggestion. First, anti-communism undoubtedly reflected the personal convictions of the SLID members -- the few students actively sympathetic to the Communist Party usually joined the Labor Youth League, not SLID, and potential Trotskyists had several groups to choose from. The question at the time was primarily one of civil liberties, and though the problem was hotly debated within SLID, the official position was similar to that held by all those taking the "liberal" line on civil liberties: opposition to all aspects of McCarthyism and the persecution of communists allied with a refusal to actually collaborate with communist organizations. This question, needless to say, was largely theoretical. There were no communist groups with which to collaborate (though had there been, we would have undoubtedly refused). Individual communist students may have joined SLID; there were certainly a number of Marxists or Trotskyists who did join, but in all cases that I can remember, they kept to the same agreement that was felt by those to the right in SLID, namely that issues were debated within a generally accepted framework. The only area where working with communists was seriously debated was in the international field. There as I've mentioned before, SLID tended to agree with the position taken by Aneurin Bevin and Hugh Gaitskell, i.e., detente and disengagement and the restoration of neutral national entities rather than the advocacy of international united fronts.

I think it important to realize how much Russia has changed since that time and how much we identified with those on the left who had been persecuted by the Communists. We felt we would be betraying those who had opposed Stalin's dictatorship from the left if we collaborated here, or abroad, with those who defended it. Obviously the overwhelming propaganda of the time twisted all of this to completely underplay the degree to which the West was also at fault and the ways in which our own attitudes would be used by the CIA or others.⁴

Where would SLID members of the 1950's stand were they students today? It's a question that it would be fascinating to answer but I doubt an answer is possible. Many have changed with the years, becoming more radical rather than less, with age and experience. But that has been true of people who belonged to no student groups as well. Volunteering as a lawyer, going South or in a ghetto; acting as an intern in a big city hospital; losing tenure for one's opposition to the war -- this kind of experience has radicalized many a member of my generation who had never heard of SLID or any other of that small rainbow of the left. Yet those who belonged were, I think, a representative cross section of a potential constituency, as SLID growth from the early to the late fifties shows. On the whole, were we ever able to have the kind of face to face discussion that happens so rarely across generational lines, I think we would see a gradual shift from the fifties into the sixties, carrying similar beliefs and commitments from the postwar Korean years into the present.

THE (OTHER) GENERATIONAL GAP

After many years of work with SLID, we too became persuaded that a generational gap did exist and that it was an insuperable one. Much as we hoped and tried, it seemed impossible to make common cause with the left that had been active in the thirties and had fallen into the rationalizations and evasions of the forties and fifties. That gap still exists and it carries us from Jay Lovestone all the way over (I'm guessing now) to Irving Howe. The differences that have alienated this generation of former leftists from the current generation do seem to be basic and perhaps immutable. I do not, of course, know enough about the way students think today to be able to say how much there is still in common with my own generation; I suspect there is much.

Students in the fifties used to be known as the silent generation. It would be foolish to suggest that SLID ever gave voice to this generation; at best, it suggested that one could speak up and that opposition still had to be voiced. In many ways we showed the signs of having followed what one might call the silenced generation; it was difficult then, it still is difficult for me now to think of anyone aged, let us say, 40 to 55, who represents something on the American left one would respect. The same lack seemed to exist among those representing our generation, those 30 to 40. What is fascinating to watch at this point is the emergence of an intellectual group on the left that had never formed in the fifties but that now represents a coherent generational outlook. The list is long and respectable, whatever your preference, from Chomsky to Coffin, Lynd to Kopkind, McDermott to Lemisch, Kampf to Ferber; these are people speaking out who are relevant and even right:

Perhaps it is this that matters most. The betrayal of the intellectuals, of the left, that we witnessed around the cold war years seemed to mark a new stage in our history. American society showed the degree to which it could be cowed and persuaded into accepting a new ideology and into abandoning dissent. We would never have guessed that the generation in which we found ourselves had such hidden reserves and would be followed by so different an outlook. It is a lesson which, hopefully, will never be needed.

footnotes

1. The more I've considered this article, the more persuaded I've become of the value of serious historical research in this field. The existence of a journal such as Radical America is already an encouraging indication. I think it might make sense, however, for student groups to consider the thought of going beyond individual research and considering the possibility of attempting some serious oral history projects in this field. It might prove interesting and fruitful to try interview projects on given campuses in which people are asked about their political activities in the thirties, forties, and fifties, to discover who was active and passive, what motivated and threatened people, why the idealism of the 1930's vanished so suddenly after the war, etc.

2. The Independent Socialist League (and its youth affiliate, the Socialist Youth League), formerly the Workers' Party, emanated from a split with the Socialist Workers' Party in 1940 over the question of support for the Soviet Union in World War II. The group's identified leader was Max Shactman. (Editor's note)

3. The terribly dated sound of "industrial democracy" may conceal the fact that it is the same thing as participatory democracy and that one of the reasons we kept the name (until we decided that it would be better press to choose the jazzier name of sds) was that we believed in this and felt it still to be a central issue.

4. The one factor which above all was missing from this was our ignorance of the role of the CIA in this arena. I think it's fair to say that nearly all of us believed in the major SLID plans on international affairs which opposed colonialism as well as Soviet domination of its satellites. It would be interesting to see (and perhaps someone will follow this up in some oral history interviews) how everyone reacted to the CIA disclosures. The NSA people, the religious youth groups and all the others were, I have no reason to doubt, equally sincere in the foreign policy positions that they took. The gradual discovery of CIA manipulation taught us all a great deal more about America. Perhaps the saddest irony of all was the very genuine pride we used to feel -- from whatever group -- when, in discussing American youth groups with foreigners, we pointed to the genuine independence which we enjoyed as opposed to the official ties and overt subsidies which so many of our European counterparts received.