

Community and Organization

The New Left and Michels' "Iron Law"

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Abstract

Most analysts of the new left fault it for having been utopian, antiorganizational, and even antipolitical, suggesting that these characteristics were responsible for its failures. It is suggested in this paper that such evaluations of the new left are biased in favor of certain organizational and instrumental-political forms — forms the new left rejected in the name of a communitarian and expressive-political experiment. It is indicated that the new left was shaped by the ongoing tension within it between a spontaneous, grassroots social movement committed to participatory democracy and hostile to formal organization and the perceived need for formal, even centralized, organization capable of implementing political change. Faced with a choice between "strategic" and "prefigurative" politics, the new left, it is argued, chose the latter and hence chose to fail according to the established political standards. The new left sought to avert Michels' "iron law of oligarchy" by its refusal to transform itself into a political party and by its insistence on remaining a social movement. The attempt to found a new politics of participation and process, while unsuccessful, may well prove to have been the new left's most valuable legacy.

Introduction

In 1969, the major radical American student organization, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), split and collapsed at what seemed to be the height of its power and promise. From late 1950s' beginnings in peace and especially civil rights political activity, the student movement of the 1960s grew in size and energy to become the locus and source of opposition to inequality, militarism, the war in Vietnam and the values of American society. SDS was the informal representative of this student movement, its most self-conscious grouping, which debated and theorized about organization, change and political power. Many in SDS were concerned with developing political analyses of American society and the potential path to the transformation of capitalist society. SDS, of course, was not alone in this preoccupation, but was the main organizational expression of these concerns; people with such concerns were most clearly *new leftists*. In contrast, the *student movement* was a more inchoate upsurge of protest and opposition by students and ex-students, usually to the war in Vietnam and university complicity with the war, often with little or no commitment to radical change. The relationship between the new left and the student movement forms part of the subject of this paper in that the difficulties facing new leftists (often leaders) who wished to create a viable oppositional organization were lodged not only in the larger social structure but in the ideology of the movement itself.

This paper will not attempt to explain why SDS disintegrated in 1969 or what "happened" to the new left and student movement. Rather it will suggest some characteristics of the grassroots movement which were responsible for the unique character of the new left and student movement of the 1960s in this country. Briefly, the time span covered is the 1960s until 1968-69 when new left politics began to polarize, as evidenced in the split and demise of SDS in 1969. The most important initiating and defining event for the entire period was the civil rights movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s in the South, specifically the sit-in movement beginning in 1960, the voter registration projects, and the organization of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which inspired admiration, emulation and cooperation among northern student activists. The white student movement developed slowly in the early 1960s until the

government's escalation of the war in Vietnam in early 1965 and the explosion of the protest movement against it which continued into the 1970s. The membership in SDS grew fantastically during the second half of the sixties, a recipient of antiwar sentiment, disaffection and alienation from American society. Membership alone, however, cannot tell the whole story because it was an informal organization which many activists never joined. Even when they did join, it often meant neither organizational discipline nor organizational commitment. The movement was decentralized, spontaneous and activist, putting most of its energies into direct action: demonstrations, teach-ins, sit-ins, sanctuaries for draft resisters, and so forth, initiated at the local level. The growth of a youth movement and counterculture was critical to the politics of the decade but is not directly included in this analysis.

The new left is one of those subjects on which so much has been written that a new contribution would seem to require special justification. Yet, as often happens, in this case justification for a new discussion is provided by problems in the extensive existing literature. With only a few important exceptions (Nairn and Quatrocchi, 1968; Calvert and Neiman, 1971; Gombin, 1975; Statera, 1975; Young, 1977), commentators from the political right, left and center, from conservative social scientists to Leninists, have been almost uniformly critical of the new left. While their political standpoints diverge, most studies share the view that the new left was a utopian, antiorganizational, even antipolitical movement which, for these very reasons, was bound to fail. That it did apparently fail is taken as proof of the arguments. Such commentaries, moreover, presuppose or sometimes state that a coherent strategy and organization adequate to the demands of modern politics could and should have been developed by the new left (Harrington, 1965; O'Brien, 1971, 1972; Miles, 1973; Altbach, 1974; Unger, 1975; Weinstein, 1975). "In large measure," Lipset has written, "student and other youth groups tend to differ from adult political organizations by their emphasis on what Max Weber has called 'the ethic of absolute ends,' as contrasted with 'the ethic of responsibility.'" He adds, aptly summarizing the critical thesis, "their politics is often expressive rather than instrumental. The New Left groups also have no clear concept of any road to power, of a way of effecting major social change" (Altbach and Lipset, 1969: 499,512).

Instrumental Bias

I would like to suggest that, whatever their strengths, such arguments are based on *organizational* or, paraphrasing Lipset, *instrumental* political biases. That is, they assume not only the efficacy but the necessity of *certain kinds* of instrumental politics or certain kinds of organization. I believe that in studies of the new left such approaches lead to two serious problems. First, they tend to prohibit the analyst from looking at the new left through *its* eyes, eyes that did not accept certain conceptions of politics. While analysts need to do *more* than this, they ought to do *at least* this. My goal in this paper, then, is to approach the new left with the assumption that, when its politics was what some would term expressive rather than instrumental, it was doing something political. Specifically, I believe that the utopian "antiorganizational" and "antipolitical" aspects of the new left were among its most vital aspects and, moreover, of great interest to the sociologist of contemporary social movements.

The second problem intrinsic to organizationally or instrumentally biased approaches to the new left is related to the first. Such approaches generally fail to recognize the degree to which the new left sought to discover organizational forms and instrumental mechanisms that could be

both effective within the given political arena *and* consistent with the "antipolitical" motifs of the movement. Although it may be that any such attempt (which in Max Weber's terms would amount to a synthesis of an ethic of responsibility with an ethic of absolute ends) is doomed to failure, the fact remains that a substantial part of the story of the new left was its attempt to accomplish this synthesis. The second goal of this paper, then, is to analyze the new left's effort to grapple with the problem of organization and instrumentality, and in so doing to fill the substantial gap left by the bulk of the studies of the movement.

The unresolved tension, between the spontaneous grassroots social movement committed to participatory democracy, and the intention (necessitating organization) of achieving power or radical structural change in the United States, was a structuring theme of the new left. This tension and the ambivalence about organization is the axis on which this interpretation of the new left turns. The contradictory demands of a serious, national political organization (SDS) and the impulse towards local, utopian and spontaneous politics were projects pulling in conflicting directions. Furthermore, the depth and breadth of what was a genuine grassroots social movement in the 1960s were critical because it was precisely this complexity that presented obstacles to organizers and leaders. There was "resistance" on the part of the disordered, antiauthoritarian student movement to attempts at central organization by student leaders.

Prefigurative Politics

I have used the term *prefigurative politics* to designate an essentially antiorganizational politics characteristic of the movement, as well as of parts of new left leadership; it may be recognized in counter-institutions, demonstrations and the attempt to embody personal and antihierarchical values in politics. Participatory democracy was central to prefigurative politics. Paraphrasing the Port Huron Statement of 1962, participatory democracy means simply the equal participation of each individual in all of the social decisions affecting the quality and direction of his or her life. The crux of prefigurative politics imposed substantial tasks, the central one being to create and sustain within the live practice of the movement, relationships and political forms that "prefigured" and embodied the desired society (Boggs, 1977-78).

The notion of community is integrally connected with prefigurative politics. The new left sought community as it sought to unite the public and private spheres of life. Community echoes not only certain currents of historical leftism, but a long sociological tradition as well.¹ A definition derives from several sources: by community I mean the more direct, more total and more personal network of relationships than the formal, abstract and instrumental relationships characterizing state and society. "Community is founded on [man] conceived in his wholeness rather than in one or another of the roles, taken separately, that he may hold in a social order" (Nisbet, 1966: 47-48; also see Stein, 1964; Williams, 1976; Hearn, 1978). In saying that the new left sought community I refer not only to the desire to create a sense of wholeness and communication in social relationships, but to the effort to create noncapitalist and communitarian institutions that embodied such relationships (for example, counter-institutions). Prefigurative politics attempted to develop the seeds of liberation and the new society (prior to and in the process of revolu-

¹ For interesting accounts of the links and differences between the new left of the 1960s and the traditions of anarchism and council communism, see Gombin, 1975. On the concept of community, see Nisbet, 1966 and Stein, 1964.

tion) through notions of participatory democracy grounded in counter-institutions; this meant building community.²

Prefigurative politics in the new left and in the movement meant that certain organizational forms were precluded or controversial since they undercut the antihierarchical and direct nature of prefigurative politics. For example, to the extent that the new left embraced the concept of community, it faced great difficulty when events compelled it to develop formal organization in order to function in the customary political arena. This forced the new left into the dilemma of being unable or unwilling to create hierarchical organization which would undermine, from participants' point of view, the values and processes of prefigurative politics. *This does not mean that the new left was apolitical.*³ First, the new left's central impulse toward community was precisely its political content. Second, within and alongside the new left's prefigurative impulse was what I have called *strategic politics* – committed to building organization in order to achieve power so that structural changes in the political, economic and social orders might be achieved. Organization-building and strategic thinking were central to strategic politics. In these terms, then, this analysis suggests a *conflict between strategic and prefigurative politics demonstrating the uniqueness and significance of the latter*. But it is incumbent to stress that both strategic and prefigurative politics were constitutive of the movement. The new left's relationship to power is the central issue.

The Movement and Organization

Many in the leadership of SDS believed strongly in the importance of forging a strong left student organization as a means to political change.⁴ The movement, on the other hand, was a locally-based, spontaneous outpouring of opposition to the war in Vietnam around the country; its existence did not depend on strategy or formal organization. New left organizations were based on the movement; they did not create it. As a SNCC member remarked of the civil rights movement, "No one really needed an 'organization' because we then had a movement" (Zinn, 1965: 36). The nameless activists of the movement formed the less articulate "other"; they were the organizers' constituency. The fact is that those who wanted to change America by organizing this movement were unsuccessful. Although there were many contributing factors, referred to

² There is a case to be made that community refers to a set of relationships, experiences and institutions that have been (and continue to be) destroyed by the development of capitalism and which consequently became relevant in the late nineteenth century and remain so to the present (Hearn, 1975; 1978: 270 ff.). The search for and/or the struggle to defend community (both the "sense" of community and actual community institutions) become political in the context of the changes capitalism has brought in the everyday life of the individual – changes characterized by lack of control at work, school and play, impersonality and competition in all areas of life. Community relationships in which family networks are sometimes embedded, have often contained within them culture and values that have enabled individuals, families and groups to resist institutions and values destructive of their own. The desire for connectedness, meaningful personal relationships and direct participation and control over economic, political and social institutions growing out of the needs of the individual, rather than out of the instrumental needs of large-scale corporations, takes on radical meaning in contemporary society.

³ In contrast to this perspective, see E.J. Hobsbawm's (1965:2) equating of "political" with "political organization," and his dismissal of primitive and pre-industrial social movements as "pre-political." Piven and Cloward (1977) have pointed to a number of difficulties arising from equating "political" with organization. See also Hobsbawm's (1978) rejoinder in his review of their book.

⁴ These statements and all general statements about the politics of SDS leadership are based on research done for my doctoral dissertation (see Breines, 1979).

below, those having to do with the ideology and self-conscious politics of the student movement most concern us. Suffice it to say here, the "organization vs. movement" tension was not based on differing material interests between the leadership and the "membership"; the only obvious difference was that when members became part of the leadership they usually became more committed to organization. However, even this was not true across the board because there were always some leaders who were ambivalent about centralized organization.

This opposition to organization was the essence of student movement politics. Prefigurative politics was hostile to bureaucracy, hierarchy and leadership, and it took form as a revulsion against large-scale centralized and inhuman institutions; its most acute concern was to avoid duplication of the hierarchical and manipulative relationships characteristic of society. The meaning of prefigurative politics found summary expression in some of the oft-repeated keywords of the movement: community, equality, participatory democracy. It was a profoundly antiorganizational impulse. It is my conviction that the new left *chose not to be strategic*; it chose to fail according to traditional political standards and definitions. That was part of its point. Activists opted for prefigurative politics not because they were ignorant, unconcerned or unaware of organizational issues, and not because they were unable to be disciplined. The process, the means, the participation and the dialogue were as important as the goal.

To say that the dominant current in a social movement "chose" a politics raises many questions. It implies a "free" choice, unconstrained by sociological and structural factors such as the class base and material interests of the protestors, the effects of state and police repression, the media, and the electoral political system itself. There is no question that the appeal and force of prefigurative politics was a structured choice, but to reduce it, as have so many analysts, to material factors alone devalues the uniqueness and contributions of new left consciousness and politics. To say it differently, in spite of the fact that student movement politics *may* possibly be accounted for by such factors as bourgeois backgrounds, future position in the social structure, the peculiarities of student life, or repression, there was a central theme and content that was conscious, voluntary and political: loathing and suspicion of bureaucratic, hierarchical and undemocratic organization.

Throughout the years in question the decentralization and grassroots nature of the movement informed the ideology of participants. Around the country activists acted and functioned politically with little regard for what the SDS National Office or specific leaders suggested ought to be done. The genuine ambivalence about leadership, and about representatives speaking on behalf of the group, derived in part from activists' sense of their *own* autonomy and self-direction. It was on the local level that they operated, often taking it upon themselves to generate and execute political projects. The fact that self-directed political activity sprung up all over, that mass insurgency often spread in spite of the lack of organizers and leaders, that a "thousand flowers bloomed" during the sixties, reinforced antiorganizational ideology. There seemed no *need* for centralized organization when local organization and political activity mobilized itself. Of course, that is a debatable assumption and depends on how goals were defined. Very briefly, because often goals were nonmaterial and political, and not economic (an end to the war in Vietnam being the most obvious) — and because often they were, in fact, qualitative and moral — *organizational*

leverage was not persuasively strategic and rational. Disruption, the threat of moral and political resistance, was as effective as an economic strategy would be in a labor struggle.⁵

Robert Michels

It is impossible to study the new left and ignore the work of Robert Michels. His *Political Parties*, the classic statement of the degeneration of a democratic organization into an oligarchic structure, seems almost to have been internalized by the antiorganizational currents in the student movement. Students often rejected representative democracy in favor of direct democracy, refusing to have representatives in negotiations with authorities because they were suspicious of formal organizational delegation. They rejected centralized and permanent structure as well. Michels analyzed the attempt of the German working class to "... secure a sufficiently vast and solid organization in order to triumph over the organization of the state ..." which resulted in their party "... acquiring a vigorous centralization of its own, based upon the same cardinal principles of authority and discipline which characterize the organization of the state" (Michels, 1962: 335). In the student movement of the 1960s, the distance between leaders and participants, and between national officers and membership, was vigorously solved by eliminating leaders, office functions, the division of labor, centralized decision making and formal democracy. All the oligarchic tendencies towards elitism, bureaucracy, rigidity and conservatism of which Michels warned — when he suggested that "... the mechanism of the organization, while conferring a solidity of structure, induces serious changes in the organized mass, completely inverting the respective position of the leaders and the led" — were criticized in SDS and the student movement (Michels, 1962: 70). Most of the requirements of organization were perceived as undermining the values of the movement and were rejected.

Michels warned that "... from a means, organization becomes an end" (Michels, 1962: 338); the student movement was wary of bureaucracy, leadership, and representation because each appeared to preclude participation and autonomous democratic decision making. Each of the factors about which activists were suspicious found an historical precursor in Michels. The concern about the growing power of leadership at the expense of membership participation, for example, although not arrived at through experience in a large socialist party (nor even knowledge of that experience) nevertheless was extracted and created by experience in the mammoth bureaucracies of advanced capitalist society and was similar to Michels' conclusions. Yet Michels stated unequivocally that "Democracy is unconceivable without organization," that organization is the weapon of the weak against the strong and is absolutely essential for political struggle of the masses (Michels, 1962: 61). In essence this was rejected by new left antiorganizationists whose paramount concern was democracy and participation.

Organization and Participatory Democracy

It is worth raising the issue of whether the expanding grassroots movement, characterized by dedication to democracy, *could* have found adequate organizational expression. The tension and dilemma between organization and the movement *was* debated by SDS members and others, most

⁵ See Piven and Cloward (1977) for a similar argument vis-a-vis poor people; see below for a discussion of similarities with the analysis presented here.

of whom were dubious about the ability of any national organization to democratically capture and represent the movement in all its diversity. In contrast, much of the sociological literature on social movements assumes that in order to be successful, leadership, structure, division of labor, specific goals and hierarchy in some combination are required (Useem, 1975). Drawing on both Weber's "routinization of charisma" and Michels' "iron law of oligarchy," Gusfield (1968: 448) pointed out that while a semipermanent organizational structure is often essential to the achievement of movement goals, this organizational structure often sets in motion forces that defeat the very ideals that gave birth to the social movement; and literature within the Marxist, specifically Leninist, tradition routinely considers the party as the self-evident representative of the working class.

In a dramatic break with these political assumptions — a break which entailed redefining "success" to include the means, as well as the goal — SDS leaders asked how democracy could function in a movement of 10,000 or 100,000 persons. Few felt confident that it could. For many activists the spontaneous and contagious oppositional movement could not be captured in organization. The "tool" or "weapon" of organization, other than for short-lived mobilization, impaired participatory democracy so central to new left politics. They considered the movement in all its ramifications to be an accurate expression of the politics of revolt around the nation. On the one hand, a leader in the "strategic" camp had charged that SDS seemed more the "result of motion" than the cause. SDS recruited members neither to a political position nor to an organization, and as a result *became* what its members, always changing, were. This, from the strategic point of view, was ridiculous; what was the point of having an organization at all if it was not to provide leadership and education and an attempt to achieve power? On the other hand, a letter in *New Left Notes*, the SDS weekly newspaper, had said, "SDS is and should be a movement..." and "the form of SDS should reflect, not determine, its content." That content, the membership, was varied, vital, spirited and in motion. How could an organization capture that?

There is no question that the assessment by activists, of whether a centralized and national organization could have represented the student movement, was colored by both their strong suspicion of organization and the enormous excitement, sense of upheaval and potential power which characterized the student movement of the 1960s. The institutionalization of the student movement into a powerful organization was simply not designated a central task. Apparently most new leftists and activists believed that political and social transformation, as well as the end of the war in Vietnam, could come about without a hierarchical national organization, or they were unwilling to risk "oligarchic" results. Implicit in the argument of this paper is the assumption that new leftists and movement activists, accepted criticisms to the contrary, did not simply ignore the problem because of naive psychological problems or middle-class backgrounds. For many this was a political choice — not to create permanent organization.

New Left Challenge

An evaluation of the "correctness" of their position on this critical issue is beyond the parameters of this paper. It was mentioned earlier that the context and rationale for this reappraisal of the new left derived from the existing literature about the new left — literature which has been almost uniformly critical particularly on the grounds of organizational failure. Many lessons have been drawn from the history and sociology of the new left, the most prevalent being that

organizational failure meant new left and student movement failure. I suspect that conclusion is inadequate. New leftists' most important contribution was their sensitivity to a critical political issue. They certainly did not solve the problem, but perhaps alone in recent American history they consciously and purposively raised it and attempted solutions.

Theirs was a challenge to Michels and all the preceding social movements that had resulted in organization at the expense of democratic and direct participation. Furthermore it seems a fair proposition that organization could not have "saved" the student movement or the new left. One lesson may be simply that organization neither creates nor substitutes for a movement. When it does, there is evidence that it becomes either undemocratic (with Bolshevism being the classic example) or electorally inclined and integrated into the system (e.g., in this country, the late nineteenth and twentieth-century agrarian revolts of the Farmers' Alliance developed into the Populist Party; see Schwartz, 1976). If the new left as a whole had merely rejected organization or strategy or instrumentality, as many commentators have insisted, then the story would not be of particular interest to many. But the new left's intense and finally unsuccessful effort to devise forms of social and political organization capable of effecting major, radical, structural changes in American society, which at the same time would nurture a grassroots social movement committed to participatory democracy and community, has bearing on both past and future movements in the West.

The affinity of this interpretation of the new left to the analysis of poor people's movements in America by Piven and Cloward (1977) will be apparent to those who know their work. I would like to suggest the relevance of their work for this interpretation of the new left and, using their analysis, speculate briefly on insights it yields into understanding the student movement of the 1960s. Piven and Cloward propose that, due to the structure of the electoral-representative system, protest and mass insurgency are the only alternatives open to poor people seeking redress of their grievances. When conditions make it possible for poor people to collectively act out their defiance, the unavailability of resources makes disruption their only political alternative. Furthermore, it is often politically strategic for the poor to disrupt institutional life since historically they have achieved more this way than through building their own ultimately bureaucratic organizations.

What this analysis has in common with new leftism and the student movement is disruption, or direct action, as a definition of politics, as a way of achieving certain goals; it is a politics that requires functioning outside the system, outside the "normal channels." Perhaps certain goals may be achieved and political participation attained precisely by acting outside those channels. Piven and Cloward argue their case *strategically*: the poor have no other leverage but defiance of institutional norms, and sometimes it works. It works, in any case, more effectively than building organization.⁶ The student movement and new left, however (and before them, the civil rights movement), chose this kind of politics not as their only resource, but because traditional institutional politics ignored or excluded the kind of radical goals they pursued. While poor people and students (both in "weak institutional locations" and therefore marginal to the economic life of the country) used massive civil disobedience and direct action as political strategy, students (black and white) selected these politics for ideological reasons.

⁶ For critiques of the Piven and Cloward perspective and analysis (some of which are applicable to my interpretation) see the following: Hobsbawm, 1978; Roach and Roach, 1978; Jenkins, 1979; Kesselman, 1979.

A number of questions are raised. 1) Are marginal groups with few resources and little power forced, whether or not *they* consider it a political choice, into disruptive and direct action politics? 2) Is disruption the only way for such groups to achieve redress of their grievances or radical change? 3) Is direct action politics a way to prevent being absorbed and coopted by the electoral-representative system? Underlying these queries is the suggestion of Piven and Cloward that "... main features of contemporary popular struggles are both reflection of an institutionally determined logic, and a challenge to that logic" (Piven and Cloward, 1978: 172). Opposition movements are structured by the larger political system to reproduce themselves in an electoral version, thereby absorbing and undercutting their radical project. In lieu of this, there seems no alternative but to utilize marginal political tactics. In so doing, disruption and direct action become a way to achieve goals and to avoid co-optation. The political-economic system structures protest, but protest is at the same time a challenge to that system.

Depoliticization

In the case of the new left there was a combination of constraints and choice in the embracing of prefigurative politics. A central goal of the new left was a radical revitalization and redefinition of politics in America. "Being political" meant participation of everyone in decision making and action, in building community — often through direct action. It was a dedication to the means as well as the goal, and a way of circumventing the passivity and hierarchy of electoral politics.

One of the central purposes of new left politics may be defined as the attempt to unite private and public life, which goes back to the idea of the *polis* in ancient Greece and is at heart profoundly political.⁷ But, as Alan Wolfe states:

If, following the Greeks, one conceives of politics as the common quest of equals for the just and happy society, then in late capitalism politics of this sort is replaced by a form of alienated politics, in which parties and interest groups become responsible for absorbing the common power that people possess and for using this power to rule over the people from whom it came in the first place (Wolfe, 1977: 312).

Recent work on the state in advanced capitalism suggests that liberal politics has become synonymous with a depoliticized notion of politics and has triumphed over genuine democracy.⁸ A managerial antipolitics, in which the citizen is isolated and removed from any community or notion of politics in which to participate, characterizes contemporary American society. Wolfe's central point is that the "antipolitical needs of liberalism" require that a participatory and politicizing democracy be suppressed. Liberal society depoliticizes and marginalizes the political. The breakdown of such mediating institutions as political parties and interest groups helps to foster this universal depoliticization. Wolfe suggests that:

Like a worker who sees the product of his labor transformed into a commodity alienated from himself, the late capitalist citizen finds that the source of his alienation lies in his own productive activity, in this case the production of community rather than commodities. Expropriation is no longer unique to the economy (Wolfe, 1977: 312).

⁷ For further elaboration of this point see Jacoby (1973, particularly pp. 172-73) for how Marx's notion of "true democracy" is closely related to the polis.

⁸ See, for example, Jurgen Habermas (1970, 1975).

As we have seen, Lipset accused the student movement and youth of expressive rather than instrumental politics. Further, he suggested that youth tend to take the values they have been taught in absolute ways and criticize existing institutions in their light; in contrast, the ethic of responsibility involves the necessity to compromise in order to achieve a positive outcome (Lipset, 1969: 499). The unwillingness to compromise one's values, the conceptual lack of a clear road to power and a readiness to use tactics that violate the normal democratic game may be considered, in the case of the new left, as the *assertion of the political*, a rejection of depoliticization. The "ethic of absolute ends" conflicts with the norm of depoliticization in the society.

If resistance or protest movements are forced into disruption because they have few options, it is also possible to see disruption as a choice, a challenge to conventional, bureaucratic politics. The new left challenged the electorally-defined status-quo and organization-building as a definition of politics, just as it challenged Michels and hierarchical politics. The ease with which hegemonic institutions appear to transform movements into formal bureaucratic institutions with reformist (in contrast to radical) goals suggests that prefigurative politics may be seen not only as a strategic last resort, but as a determined attempt to avoid co-optation and oligarchic transformation as well as the mantle of legitimacy accorded those who cooperate.

It is striking that most commentators, political leaders, theorists and sociologists, from Lenin to Lipset, agree about the nature of politics and political organization. As Weber said:

He who seeks the salvation of the soul, of his own and others, should not seek it along the avenue of politics, for the quite different tasks of politics can only be solved by violence (Weber, 1946: 126).

Whether it is the dark image of violence or the reasonable notion of compromise and responsibility, for these commentators politics is about power, hierarchy, centralization and organization. I am suggesting here that the new left broke with these convergent and "realistic" notions and attempted to forge a new notion of politics, one informed by insights of Weber and Michels. The significance of the new left and student movement lay in its effort to invent a politics committed to participatory democracy, a politics that embodied antihierarchical values and community while simultaneously attempting to bring about radical structural change in the United States. One way of interpreting the decade is as an attempt to break with Weber's "iron cage" of bureaucracy and Michels' "iron law of oligarchy," and to devise a politics that combined the instrumental with the expressive, the strategic with the prefigurative. The experience of the movement in the 1960s stands as a profound political confrontation with the issue of organization in a radical, democratic movement.⁹ The problems the new left addressed were not narrow and private but large ones for any social movement confronting the issue of democracy in its midst and in its future. Every genuinely radical social movement must come to grips with the conflict between grassroots self-activity and participation on the one hand, and organizational maintenance, efficiency and strategy on the other. The new left and student movement represented a movement in which utopian, spontaneous and participatory politics were affirmed. It should be recognized for the brave and significant experiment it was.

⁹ Many of the insights and much of the practice of new left prefigurative politics were inherited and espoused by the women's liberation movement.

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This article coined the term *prefigurative politics*.

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