

# In Defense of the Student Movement

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The student movement today is the one organized, significant segment of the intellectual community that has a real and active commitment to the kind of social change that our society desperately needs. Developments now taking place may lead to its destruction, in part through repression, in part through what I think are rather foolish tactics on the part of the student movement itself. I think this would be a great, perhaps irreparable, loss. And I think if it does take place the blame will largely fall on the liberal enlightened community that has permitted a situation to arise in which the most committed, sincere, and most socially active of young people are perhaps working themselves into a position at the end of a limb, from which they may be sawed off at great cost to all of us and to society as a whole.

One development that makes me feel that this matter is of crucial importance right now is the rise on the campuses of a growing movement that I think is quite ill-conceived and that may lead to repression of student activism and destruction of what I deem the few possibilities for significant social change. I have in mind a letter (which I did not receive, though a number of my colleagues did) from the Coordinating Center for Democratic Opinion headed by Sidney Hook and a number of other people. [The organization is now called University Centers for Rational Alternatives.] The letter calls upon people to join this organization, the goals of which “will be to defend academic freedom against extremism, to promote the activism of non-extremists in all aspects of civic affairs, to foster rational treatment of contemporary problems, and to combat attacks on the democratic process,” particularly “terrorist attacks and multiple varieties of putschism” such as at San Francisco State, and also “many other extremist resorts to disruption, intimidation and violence,” all of which amount to a “new McCarthyism of the left.” The letter speaks of the dangers of appeasing this movement, pointing out that appeasement is both “morally intolerable and practically disastrous.” And it says that “the main thrust” of the new organization is to be “to protect and advance the freedom and democratic integrity of academic life,” to struggle against the “extremist challenge,” “to support the university as an open center of free thought and speech – as a meeting house of many viewpoints – not as an enclave of enforced conformity or a totalitarian beachhead in a democratic society.”

It would be very difficult to find anyone who would reject these goals. It would be difficult to find anyone who would be in favor of a university that would be an “enclave of enforced conformity” or who would oppose the view that the university should be “an open center of free thought and speech.” But in another and more serious sense it represents, I think, an extremely

dangerous, even perhaps vicious development; no doubt inadvertently, but I think objectively. When I see things of this sort, what immediately comes to mind is some advice that A. J. Muste gave to pacifists about a half century ago. He said that their task is to

denounce the violence on which the present system is based and all the evil, material and spiritual, this entails for the masses of men throughout the world. So long as we are not dealing honestly and adequately with this 90 per cent of our problem, there is something ludicrous – and perhaps hypocritical – about our concern over the ten per cent of violence employed by the rebels against oppression.

I think that's a sensible remark. And in fact, even if the criticism of "McCarthyism of the left" contained in this letter and similar statements were entirely accurate, still I think Muste's words would be quite appropriate. It would be surprising that that much attention should be given to this minuscule element in the problems of society and the problems of the university.

I want to apologize in advance because later I am going to do something, in Muste's words, "ludicrous and perhaps hypocritical"; namely, spend part of this discussion on an infinitesimal part of the problems that face American society and in particular the universities: tendencies in the student movement that strike me as irrational and objectionable and probably ultimately suicidal. My reason for doing this is precisely because I think that the student movement does have a historic mission, and I think it would be a great tragedy if the tendencies to which I have referred were to lead it into such disaster that this mission will not be fulfilled. There's no other force in society that I see from which one can hopefully expect that a comparable achievement will come.

But before turning to this important though marginal aspect of our present social problems, let me refer, obviously inadequately, to what seem to me the real problems. The basic problem is indicated by the fact that since World War II, our society has devoted something over a trillion dollars to what is euphemistically called "defense" and unknown additional amounts to subversion. We have intervened with military force to overthrow governments that we admit were popular and legally constituted and to maintain in power repressive dictatorships throughout the world that are willing to subordinate themselves to our interests. And furthermore we have at least once certainly, and perhaps several times, brought the world perilously close to nuclear destruction. Worse still, we continue to accept as legitimate the principles on the basis of which those decisions were made. So we can expect the situation to recur.

It's remarkable that liberals and conservatives alike, just about all those in the mainstream of opinion, applaud this splendid performance. There is very little serious criticism of the decisions that were made, let us say, during the Cuban missile crisis, when we did bring the world very close to total destruction in order to establish the principle that we have a right to have missiles on the borders of the Soviet Union while they do not have the same right to have missiles on our border. One finds little criticism of that principle, little mention of the criminal insanity of those willing to risk nuclear war to defend such a principle, within the mainstream of opinion. What you find rather are statements like those of Presidential historian Thomas Bailey, who refers to this as a high point of the Kennedy Administration: when Kennedy showed that he knew how to play "nuclear chicken."

The dangers of nuclear war and its consequences are obviously immense and require no comment. But the problem of repression, of the institution of dictatorial forms, is one that definitely

can be talked about and is very serious. For example, last year there was a good deal of reporting in the papers about political developments in Thailand. But there were a number of things that were not mentioned in these reports. In particular there was a long report in the New York Times about the sudden reappearance in Peking of a man named Pridi Phanomyong, who was simply identified as a Communist Thai leader who had suddenly come into some prominence in China. There is an interesting background, not reported in the story, to his appearance in Peking.

If one looks into the history of these developments, one finds some important things. In 1932 Pridi Phanomyong was leader of the liberal reform movement that tried to introduce parliamentary institutions into Thailand and overthrew the absolute monarchy. He himself was overthrown shortly afterward, then during World War II fought together with the American OSS in the "Free Thai" guerrilla movement against the Japanese, while Thailand was under the rule of a basically fascist dictator who had an alliance with Japan. In 1946-7 Pridi led a liberal parliamentary reform movement and won Thailand's only more-or-less free election in history. But he received almost no support from the United States and was quickly overthrown in a coup. By 1948 the fascist dictator who had been a collaborator with the Japanese was back in power. He was immediately recognized by the United States and given very substantial military and economic aid to develop Thailand as one of the supposed bastions of freedom in Southeast Asia.

In fact, Thailand developed into one of the most bloody, repressive, vicious dictatorships in the world. Its enormous crimes are reported in such historical documents as a book by a Kennedy liberal named Frank Darling (one of the signers of the Hook Committee's statement, incidentally) who goes to great length to detail the repression and the role of the United States in instituting it during this post-war period after the coup. And he points out something that the Times did not bother to mention; namely, after Pridi was overthrown by a coup that was supported immediately by the United States, he remained in Thailand for a few years and then escaped to China, so that by 1954 the liberal reformer who had been fighting against the Japanese, with the Americans, was in Communist China, and the fascist dictator who had been allied with the Japanese, and had declared war on us, was ruling in Thailand, now an authoritarian military dictatorship with substantial American military support.

This, Mr. Darling says, was "ironic"! He then concludes and summarizes this situation as follows:

the vast material and diplomatic support provided to the military leaders by the United States helped to prevent the emergence of any competing groups who might check the trend toward absolute political rule and lead the country back to a more modern form of government.

The last phrase is interesting: "lead the country *back* to a more modern form of government." But it is quite accurate because the Thais had a more modern form of government in 1946-7 under the leadership of a liberal reformer who is now in Communist China; and it was American military aid that very largely created a situation in which one now hopes they might move back to this more modern form of government.

This is a fairly typical example of the American impact on the less developed Countries. If we can escape nuclear war, then the prospects for peace are really prospects for the peace of the prison or the peace of the graveyard, if present tendencies continue. It is interesting that Darling, though he deplors the consequences of our actions in Thailand, nevertheless urges

that we continue about as before. He thus expresses the predominant voice in American society: What follows from our actions is deplorable, but it is not our fault, we have no choice, we must continue. Now of course this is not quite the predominant voice because Frank Darling is liberal, a CIA analyst and basically a Kennedy liberal.

There is another voice in the mainstream of American opinion that is becoming more dominant: the voice of people like Melvin Laird, who has called for a “first strike” if the situation requires it. This makes us as far as I know, the only country in the world where the Minister of War has come out in favor of “preventive war” if “our interests” demand it. And he is supported – I suppose again this makes us the only country in the world where this is true – by the leading military spokesman in the press, Hanson Baldwin, who has come out in favor of first use of nuclear weapons for what he refers to as “defensive purposes”; specifically, bolstering weak governments against subversion and aggression – where we decide, of course unilaterally, when this is taking place – as in Vietnam in 1964, when it appears a decision was made perhaps even prior to the 1964 election campaign to escalate the war and to attack North Vietnam. One recalls the rhetoric during the election campaign. This decision, whenever it was actually made, was secret and private. It was a conspiracy, an illegal conspiracy to carry out acts of war that then were put in effect in February, 1965. This conspiracy has not been challenged in the courts although it is one of very great significance, not only to the people of Vietnam but to ourselves, and although it violates domestic law insofar as international treaties are part of that law.

What is investigated in the courts are other sorts of “conspiracies”; for example, the “conspiracy” by Dr. Spock and others to challenge the illegal acts of the government. It is striking that the government made clear what it regards as the basis of the Spock conspiracy. It made this even more clear at the appeals level than it did during the trial by giving a list of “co-conspirators,” of whom I am one. The criterion that identifies this set of co-conspirators is precise; the people tried at the Spock trial and the co-conspirators happen to be exactly the group that appeared at a press conference, independently, to speak their minds, to say what they thought about the war and resistance. Many of them never met before or since. This was the only link between the people named as “conspirators” in the Spock trial.

I believe this indicates what is the real peril not only to academic freedom, but to the freedoms provided by the Bill of Rights. Even if one were to agree with everything said in criticism of the student movement, this criticism would, in proper perspective, be quite insignificant.

The dominant voice in American society, the mainstream opinion, is bracketed by people like Frank Darling, on the one side, and by people like Melvin Laird and Hanson Baldwin, on the other. This voice is one that was made explicit by Barrington Moore in an article in the *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* in early 1960:

You may protest in words as loud as you like. There is but one condition attached to the freedom we would like very much to encourage. Your protests may be as loud as possible so long as they remain ineffective. Though we regret your sufferings very much and would like very much to do something about them – indeed we have studied them very carefully and have already spoken to your rulers and immediate superiors about these matters – any attempt by you to remove your oppressors by force is a threat to civilized society and the democratic process. Such threats we cannot and shall not tolerate. As you resort to force we will, if need be, wipe you

from the face of the earth by the measured response that rains down flame from the skies.

I think if you observe American society, you find that this is its predominant voice. It's a voice that expresses clearly the needs of the socio-economic elite; it expresses an ideology that is adopted and put forth with varying degrees of subtlety by most American intellectuals and that gains a substantial degree of adherence on the part of a majority of the population, which sees itself as entering or already having entered the affluent society.

This predominant voice is supported by a predominant attitude of almost total apathy that makes it possible for any atrocity to appear in the front pages as long as it is directed against alleged "communists" or landless peasants or something of the sort. And it arouses virtually no response, certainly no response commensurate with what is described. This attitude is developed from the very earliest years.

I've become more aware of that since my children have been in school. Let me give you one example that I came across. I have a daughter in the Lexington, Massachusetts, Public School. Lexington is a very progressive, professional, largely upper-middle-class community that prides itself on its outstanding school system. My daughter had a social science reader that talked about the marvelous New England heritage. The protagonist in this reader is a young fellow named Robert, who is being told about the wonders of the colonial past, including the following:

Captain John Mason made plans to capture the Pequot fort where the Rhode Island Colony and the Connecticut Colony met. His little army attacked in the morning before it was light and took the Pequots by surprise. The soldiers broke down the stockade with their axes and rushed inside and set fire to the wigwams. They killed nearly all the braves, squaws and children and burned their corn and other food. There were no Pequots left to make more trouble. When the other Indian tribes saw what good fighters the white men were they kept the peace for many years.

"I wish I were a man and had been there," thought Robert.

And this is his last thought on the subject.

There is no doubt that if the Germans had won World War II, little Hans would be reading similar stories about Lidice, and he would also be wishing that he were a man and had been there. But this is the fare that is fed our children from earliest school experience, that is reinforced by the mass media, and that certainly goes a long way toward accounting for the fact that it's possible to have a story exactly like this in the newspapers where one replaces "Pequots" by "Vietnamese" and "stone axes" by "B-52s" – and to find the zombie-like reaction that permits any kind of atrocity to take place with nothing said about it. Now my daughter is not being exposed to some of the more remarkable statements by New England intellectuals at the time; for example, Cotton Mather, who described that very same incident as follows: "It was supposed that no less than 600 Pequot souls were brought down to hell that day." Mather goes on to talk about the diseases that decimated the Indians after the Mayflower landing, saying, "The woods were almost cleared of these pernicious creatures to make room for a better growth."

This is a part of our tradition that people ought to be exposed to, and they ought to be shown how it relates and compares to what is happening today. In such circumstances it might be possible to maintain peace – if the oppressed peoples of the world were silent and quiet, if they were

willing to continue to play the role that was once described by Philippine nationalist Jose Rizal in castigating his countrymen because their aspirations were “dreams of a slave who asks only for a bandage to wrap the chain so that it may rattle less and not ulcerate his skin.” But of course, those days are over. The slaves are no longer just calling for a bandage to wrap the chains, and that is the major reason for the disorder around the world, and the resulting disorder on American campuses.

It is hardly necessary to emphasize that the very same predominant voice is heard with reference to domestic issues. A look at the files of the New York Civil Liberties Union will explain very clearly what “law and order” means to the poor. What it means is permanent harassment by the forces of justice. You get a very clear picture of this in books by Algernon Black, for example, or Paul Chevigny in *Police Power*, where he discusses no real atrocities but just the low-level, day-to-day harassment that defines the life of poor people in their relation to the forces of order. He does not mention events like the murder of students, events which lead to a great deal of sympathetic clucking of tongues, but do not lead to the formation of any national committees to defend the rights of students.

I might mention that the hypocritical role of the government in the civil rights movement is evident to everyone who had anything to do with it. My own involvement was not very great, but it was enough to make clear what was going on. The federal government does have the authority under the United States Code to use force to defend the rights of citizens against state authorities. It has not done so. Everyone, many other people much more than I, has seen incidents of brutal violence carried out by state authorities against citizens, with F.B.I. agents standing there taking notes when they have the right, the duty in fact, to intervene to prevent this if they are given the appropriate orders, which they’re seldom given.

Let me turn to another area. Ralph Nader has pointed out that in the state of Pennsylvania 2,000 miners die each year of so-called “black lung.” This is not a cost that is calculated by business or by professional economists when they talk about the health of the economy. And we can be quite certain that if these miners were, let’s say, to seize the mines, if they were to insist that reasonable standards be imposed, or to be more exact, that reasonable standards be enforced to prevent this, then we can be quite sure that there would be a movement to prevent “left fascism” from taking over American society; and any impoliteness or violence that would result would be blamed on the miners and headlined on the front pages, as the troops are called in to repress these multiple forms of putschism,” as they were by Franklin D. Roosevelt 30 years ago.

There are more subtle but equally pernicious forms of violence. The Hook letter quoted earlier mentions San Francisco State. The letter did not mention that San Francisco is a city that is 20 per cent black, and that its college is there to serve the urban community. San Francisco State College last year had 3.6 per cent black students, down from 11 per cent seven years before, in a city that is 20 per cent black.

According to an article by Professor A. K. Bierman of San Francisco State, a bill to provide funds to help disadvantaged students to enter college passed the state legislature but was vetoed by Governor Reagan, who may well have been trying to set up a confrontation for political reasons. No national committees were formed to investigate this particular situation, let alone to deplore it; and the facts that I just mentioned are not referred to in the discussion of the “putschism” that took place on the San Francisco campus, though they surely have something to do with it. This kind of omission makes one seriously question the judgment of people who are

putting together this kind of ultimately repressive movement. I need not mention that a college degree is a certificate of entry to the affluent society.

Personally I would entirely agree with the people I quoted who deplore the acts of those who shout down speakers at public meetings. Thus I deplore the acts of the “responsible” students who during the years 1965 and 1966 helped to break up public meetings against the war, to deface churches in which public meetings were taking place, and so on. In Boston in I 965 and early I 966, it was impossible to hold a public meeting on the Boston Common to oppose the bombing of North Vietnam, because it would be broken up by force by M.I.T. students, for example, who would march over from the fraternities, with many others. And the Arlington Street Church was pelted with tomatoes and tin cans when the meetings were shifted indoors. This was all headlined on the front pages of the newspapers. In the Boston Globe on October 16, 1965, the entire front page was taken up by a description of the events that happened the day before, and the radio ran constant and detailed reports. And of course the commentators were very indignant about what was happening. They were indignant about the peaceful demonstrators who by what they were saying were inciting this reaction on the part of the responsible, short-haired students. And they were joined by liberal Senators like Mike Mansfield, who also spoke against the irresponsibility of the demonstrators for making statements that he himself was to endorse when the time came two years later. Perhaps he might even admit that, had he done so earlier, the world would be a slightly better place. Again, there were no national committees formed to protect the right of free assembly in the face of this kind of violence.

Let’s turn to the matter of politicization of the universities, which is a matter that Professor Hook’s committee is much concerned with and that he himself has spoken about quite eloquently many times. Professor Hook has argued that there is a prima facie case that Communist Party members should not be granted the rights of academic freedom, the normal rights, because of the fact that they belong to an organization that by its own statements endorses limitations on free speech and urges its members not to tell the truth under certain circumstances. There are also other organizations that have behaved in such fashion; for example, the United States Government, which urges and in fact enjoins participants in its programs not to tell the truth on many subjects. Arthur Sylvester, director of information for the Defense Department a few years ago, said in a fit of anger that anyone who believes a word said by spokesmen for the government should have his head examined, or words approximately to that effect. Quite apart from such outbursts, it is clear that people with access to classified information are required by law to withhold relevant information, or even to lie, with respect to matters that may very well be related to their teaching and research supervision.

Now by Professor Hook’s argument, it should follow that in the case of people who are involved in work for the American government, there is also a prima facie case that they should be denied the opportunity to teach. Putting aside Hook’s argument, which I do not for a moment accept, their involvement in teaching, in fact their dominance of it in fields like engineering or the social sciences, would certainly suggest a high degree of a very dangerous sort of politicization of the universities. For example, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, there are two major universities, Harvard and M.I.T. Each has an outstanding department of government and political science. The chairmen of both departments are deeply involved in the Indochina war. One is chairman of a Council on Vietnamese Studies that is ultimately responsible to the State Department. The other supervises three-quarters of a million dollars of research outside the university on such topics as counterinsurgency and pacification in Vietnam. This is not untypical, and it does indicate a

high degree of politicization of the universities. We need not ask how many projects there are in which political scientists and technologists work on the question of how poorly armed guerrillas might better defend themselves against an overwhelming military force from 10,000 miles away, or how many social science projects there are to deal with the problems of, say, revolutionary development of Third World societies in anything like an objective or sympathetic manner.

Those who are sympathetic to revolution are treated rather differently. For example, Staughton Lynd was denied an appointment at Roosevelt University, a very liberal university in Chicago. The history department voted to appoint Lynd, and this decision was simply overturned by the administration. At San Francisco State, according to the information that I have been able to obtain, in one of the acts that initiated the disorders there, George Murray was suspended without due process by the Regents for statements that he was alleged to have made. He had made some statements of which they disapproved. He was apparently suspended by the trustees over the objection of the president of the University, the mayor of San Francisco, and the police chief of San Francisco in what appears to have been another attempt to make political capital by setting up a confrontation on the campus. These are matters that ought to be explored, but no national committees are set up to defend academic freedom in the face of instances of this sort, which might be enumerated at considerable length.

Let me turn now to the other aspect of the problem of combatting the politicization of the universities, the dominant and overwhelming element of which results from the national psychosis that has developed during the Cold War, with the subversion of science and technology and scholarship as they devote themselves to the goals expressed by the predominant voice in American society. This is the real problem of the universities. Professor Hook's group I think is right in much of what it deplores; but it is talking about a speck at the margin of the problem. It is ignoring the real problems of politicization. It is remarkable that if one wants to find a critique of the subversion of the universities, the betrayal of the public trust by the universities, if one wants to hear a real voicing of this critique, one turns not to the civil libertarians but rather to Senator Fulbright or Admiral Rickover or General Eisenhower, all of whom have spoken quite correctly about the dangers to a free society when the university associates itself with powerful social institutions. It's remarkable that a critique of this development, which is fundamental and significant, has to come primarily from such sources.

I have up to now been discussing "the violence on which the present system is based," to use Muste's words. How about the other aspect, the 10 per cent, or more accurately, the 1 per cent or less of the violence? George Orwell once described political thought, especially on the left, as a kind of masturbation fantasy where the world of facts hardly matters. Unfortunately, there is a good deal of truth to that characterization. One of the Movement newspapers once carried an article by a very distinguished professor at Harvard, an old friend of mine who has become deeply involved in radical politics lately and who says that the "goal of university agitation should be to build anti-imperialist struggles in which the university administration is a clear enemy." Now this man knows American universities very well, and in particular he knows Harvard very well. It's very difficult for me to believe that he really thinks of Nathan Pusey as the representative of imperialism on the Harvard campus. In fact if that were true, things would be very easy. All you would have to do would be to sit in at the administration building and you would have struck a blow at imperialism. But it doesn't work like that. The problem is far deeper. This is almost a pure fantasy.



The real problem is that those who call for freedom in the universities are calling for something that exists but that is very badly misused. The universities are relatively free, fairly decentralized institutions in which the serious decisions, those that actually relate to the interrelation between student and faculty, to the curriculum, to what a person does with his life, the kind of work he does those decisions are very largely made by the faculty and very largely at the departmental level. At least this is true at the major universities I am familiar with.

Of course, the temptations are very strong to make certain decisions rather than others. For those who choose to put their talents to the service of the powerful institutions of the society, there are many rewards – or what might be thought to be rewards. There's power, prestige, and affluence – a share in the great project of designing an integrated world system dominated by American power, which many feel to be a reward. Those who make different choices can confidently expect a good deal of abuse and recrimination, perhaps the destruction of their professional careers. Hence, in one sense the choice is hardly free. In fact, the choice is approximately as outlined by General Hershey in one of his most famous statements; namely, this is the American or indirect way to insure compliance.

But in a much more important sense the choice really is free. And the fact of the matter is, and I think one has to face this, that the politicization of the universities and the subversion of science and scholarship, which is quite real, is the result of a relatively free choice by students and by faculty who have been unwilling to resist the temptations and to face the real difficulties of standing outside the mainstream and of rejecting the rewards, if such they are, that are offered for compliance.

Consider the problem of developing radical scholarship in the universities. This is a category I do not believe adequately exists. I personally believe that objective scholarship will very often lead to radical conclusions in the social sciences, as in every other field. One takes for granted in fields outside the social sciences that objective scholarship will often challenge the predominant framework of thinking. Only in the social sciences is this considered somehow the mark of an alienated intellectual who has to be dealt with by psychiatric means. But the fact of the matter is that the task of developing objective scholarship free from the constraints imposed by the American political consensus is a quite real one, and I personally believe that it will lead to radical conclusions.

The burden of proof is obviously on someone like me, who makes that assertion, who believes that objective research will support conclusions of a radical nature. And this is exactly the point that I want to stress. The failure to develop what might be misleadingly called radical scholarship, the failure to build it into the curriculum, this is by no means the result of decrees by college administrators or by trustees. Rather it results directly from the unwillingness of the students and the faculty to undertake the very hard and serious work that is required and to face calmly and firmly the kind of repression, or at least recriminations and abuse, that they are likely to meet if they carry out this work in a serious way. I would expect these to come not from the administration but rather more from the faculty, which may feel that its guild structure, the professional structure on which its security rests, is being threatened. Particularly in the social and behavioral sciences, where theoretical content is virtually nonexistent and intellectual substance is slight, the pretense of professional expertise is very often used as a defense against quite legitimate criticism and analysis. Here I think can be found one source of the abuse of academic freedom: namely, the restricting of those who try to develop objective academic scholarship that

will challenge the prevailing framework of thinking in the professions and the conclusions that are often reached.

Suppose that these barriers are overcome – the barriers being, I think, the unwillingness of students to do the hard work required and the fear of the faculty that their guild structure will be threatened. Suppose that these barriers are overcome. Then it might be that the trustees and the administration would step in to erect new barriers against the implementation of study and research and teaching that leads to radical conclusions and the action programs that ought to flow from honest, serious research. However, this is only speculation. We do not know that the universities will not tolerate programs of this sort, both as teaching programs and programs of research and action as well, because the effort has barely been made. There are cases of administrative interference and they are deplorable, but it would be a great mistake to think that they constitute the heart of the problem. They do not.

I think it crucial that the effort be made. I think we very much need understanding of contemporary society, of its long-range tendencies, of the possibilities for alternative forms of social organization and a reasoned, serious analysis, without fantasy, of how social change can come about. I have no doubt that objective scholarship can contribute to that understanding. But it is hard work and it has to be conducted in an open-minded and honest fashion. Furthermore, I think work of that sort has a political content almost at once and can strike directly at repressive institutions. To cite one example, there's a group of graduate students and junior faculty in Asian studies at Harvard and other universities who have formed a Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars that is attempting to develop – I can only describe it in value-laden terms – a more objective and hence more humane and more sympathetic treatment of the problems of the developing Asian societies. If this attempt on their part succeeds – and I think it may, if it consists of solid and well-grounded work – it may seriously weaken one foundation stone of the national psychosis that plays a major role in promoting the garrison state with its enormous commitment of resources to destruction and waste, and its continual posing of the threat of nuclear war.

Let me mention perhaps a more important example, the problem of organizing scientists to refuse military work. For example, consider the matter of the ABM. Most scientists know that the ABM is a catastrophe, that it will not increase our security but in fact will probably endanger it by increasing international instability and tensions. But it is quite predictable that having given their lectures to the Senate committees, many of these very same scientists have gone to work to build it, knowing what they are doing. There is no law of nature that dictates that this must be the case. They can refuse individually; they can refuse collectively. They can organize to refuse. I think the real point is that lectures on the irrationality of the ABM, though quite amusing, are basically beside the point if in fact the ABM is motivated not so much by the search for security as by the need to provide a subsidy for the electronics industry. And I think there's very good evidence that that's true. The fact of the matter is that if I may quote from a paper given at the December, 1967, meeting of the American Economics Association –

... the current proposal for an ABM system has been estimated to involve 28 private contractors with plants located in 42 states and 172 congressional districts. Given the political reality of such situations and the economic power of the constituencies involved, there is little hope that the interaction of special interest groups will somehow cancel each other out and that there will emerge some compromise that serves the public interest.

These interest groups are further specified as “the Armed Services, the contractors, the labor unions, the lobbyists who speak of free enterprise while they are getting a government subsidy, the legislatures who for reasons of pork or patriotism vote the funds,” and so on. These are the political realities; they have not got much to do with whether there might be an accidental nuclear explosion or the chances of shooting down one of those Chinese missiles that Melvin Laird is worried about. Incidentally, I might add that the electronics industry itself is quite aware of all of this. For example, there is a study of the Electronic Industries Association that discusses prospects for the future. It states that “arms control agreements during the next decade are unlikely. The likelihood of limited war will increase and thus for the electronics firms the outlook is good in spite of the end of hostilities in Vietnam.”

Scientists can organize to refuse cooperation with such projects, and they can also try to organize and to take part in the mass politics that provides the only hope in the long run for countering and ultimately dispelling the nightmare that they are creating. I think that if an organization of scientists to refuse military work develops on any significant scale, then precisely because of the role that this work plays in maintaining the so-called “health” of the society, they may find themselves involved in very serious political action. I wouldn’t be surprised if they find themselves involved in what is called an “illegal conspiracy,” in a kind of resistance. In general, I think one can expect that effective politics – by that I mean politics that really strikes at entrenched interests, that really tries to bring about significant social change – is very likely to lead to repression, hence to confrontation.

There is a corollary to this Observation: The search for confrontation clearly indicates intellectual bankruptcy. It indicates that one has not developed an effective politics that by virtue of the way it relates to the social realities, calls forth an attempt to defend established interests and perhaps attempts at repression. One who takes his rhetoric at all seriously will work towards serious reforms, perhaps even reforms that have ultimately revolutionary content, and will try to delay confrontations as long as possible, at least until he has some chance of succeeding.

The search for confrontations is a suicidal policy. Now there is an argument for the search for confrontations, and I think one should face it frankly and openly. It’s put forward clearly by people like – to quote a past master in this – Daniel Cohn-Bendit. He denies being a leader, but was certainly one of the most articulate spokesmen for the French student actions. He has the following to say about “provocation,” about confrontation politics. He says:

Provocation is not a weapon of war except in special circumstances. It can only be used to arouse feelings that are already present, albeit submerged. In our case [the student case in France] we exploited student insecurity and disgust with life in an alienated world where human relations are so much merchandise to be used, bought and sold in the market place. All we did therefore was to provoke students to express their passive discontent, first by demonstrations for their own sake and then by political action, directly challenging modern society. The justification for this type of provocation is its ability to arouse people who have been crushed under the weight of repression.

That is not an unfamiliar argument and one cannot discount it. But when we talk about the student movement in the United States, we are really not in any serious sense talking about people who have been traditionally crushed under the weight of repression. That’s rather hyperbolic.

And I think in the actual concrete situation of the student movement the idea of confrontation tactics is often a confession of the inability to develop effective politics or the unwillingness to do the serious and hard work of social reconstruction that can easily be condemned as “reformist,” but that any true revolutionary would understand immediately is the only kind of work that could lead to new social forms, which might perhaps even pave the way for a revolutionary or far-reaching change in social organization.

I think that confrontation tactics as they actually evolve are frequently rather manipulative and coercive and really the proper kinds of tactics only for a movement that, inadvertently or not, is aiming toward an elitist, authoritarian structure of a sort that we have had far too much of on the left in the last half-century and that in fact has destroyed what there was of a living, vital left in the Western world.

There is a confusion in all of this talk about tactics that ought to be faced more clearly in the student movement. I am referring to the practice of counterposing “radical tactics” to “liberal tactics.” This is a senseless distinction. It makes no sense at all to try to place tactics in a spectrum of political judgment. Tactics are neither radical nor conservative, nor do they lie anywhere else on the political spectrum. They are successful or unsuccessful in achieving certain goals that may be discussed in terms of their political character. But to talk about the tactics as what is “radical” or “liberal” is to make a fundamental error. Part of the style of the student movement is to focus great attention on immediate concerns that are close at hand – what do you do tomorrow, how do you relate to the people near you, and so on. This is nice in some ways. It gives an attractive style to many of the student actions, but it can be politically quite destructive, I think, if it becomes the general framework within which the movement develops.

Any serious movement for social change will have to involve many different strata of the population, people who certainly see their needs and goals quite differently, including many groups that are in no position even to articulate their goals and needs, and certainly not to bring them to public attention or to develop political action based on them. I think that these may prove to be related and compatible goals but of course that has to be shown.

The major task for intellectuals – including the student movement, which in large part has been the cutting edge of a growing movement for social change – is to try to understand and to articulate those goals, to try to assess and to understand the present state of society and how it might change, what alternative forms there are for the future, to try to persuade and to organize and ultimately to act collectively where they can, and individually if it comes to that. On the other hand, it is clear that if the adult community fails to act in some way to meet the real problems of the universities and society, if it contents itself with deploring the occasional absurdities of the student movement and various superficial manifestations of student protests, then I think we can expect with perfect confidence that student unrest will continue. Furthermore it is right that it should continue. Those who deplore the forms that it takes, I think might do much better to ask what they can do to eliminate the evils that constitute the core of the problems we face, and then proceed to act in a serious and committed manner to confront these problems.

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Noam Chomsky  
In Defense of the Student Movement  
1971

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