

Radical professors

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ishment he may appear to students. Although radicals emphasize the professor's role as a servant of the state and the corporation, until recently most professors tended to choose their vocations almost like monks—they rejected potentially lucrative careers like law and medicine to undertake poorly paid, misunderstood and unappreciated pursuits redeemed by intangibles like good students, leisure and the joys of research. In the nineteen-fifties particularly, a bright young man's choice of an academic career was often a conscious rejection of the allurements which "the world" held out.

Professors, when they think about their situation, are often troubled by their social role, or lack of one. Most reject the idea that a social role is unnecessary. Many are satisfied that they affect society through their students, but this formulation still leaves open the nature of their influence. Some search for a more direct link with society. By temperament they are often observers—contemplative, quizzical, uncommitted. Inevitably the logic of their position leads to social criticism.

THE radicalism of the past decade, in which some professors appear to have lost all commitment to an academic discipline or to teaching in the ordinary sense, is related to an earlier phenomenon—the fact that until the Kennedy Administration there were few occupations which a liberal, critical-minded young man could enter without suppressing his beliefs and his hopes for meaningful activity. Many individuals entered academic life because of the freedom and the congenial environment it provided. Living in a society they could not fully accept, many dissatisfied young men could think of nothing better to do than study it.

The emergence of academic radicalism in the nineteen-sixties was thus for some professors a liberation and a delayed fulfillment of youthful dreams—they would have liked to have been political men, but their times prevented them. After a new taste of the world the monk discovered that the cloister could no longer hold him.

Although like most professors radicals do not generally believe that the rewards of

their calling are adequate, they also feel a certain guilt at the privileges of their status—leisure, the right to think and speak critically, freedom from the constant need to "produce" on the job. (The accounting demanded in promotion and tenure reviews comes only at infrequent intervals.) They feel compelled, in some way, to justify their special existence. Professorial compulsion to speak out on virtually every public issue is often not arrogance or vanity but the simple belief that if the intellectual will not speak no one else can be expected to.

Nonetheless an obvious gulf separates the genuine radical professor, who approves and engages in direct action, disruption and confrontation, and the academic who, however strong his opinions, is prevented by principle or temperament from going beyond legally tolerated channels of dissent. Many rather crude motives have been advanced to explain professorial radicalism—lust for power, simple arrogance, desire for popularity, search for a lost youth, etc. Many equally simple complimentary motives have been advanced—fierce moral sense, total dedication to truth or teaching by example. No doubt this whole range of motives has its place in the complex of academic radicalism. But for many professors the ultimate root of their radical commitment is a more subtle thing—their uncertain relationship with "the world" and the recurring fear that "reality" is eluding them.

By definition the professor is an élite personage—by education, by status and function, by values and beliefs. The essence of his calling is insubstantial and ethereal—words printed and spoken and those allegedly potent but unseen weapons, ideas. In the beginning these attract the radical with compelling and hypnotic beauty. In an ugly and dishonest world the pure word seems more real than anything else.

But in the end this seduction begins to seem an illusion, especially when others who never chose the academy and the realm of thought—militant blacks, grape-strikers, Latin-American guerrillas, student activists—begin to demonstrate that reality is not as obdurate as the professor had supposed and is far more tractable to their deeds than to his words. What was once

Can promoting culture be a "form of oppression"?

an approximation of paradise—the world of leisured thought and spacious judgment—is revealed as a trap which has destroyed the manhood of the unsuspecting professor.

Academic radicalism is therefore perhaps most often a search to rediscover the "reality" from which the professor now feels profoundly estranged, and his participation is often aimed less at real changes in the world (although in a vague way he does want "the Revolution") than at his own spiritual transformation.

A San Francisco State professor tells how "I was a good boy in the academy. . . . I even wrote three books. . . . One day . . . two big black kids hoisted me up on their shoulders, and I spoke . . . the adrenalin pours into you, the beautiful feeling [that] . . . those of us who were on strike were on the side of life. I say those who did not join . . . actually chose a kind of death."*

AT every point the professor's radicalism is likely to be a reversal of the values he formerly lived by. Once committed to rationality and balance (especially during the hysteria of the McCarthy era), he now regards these as rather pale and cowardly. He is enormously taken with the student use of invective, slogan and obscenity, and quite envious because of his own clumsiness in these genres. Once preoccupied with high culture and "the best that has been thought and said," he now realizes that truth is most accessible in revolutionary tracts, rock music and the "spontaneous" doings of blacks, students and selected "workers." Formerly a believer in transtemporal ideas and ideals, spirit and values, he now realizes the truth in the Marxist contention that all reality is an expression of class structure and material interests. (Professor Kampf, who is president-elect of the Modern Language Association, reveals how he was deluded in his youthful obsession with 18th-century English literature because, "Neither Swift nor Pope would have received me into his home. Kampf, the Jewish socialist from Washington Heights. . . ." Trying to intro-

duce working-class students to "culture" is a form of oppression, he insists, "a weapon in the hands of those who rule."**)

The radical metaphor of reality is a simple spatial figure, roughly divided into higher and lower realms. Everything emanating from the "higher"—authority, high culture, tradition, rationality, balance, gentility—is at best suspect and usually pernicious. Everything originating in the "lower"—equality, folk culture, iconoclasm, strong passion, violence, raw experience—holds promise of life and truth. Here educational, cultural and political radicals are momentarily at one, joined at their common source by the educational radical's insistence on democracy and spontaneous learning, the cultural radical's lust after experience and elemental life, and the political radical's faith in "the people."

The fanaticism and unhappiness of the radical professor is necessarily related to his loss of faith in his chosen vocation, a loss of faith rendered inevitable by his new vision of reality, in which books, ideas and discourse, even of a quite radical kind, cannot possibly be genuine or in the last analysis important. For various reasons both selfish and idealistic the professor does not abandon his post, but increasingly he tends to use it as a convenient base of operation for other pursuits. (Thus some professors see prolonged academic strikes not as an interruption in education but the very essence of the process.)

The radical professor is necessarily involved in the continuously troubling struggle to give meaning and relevance (a word now seldom used) to activities he scarcely any longer believes in. Professor Kampf describes how, teaching a seminar on Proust, he was unable to make it real until the meetings were transferred to a room which was serving as a sanctuary for draft-resisters, and Proust could be related directly to what was occurring there. (He does not describe exactly how he related Proust to the sanctuary, but does observe that he will probably not teach Proust again.) When the cul-

**This and other mentions of Professor Kampf refer to his article in *Change*, May-June, 1970, pages 27-34.

*Quoted from *Commentary*, August, 1969, page 8.

tural radicals visited his class, one of the students stripped naked in a successful attempt to nonplus the invaders, and the class became meaningful because the students spent two hours discussing the significance of this action.

This continuous welling up of "life" from the lower half of society—the young and powerless — effectively precludes even the possibility of education in the traditional sense. Professor Kampf rejects the validity of esthetic judgments about literature, because they are demanded by a society which thrives on competition and consumption, and they make real experience of the literature impossible. Each man's perceptions, especially if they are untutored, are correct in themselves. The teaching of literature in the normal way is oppressive, according to Kampf, because students are ashamed when told that their feelings about a particular work are invalid. The prominence of social scientists in the New Left is not accidental, since ultimately this radicalism sees no reality beyond a set of social relationships—a variety of groups and classes all struggling against one another, each of whose claims can only be judged on the basis of how disadvantaged it is with respect to the other groups. There are no values transcending class lines which need to be respected, and thus Professor Kampf maintains that there can be no educational reform outside the context of "specific social objectives."

HOWEVER, the democratic vision of the professors, like that of the students, tends to founder on the shores of the white working class, since if working-class attitudes are accepted as valid, and if the professor forswears all ambition of imposing his own ideas, the university will have to find a place for the hardhat mentality which seems to flourish amid the working-class young even more than amid their parents. Few radicals seem to be interested in the proposal of Gus Tyler of

the International Ladies Garment Workers Union that the campuses should be populated with older people, white- and blue-collar workers on temporary leave from their jobs, to pursue continuing education. Most radicals prefer to see the universities remain ghettos of young people, who are more readily amenable to radical movements of all kinds. (A sincere acceptance of older workers on the campus might entail, for example, serious, appreciative studies of the music of Lawrence Welk, a prospect even the most "democratic" radicals are not prepared for.)

The accusation by conservatives like Spiro Agnew that radical professors are ultimately the cause of student radicalism is therefore an error made by applying a traditional point of view to a wholly new situation. The "democratic" ideology of radical professors prevents them from aspiring to teach students in the ordinary sense, and one useful index of a professor's radicalism is precisely the extent to which he claims to learn more from the students than he teaches them (a claim that is usually not exaggerated). Student radicals are by definition young people who question all values bequeathed from above, and who necessarily mistrust everyone in authority. A professor, even of proven radical credentials, can never be wholly trusted by radical students so long as he continues to hold a job and draw a salary from the university.

Paradoxically "radical" professors may actually have less real influence on most campuses than "liberal" professors. Radical students often enter marriages of convenience with radical teachers, but such students insist on retaining control of their own movements and readily sever all ties with faculty when it suits their purposes. (Radical faculty sometimes do the same.) The most extreme radical young people, like the Weathermen, appear to have almost no sustained and

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meaningful contact with adults of any kind, and the dynamics of their deepening extremism seem to develop almost entirely within the tight confines of isolated youth ghettos that reject virtually all of the adult world.

By contrast, students who are conservative, moderate, liberal, or merely uncertain often look for faculty leadership. A respected professor known to be "balanced" in his opinions can sometimes have great effect when he takes a stand for a strike or condemns a particular policy of the government or the university. Such faculty not infrequently hold positions of actual leadership in liberal student movements. Faculty thus involved define their roles in various ways, but sometimes they see themselves as conservatives

demonstrating that the older generation, and older institutions, can be responsible.

Student radicals are drawn inexorably leftward, finally to the point of desperate acts, by a self-created trap—the expectation of immediate and tangible success in the struggle, which logically requires the continuous rejection of tactics which "don't work" and the adoption of more extreme and risky methods. Professors are often radicalized by a similar self-created trap, albeit a much more complex one. By assuming that the underclasses (especially the young) are more in touch with reality than he is, the professor effectively precludes any criticism of their actions. Indeed the more extreme and irrational their acts, the more "real" they appear and the more ashamed the professor



HOWARD ZINN, a political scientist at Boston University, is one of the better-known politically radical professors, who, as a class, are sometimes accused by the cultural and educational radicals of being "uptight, overly intellectual, and enslaved to a public role."

is of his own effete-ness. (A Cornell professor is quoted as saying about student terrorists, "God bless them! I will not join them, but God bless them!")

THE professorial self-image, formed perhaps in the quiescent Eisenhower years, is part of the same trap. He has justified his life by defining himself as an outsider and a critic of society, and no matter how radical his students become he cannot make the emotional transition to the role of moderator or conservator of traditional values. Thus although prior to about 1964 he may have loved the university and the life of scholarship, he is quite prepared to countenance the destruction of both if the Revolution requires it. To do anything else would be to admit that he is in fact a part of the Establishment, and that he has always deluded himself as to the nature of his true role. The modern intellectual's general commitment to the avant-garde, to innovation, obviously works to the same end, preventing real scepticism with respect to what appears to be the inevitable direction of history.

Most radical professors have probably been surprised and disturbed by outbreaks of systematic violence perpetrated by radical students and the National Guard, and they seek to cope with it through various rationalizations which hint at suppressed guilt feelings. A group of Boston professors is circulating a national letter suggesting that most terrorist acts have been the work of police spies in the student ranks. A few theorists, like the late German radical Theodor W. Adorno, have denied any connection between their ideas and students' actions. Some radical mentors insist that they have been misunderstood. Most adopt the position of not "approving" violence but "understanding" it in the light of unalleviated evils and provocations. But if radical professors are more accurately seen as followers of their students than leaders, they still have some indirect responsibility for their students' beliefs.

Adults who suspect professorial influence behind student actions are commonly misled by the students' penchant for quoting Herbert Marcuse and other older intellectuals, without realizing that only a small *fraction of those who quote Marcuse* are likely ever to

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have read him with any care or understanding. Student radicals tend to be quintessentially American in their basic indifference to theory, which sometimes becomes a fierce anti-intellectualism. (Marcuse himself does not approve the students' attacks on the universities, and some young radicals despise him as a cloistered theorizer.) Nonetheless the ideas of the professors are important to the New Left. Ideas are important to action in two ways—they serve to justify it to the world, and they explain it to the person who himself performs the act.

Student radicalism includes levels of articulateness ranging from almost total incoherence to great subtlety and power; some students are masters of intricate theory. But behind even the best articulated radical grievances there are evident deep and inchoate rage, despair and disenchantment which seem to lack an "objective correlative," in T. S. Eliot's phrase. (These feelings are directed, for example, not only at the obvious gross evils in society but also at most of the people who are trying to alleviate these evils, and even at other radicals.) Without the presence of radical professors systematically exposing the "oppressive character" of the entire culture there would undoubtedly still be youthful rebellion, even of the most extreme kind. But it would be a rebellion quite blatantly irrational and nihilistic. The older intellectual performs for the adolescent rebel the service of systematizing his often incoherent feelings, channeling them in specific directions and justifying them under a moral and political rubric. (Nihilistic instincts are validated, for example, by ingenious explanations of how even the smallest facet of American society serves oppressive purposes.) He also gives them a certain respectability by demonstrating that they are actually more rational than the beliefs of apparently "sane" liberals and moderates. (This is done by ignoring the often random character of social reality and postulating a gigantic and highly coordinated "system" in which everything fits, from the Vietnam war to the teaching of poetry.)

SOMETIMES the radical professor also affects the radicalization of his students in another, generally unintended, more profound way—by the negative example of his own life. The students'

deep and perhaps ineradicable cynicism about the entire culture (not only of America but of the whole West), and about institutions like the university, is continually fed by their awareness that so many of the most attractive people of the older generation—intelligent, sympathetic, morally concerned parents, professors, and clergy—are ridden with self-doubt often bordering on contempt and have ceased to believe in the vocations they follow. Kate Haracz, a Michigan State student, describes one of her professors:

"Monday — M.'s travesty. He keeps talking about how the technology of the kindergarten and the technology of the college classroom are essentially the same. It's a decent point, but he ruins it, so I bought a coloring book and crayons. . . . He started out . . . by reading from 'Functionaries' . . . suddenly slammed the book on the table, and yelled 'Julius Hoffman is a functionary.' . . . this is just another stunning example of the simplistic, repeat-the-cool-thing-which-those-in-sociology-circles-say-you-should-say analysis. . . . The man simply repeats blindly the last thing he's heard. . . . today, as he sauntered into the room, you could tell he's made up his mind to be cool. He sat in the back of the room and waited. About 20 minutes after class was supposed to start, he said, 'What do you want to do today?' . . . It soon degenerated into another session of liberal breast-beating about values in education and how rotten the System is. I walked out. I've got better things to do than listen to this crap which they all take so seriously like they have just discovered the secret of the universe. They actually think it is daring (and consequently cool) to say that the System reeks. . . . I'm sick of all that tearful, Monday-morning, gutless-wonder soul-searching. . . ."

Young people who regularly encounter adults of this kind would be hard pressed to believe anything good about the "system" even if they were so inclined, and if they are not radicalized by this repeated experience they are at least led to assume that most radical condemnations are justified, since the most apparently concerned people of the older generation are more than eager to confess to any charge leveled at them, and individuals like M. demon-

*Quoted from *Change*, May-June, 1970, pages 20, 24, 25.

strate the hollowness of the university by their very mode of rebelling against it.

The future of the radical professor is at present an uncertain one, since a wave of reaction seems to be building up which may lead to campus purges. There is some support for this even within the academic community, although the majority of teachers and students in most institutions are probably determined that this shall not happen. The situation is crucially different from the McCarthy era in that it is unlikely that very many people will be prosecuted now solely for their ideas. Professors who formed their principles of academic freedom on the experiences of the nineteen-fifties are now confused by the fact that so many academics have advanced beyond verbal dissent. Some professors have participated in illegal acts like seizing buildings or "unprofessional" acts like disrupting other teachers' classes or refusing to meet their own. Even if the academic community closes ranks around the accused it is not clear that existing laws and customs regarding tenure really protect such persons. In effect the limits of acceptable professorial conduct have broadened enormously in the last five years, but it is not clear whether this is a permanent or an emergency condition, nor is it embodied in law.

By instinct most professors are strongly opposed to outside interference in university affairs and are highly uncomfortable at the thought of any kind of political purge. But the campus battles of the last six years have opened many deep and unhealable wounds, especially in older professors who feel that either in themselves or through their institutions they have been systematically humiliated and repudiated by radical students abetted by radical colleagues. Some radicals also serve fair warning that they will never leave the campuses in peace until they have destroyed them or transformed them totally, and some professors have concluded rather reluctantly that a purge is necessary for the universities' very survival. In most universities the senior faculty still has paramount power, although it is now diluted by student power and other kinds of democratization. It is likely that within the next year there will be crucial test cases regarding tenure and promotion which will do much to determine the tolerable limits of dissent in the academy.

Like society, most univer-

sities have their silent majorities of both faculty and students, whose sentiments are presumed to be conservative but who generally remain inactive and inarticulate. This academic silent majority, however, is probably a good deal more ambivalent and confused than its political counterpart. Most professors and students are repelled by many features of campus radicalism, but the moral passion and ideological coherence of the radicals continuously forces the intellectual to question to what degree his feelings are prejudiced and self-serving, a defense against unpleasant realities. Typically many academics feel guilty about supporting the radicals, guilty about not supporting them and guilty about doing nothing. They have thus been inordinately affected by events from the outside like police raids, because these momentarily tip the precarious balance in the radicals' favor. By now, however, the campus communities have become sophisticated about the dynamics of confrontation, and this fact plus recent acts of leftist terrorism has probably led to a determination by most faculty to be open to reform while remaining in active opposition to disruptive methods. It is not clear if this strategy will prove workable.

TO a surprising degree normal education seems to have continued even at the most agonized institutions during the nineteen-sixties, judging by such external criteria as dissertations completed, books and articles published, faculty and students recruited, football games played, even classes successfully held. But no one would say that the universities have not changed, or that they will ever again be the same. Beyond the obvious and important changes—student power, intensive recruitment of blacks, more "relevant" curriculums and political awareness—one radical thought has sunk deep into the universities' bones, leaving few people untouched. This is the simple question whether the life of the mind is any longer a legitimate way of existence, and whether the search for truth is not a self-indulgent evasion of the searing demands for active life in society. Whether these questions are seen as the product of a new and penetrating moral vision, or as the incessant beating of a fanatic rhetoric on tender consciences, they persist, and there are few professors now prepared to answer them with total confidence. ■