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Student unrest in Europe and America : some implications for Western society

by James Robert HUNTLEY*

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The public life of the advanced West is conducted within a common framework of civic tradition which rests on fundamentals such as the rule of law, representative democracy, majority decisions, and guaranteed rights for minorities and individuals. This modern civic culture, with its emphasis on conciliation, persuasion, and debates governed by rules, has been accepted as essential by all but the totalitarian parties of Left and Right.

The Atlantic West's civic culture is today under attack from powerful new social forces. This attack threatens not only governments and international order, but the higher values and texture of our civilization.

Youth generally (1) and many adults have been swept up in these spreading dislocations, but the unrest is greatest in the universities. Therefore this brief survey will concentrate mainly on students. It will try to describe those student attitudes in North America and in Western Europe which most affect public order and the civic tradition, in the largest sense ; suggest some possible causes for the unrest ; examine some adult attitudes ; and postulate some likely consequences of continued unrest. In particular, it will try to compare the situation on both sides of the Atlantic, highlighting similarities and differences.

Student attitudes.

Four distinct « attitude-types » seem important :

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(1) One should note here that some observers profess to be even more concerned about unrest in secondary schools than in universities.

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1. *Passivists,* not violent but nevertheless anti-social. These are the « drop-outs », hippies, beatniks, and others — apathetic, hedonistic, absurd, indifferent, unwashed, undisciplined, often drugged.

2. *Radical/revolutionaries,* willing to employ illegitimate means, including violence, to gain their ends. A small minority, but with an influence on other students and society far out of proportion to their numbers.

3. *Idealistic liberals,* deeply concerned about serious social ills, more motivated to change « the system » than to make out within it, but willing to abide by accepted democratic rules.

4. *Practical moderates,* the rational, steady types who tend towards science, engineering, math, business studies, and other « practical disciplines » ; who seem content to seek life goals within the « system ». In most places and at most times, a majority of students.

Few individual students, of course, represent these « pure » types. Many hold mixtures of these attitudes, some fluctuate in time of stress from one pole to another. Under certain conditions, we have seen large numbers of practical moderates and liberals become radicalized overnight, in the universities of both continents.

It may be significant that almost none of the radical-revolutionaris place themselves to the right politically, although on occasion some of them have styled themselves « fascists of the Left ». During the past year, there has been some growing together of the first two categories, in such movements as the American « yippies », who appear to espouse cultural revolution with decided political overtones. (See, for example, Abbie Hoffman, *Woodstock Nation,* Random House, New York, 1969.)

A recent U.S. opinion survey (2) placed two-fifths of American students in the first three groups, three-fifths in the practical-moderate camp. From January to June 1968, however, when campus disorders were widespread in America, less than 3 % of the nearly eight million students were involved (3).

In all countries, most student protest and violence have been directed towards the universities. In Britain and the United States, students have demanded more « freedom » and more « participation » in governing their universities and have sought to change administrative policies. On the Continent, protest has centered on inadequate facilities, outmoded examination systems, the privileges of a feudal professorial class, and

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(2) *Fortune,* January 1969.

(3) Lewis S. FEUER, *The Conflict of Generations,* Basic Books, New York, 1969, p. 491.

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other antiquated conditions. But in many cases, universities seem less to be genuine targets than surrogate parents in a generational rebellion.

The radical students are nihilist, anti-liberal, anti-democratic, elitist, authoritarian. For them, « revolution » is more an end than a means. Their pacemakers seem to prefer conflict to cooperation. But it is doubtful if many of them really wish to overturn society completely. Their main aim, rather, appears to be to bewilder, frustrate, and enrage authority. Theirs seems hardy the positive vision of a better society, no matter what their words, but rather the image of humiliating « the enemy » : sick adolescents plotting to turn the tables on their fathers.

Until recently, the radical-revolutionaries and the idealistic liberals usually found it possible to make common cause, but tensions between them are growing in most countries. In many cases, what began with talk of a higher form of democracy, of people participating in public decisions, has turned out instead to be a formula for a student elite to contravene the will of the majority as expressed in the institutions of representative democracy. There is an unpleasant ring of familiarity in the student radicals' demands for a total transformation — from a society (in their view) of undifferentiated evil to one of absolute perfection.

There is now a widespread sense, right or wrong, that the values of the « consumption society » are morally exhausted. In this situation, institutions can easily lose their credibility and minor irritants — in a university, for example — can produce deep alienation. Large numbers of students are hyper-critical and estranged from the world around them. A new political vocabulary has entered common usage, with such terms as « alienation », « *contestation* », « confrontation », « participation », and « repression ». For the most radical, participation appears to involve total self-determination ; anything less is repression.

By the radicals' and passivists' standards, the value of institutions is measured by their capacity to promote unconfined sensation. This kind of attitude was essentially that of the nineteenth century romantics. But romanticism was only a literary and philosophical movement ; it did not become a widely-held outlook and style of life for large numbers of people.

Today, however, many are seriously affected by this philosophy. The limits of what it is fashionable and permissible to do and believe have moved sharply in a radical direction. What one might call an « anti-culture » is growing in our midst.

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What do students believe about international affairs ? By and large, today's young people are internationalists and humanitarians. Their parents

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concentrated on East-West relations, but they worry about the North-South axis and the ecology of our planet. They know they will have to deal with overpopulation, underdevelopment, and rampant technology long after we are gone.

Probably a majority of the young believe the Cold War is over. Freedom from nuclear conflict is taken largely for granted. A recent poll in several countries (4) showed a majority of youth willing to dissolve NATO in return for dissolution of the Warsaw Pact (although another poll in Germany showed youth agreeing with their elders that NATO must be preserved) (5). To the extent that NATO is tolerated at all most youth in most countries seem to think its business is to play a « peaceful role », promote more detente, and work itself quickly out of business.

As *the* goal for European youth, Western European unification no longer suffices. It is considered largely a technical, even old-fashioned, idea. In any case, ask change-minded European youth, would not a federal Europe simply result in the same poor-quality society on a much larger scale (6)? There is less inclination than formerly to see a united Europe (and *much* less an Atlantic Community) as a logical next step towards world community.

European students identify with the United States much less than formerly. In a recent opinion study, more than two-thirds of the students at the College of Europe said that « the United States constitutes a society distinct from that of Europe and does not foreshadow the image of a future Europe ». Asked the same question about the USSR, a *lesser* number (but still a majority) felt estranged.

At an Atlantic Institute conference in 1968 a young Englishman observed that « Vietnam has had an essential impact on student revolt in the West ; young people say they do not want this kind of America to speak for all of the West ». On every side, there is evidence that large numbers of American as well as European youth want greater independence of Europe from the USA.

As yet, there appear to be no organized « anti-NATO » or « anti-Europe » movements among youth. But perhaps this is less a measure of youthful support than of indifference.

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(4) Prepared by V. Joyce for the Atlantic Treaty Association, Paris, 1967.

(5) In January 1969, Poll of the Institut fuer Demoskopie, Allênsbach, cited in *The Atlantic Community Quarterly*, Fall 1969, p. 443.

(6) A few young Europeans, however, seemed to feel differently and displayed their enthusiasm for a united Europe with a protest march in The Hague on the occasion of the Common Market « Summit Meeting » in December 1969.

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However, youthful views on international affairs proper are less important than their attitudes on more general questions. For it is western society itself — not simply traditional democracy, the multiversity, the state, or international institutions — which, for many, is on trial.

The most deeply-rooted social institutions — marriage and the family — are in doubt. For large numbers of youth (and above all students) the old framework of rules has pretty well disintegrated. Without constraints, however, young people become disoriented. For them, the problem then becomes one of constructing some kind of social group into which they can fit, for without a group and rules of some kind, the individual is naked. In such a state, groping to « belong » but rejecting the old order, it is only too easy to see demons in organizations and great institutions.

The student movements (radicals and liberals) today confront a stable, bureaucratic world. They perceive a society dominated by huge, impersonal institutions which demand conformity to the norms of the elders. Hierarchy, impersonality, and authority loom as alien, hostile forces. The « Establishment » and the « System » are seen as corrupt, hypocritical, and — most important — unable to cope.

There is much that is good in the minds and hearts of agitated students. Internationalism, humanitarianism, idealism, and the will to work for progress are precious values. But the negative elements — of blind revolution against all authority, of irrationality, of a lack of realism, and of nihilism — are deeply dangerous. If the constructive elements cannot be channeled and built up to predominate as an active force (7), and the negative are not checked, eventually all civic enterprise — from local governments to the UN — could be affected. Modern civilization balances on a knife-edge ; the determined hostility of an articulate, disruptive minority could conceivably have the most profound consequences.

The Probable Causes.

Formerly, « youth » was merely a time of life, but today it also constitutes a specific social group, created by the segregation imposed by its elders. « Youth », extending from 18 to the mid-twenties, is now a period of physiological adulthood but sociological adolescence. This

(7) That constructive attitudes do exist within a majority of German youth seems amply demonstrated in a recent paper by Rudolf Wildenmann and Max Kaase, « Die Unruhige Generation », Lehrstuhle für Politische Wissenschaft, Universität Mannheim, 1968. It is generally very difficult, however, for a constructive majority of students to overcome its inertia and apathy in the face of a determined, destructive minority.

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applies most to the student, who achieves economic power even before he is an adolescent, yet who, in his late twenties, may still not be economically responsible for himself. Such youth, without a social function, occupy a marginal position in society, which they find increasingly intolerable.

Another contributing factor is the tension between a Western cultural tradition which fosters creativity, individuality, and self-determination and a society whose institutions require efficiency, competence, selection on the basis of past and prospective accomplishment, and differential rewards. Both are valuable and valid, but a healthy balance has not been achieved. Increased leisure, affluence, and technology are putting opportunities of unprecedented scope before young people. Some are constructive opportunities, others are capable of profound damage to individuals and society.

Powerful commercial interests have been quick to exploit these deep social changes by creating a « youth market ». The advent of psychedelic art, music, and dress — parasites on the huge illicit trade in drugs — is but one of the more distasteful aspects of a veritable explosion, commercially contrived and exploited, of the artifacts, art forms, speech, appetites, and tastes which characterize « pop » culture. TV and radio, largely amoral in their ethics, feed on this commercial market, energize and proliferate it. Youth have been encouraged to abandon old values and to adopt new ways of acting, speaking, and clothing themselves which emphasize in every possible way their supposed « differentness » from their elders. (To suggest but one example of the commercial potential inherent in this revolution in manners and morals : the market for the contraceptive pill has been vastly increased by the widespread-youthful abandonment of earlier sexual standards). Commercialism has driven a wedge between the generations, and promoted the development of an anti-culture which challenges the most valuable traditions as well as the social fabric of the West.

Thanks also to TV, which displays the bewildering disorder of the entire world in nearly every family's living room, the mass of youth are better informed — but also more confused — than any earlier generation.

Student radicals, usually from affluent homes, find it easy to travel, to find out what is happening in every part of the globe, to reproduce and disseminate revolutionary manifestoes (often on the printing presses of their own universities). TV willingly gives radicals a public platform, thus multiplying many times over their capability for inciting social disruption in the most distant places. It is to the marvels of modern technology, and not to Communist plotting, that the radical student

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movement owes whatever cohesion, international character, and power it may have.

Schools are responsible, insofar as they do not provide pupils with the intellectual equipment for evaluating critically what they see on TV, now the world's chief instrument of learning.

Parents have failed to maintain their authority, have given children too much goods and money too soon. They have also failed to tell their offspring about the civic accomplishments of adults, have neglected their children's leisure, and have fobbed them off when they ask searching questions about society.

University systems in most countries have expanded too rapidly. It has been impossible to absorb the large numbers effectively.

One must add a perhaps not unmixed blessing — the loss of élan and fervor among the traditional revolutionary and radical parties and doctrines, which used to syphon off a good deal of youthful discontent.

There is a general belief that « the Cold War is over ». Whether right or wrong, this belief has brought about a general lessening of constraints on dissension. An earlier, powerful impetus towards consensus and conformity in Western society has been in large measure removed (8).

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And what of the issues which students raise ? Are they too not causes ? Only in part.

Vietnam, « participation » in the governance of universities, the shortcomings of the « consumer society », racial inequality and other forms of social injustice have all had their day at the barricades. It would be a mistake not to consider the issues, each in its own impacted setting, and to fail somehow to respond, for each is a serious matter and represents real defects in Western society. But none of them alone — or even collectively — can explain what has happened. It would be a serious error to believe that dealing patiently with local grievances or even big issues can cause the tide of unrest to roll back. *Most of the issues on which the passions of radical students focus are not seriously or deeply cared about* (9). For the element of irrationality in this unrest is pervasive.

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(8) In preparing the foregoing section on « causes », the author is especially indebted to the penetrating insights of Marcel Hicter of the Belgian Ministry of Cultural Affairs, set forth in his report for the Council of Europe Assembly, « Un Monde Malade de sa Jeunesse », Strasbourg, September 1968.

(9) The most important exception : the reform of higher education in certain continental countries.

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What is happening can perhaps best be understood as a new chapter in a long history of student-led generational rebellions.

In the eyes of a vocal and active minority of students, their elders have been shorn of authority. The United States has « failed » in Vietnam. The SPD and the CDU, during the period of the « Grosse Koalition », « failed » to make the party system work. Europe's political and business leaders are likely to be submerged by « the American Challenge ». Social reforms are long overdue in Europe, yet « politics as usual » still seems the order of the day. The American Negro is still a second-class citizen. The gap between the rich and the poor countries grows greater. Everyone knows the list, but the point is : *that the older generation appears unable to cope.*

But why should this widespread loss of youthful confidence have come about in the 1960's ?

When aroused students attacked « the system », beginning at Berkeley in 1964, it proved to be a paper tiger. Modern democratic societies are acutely vulnerable. The most fragile institution of all, the American « multiversity », citadel of learning and liberalism, could not contain an irrational, illiberal attack on its bastions. First Berkeley, then the Free University of Berlin, Columbia, the Sorbonne and the French State, even Harvard, and scores of lesser places in many countries caved in before the sharp onslaughts of tiny anti-democratic minorities who knew how to exploit police brutality to win the active sympathies of the mass of students.

Even the United States Army has shown itself unable to contain fully the inroads of drugs, the « peace » movement, and the « hippie » sub-culture.

Authority in much of the West has been discredited because.

a) It is generally weak.

b) It is not performing adequately.

c) It has abdicated pointedly and repeatedly in the face of determined attacks by handfuls of terrorists who knew how to exploit its tolerance and — perhaps — its collective guilty conscience.

The Attitudes of Elders.

These are as important as the attitudes of youth.

The leading ideas articulated by radical students originated with adults.

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Herbert Marcuse (10) is perhaps the best know ; his argument is simple : the ideal of tolerance belongs to the liberal democratic tradition, which has exhausted itself. Advanced societies, although providing adequately for physical wants, enslave the individual culturally.

Other prophets of the radicals include Che Guevara, Mao (the young), Marx, Bakhunin, Debray, Fanon, Kropotkin, and others, whose works youth usually misinterpret or fail to understand. But more important at this stage than the content of the radicals' ideological armory is the revolutionary ring of its vocabulary.

More significant for the fate of the student movement are the attitudes of a particular kind of liberal adult, whose reaction to the determined violence of the radicals is to praise them for their supposedly liberal goals and social consciences. Such liberals see academic freedom as entirely open-ended. They do not stop to reflect that true tolerance does not demand that society tolerate the actively intolerant. Nor do they understand that although order is possible without justice, justice is impossible without order.

Also, many adults are afflicted with guilty consciences, not for their personal acts, but for the past injustices of « society ».

Such attitudes gravely handicapped the liberals who stood at the command posts and peopled the faculties of great universities when recent crises called for swift, decisive action in defense of the West's civic tradition.

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When a government is repressive, as in Europe's communist and fascist fringes, adults often welcome students as the vanguard in a fight the oldsters would, if they had the courage, like to join. In advanced democratic countries, however, the majority of adults feel that radical students improperly employ totalitarian means to accomplish what could be attained with hard work, persuasion, and legitimate politicking.

Public resentment against unruly students in the advanced countries is growing : a moderate statement of this impatience might be the words of an American educator, Paul Woodring :

« ... there is no real need for universities, free or otherwise, unless it can be assumed that the younger generation has something to learn from the older one. Students who deny this should leave the universities and get on with the business of adult life » (11).

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(10) See *One Dimensional Man ; the Ideology of Industrial Society*, Sphere Books, London, 1968.

(11) *Saturday Review*, 17 August 1968.

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Other adults, however, carry their resentment further. In Britain, there is popular pressure to withdraw government grants from students who misbehave. In the United States, the combination of Negro and student unrest has produced votes for cuts in school and university funds, potentially repressive legislation, and a demand to use police powers with less restraint. In such a contest, students — and society too — can only lose.

Bewildered by the patent rebelliousness and seeming ingratitude of their offspring, adults rejoice to have overcome the great crises of the last thirty years, to have achieved unprecedented prosperity, social security, and technical advances. They find it difficult to realize that for today's youth, such progress in meaningless if devoid of improvements in human relations.

Now that we are on the verge of conquering disease and privation, we come face to face with the awesome question : « Man does not live by bread alone... but by what ? ». Youth have been first to insist on an answer, first to demonstrate the consequences if we do not find one.

The philosophical truth is that no generation has privileged access to reality. Each has its special historical vantage point from which to view the world. Each generation will have to learn to look at itself with the same sincerity it demands of the other. The alternative is more or less permanent generational conflict, which could rival in bitterness the nationalist, class, ethnic, and religious conflicts of the past.

Some Transatlantic Comparisons.

There are many similarities in the nature and the apparent causes of student unrest on both sides of the Atlantic, but there are important differences, too.

At this writing — December 1969 — the Vietnam issue, although still a cancerous one in all segments of opinion in both Europe and America, is more quiescent in the Old World. This has been so since the U.S. Government opened the Paris negotiations, providing evidence of its peaceful intentions which has apparently been accepted widely — so far — in Europe. By contrast, the anti-war movement has reasserted itself in the United States. A significant number of American students want to reverse the foreign policy of their country ; very few Europeans students seem troubled about their countries' foreign policies, except perhaps for a generalized concern about the « Third World ».

In the United States, university conditions are substantially different from those of Europe. First, the populist, egalitarian strain in U.S. higher

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education, expressed in the aim, largely realized, of providing college training to practically anyone who wants it, contrasts sharply with the social aims and composition of university systems in most of western Europe, where elitist attitudes still predominate. In the United States, universities are generally committed to building up a broad base of scholarship, while most European academic institutions still tend to look for students with the most brilliant minds and push them to their highest possible achievement. In Britain, there is also the elitist variant of educating « first class men » for leadership by inculcating in them the values of society.

By and large, U.S. universities are more « modern », more flexible, more responsive to changing needs than European. European students, much more than American, are fighting an entrenched, privileged professorial class and an outmoded structure. But in both continents, higher education systems are strained by expansion and consequently not well-run overall. In the United States, students in the larger institutions — which in some cases approach fantastic proportions of 35,000 or 40,000 on one campus — complain of the impersonality of the teaching ; European students, except in Britain, generally have always been used to such lack of human contact. Many European students might find themselves quite happy in an American university, which in many ways already meet the European's criticism of his own institutions. But this relative advantage does not impress the American student, for his society is feeling pressures which Europe has only begun to experience.

American universities have traditionally assumed the responsibility *in loco parentis ;* most European universities have not. Thus the clamor for sexual and other forms of personal freedom takes on a stronger coloration in the U.S. The evolution of these mores, and the protests they arouse, vary widely in Europe. But in general, the American « revolution » seems to be more directly aimed at parents than the European.

American youth unrest has a component almost totally lacking in Europe : the plight of the American Negro. American universities in struggling to accommodate the pressures generated by a recent influx of black students, some of whom been highly radicalized. They often present irrational demands — for segregated housing or control of their « own » departments of « black studies » which educational authorities find either unwise or impossible to grant. While the degree and character of violence on some American and some European campuses has been essentially no different, the special position of the Negro, eliciting deserved sympathies of liberal professors, administrators, and fellow students and yet often demanding the impossible, has made the US situation unique and in some ways more difficult.

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There has been a recent trend in the United States, Britain, and Germany to try to contain radical student terrorism through court action. This trend appears less distinct in the rest of Europe.

A most disquieting trend, stronger in the United States but discernible in Europe, is the steady growth of the passivist culture, centered on drugs. Such manifestations as the unprecedented Woodstock Festival, which attracted some 400,000 young Americans to upstate New York for a long August weekend of rock and roll and drug-taking, show the apparent strength of this presumptive alternate culture. This trend appears to have reached significant European proportions so far only in the Netherlands and Britain, although drug abuse is growing almost everywhere.

Most of what has been said about the United States could also apply to Canada. While Canadian universities were relatively quiet when trouble erupted in the U.S., Germany, and France, turmoil has recently arrived. To a large extent, Canadian observers appear to feel that it has been « exported » from the USA.

The Possible Consequences of Continued Student Unrest.

Although it is difficult and somewhat dangerous to try to draw generalized conclusions from these phenomena, a concern for the general welfare tempts one to try. It present trends continue unchecked, here are some things which could happen.

Unless respect for democratic practices is quickly restored, it is likely that politics will draw away from the central consensus which has made postwar democracy so eminently operable in most Western countries, to polarize on Left and Right.

Traditional youth organizations may disintegrate under the impact of generational conflict. This is reportedly already happening in Italy.

If trends in the direction of an « anti-culture » — and most particularly in the use of hallucinogenic drugs — are not reversed, a continued growth in the number of passivist « dropout » — hippies, provos, beatniks — can be expected. The disrptive potential has already been demonstrated. Society can ill afford the consequent loss of bright, articulate people from the ranks of the socially productive.

Some educational changes for the better may be coming about as a result of student demands, at least in French universities. Although American students have won considerably more « participation » in some universities, it is too early to judge whether this will mean better education. What few gains come about in education could be lost, however, in political life if generational conflict becomes a permanent phenomenon.

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Rather then achieving a net improvement in education, the universities may continue the present trend towards politicization. When a university is politicized, faculties cannot agree on what to do, and are ripe for pressures and intimidation. One observer at Columbia in 1968 could say : « The University ceased to be the conscience of the community : it became an enclave for the rule of the id » (12).

The full effects of the student revolt on international relations, and particularly on the movement of European-Atlantic institution-building, can as yet be only dimly seen. One fears that the history of the last fifty years is being falsely rewritten (as history was rewritten in the twenties and thirties) and that therefore the outlook for a stable world peace system will be decidely less promising. One is reminded of the « Oxford pledge » of 1938, that « this house refuses to fight for King and country in any war ». Precisely at a time when collective action could have stopped Hitler, the British and American students were enacting their rebellion against a previous generation, and disarming themselves intellectually and morally before the Nazi advance.

The very quality of our civilization may be in considerable danger — either from the failure of complacency to correct those ills which many students and adults rightly see as critical, or from the failure to stem the tide of nihilism — or from both.

Students Revolts in History.

So far, the historical record shows no student movement which remained attached in the long run to the values of academic freedom (13). With melancholy uniformity, the record instead shows plainly, time and again, how the most idealistic student movement converted itself into a blind, irrational force, hostile to liberal, democratic values.

In 1819, the short-lived German student movement, which had begun as a liberal influence, turned to terrorism. In the revulsion of the Prussian authorities against a wave of assassinations, constitutionalism and democracy were set back in Germany for more than a century. From 1860 to 1900, the Russian student movement proceeded gradually from liberal humanitarianism to nihilistic terror, frustrating one Czar's tentative steps towards a constitution and helping to pave the way for Lenin. Latin American student movements have historically weakened education and

(12) Arnold BEICHMANN in *Encounter,* May 1969.

(13) For a particularly thorough, critical analysis of all important student movements from 1800 to 1969, the reader is referred to Feuer *(op. cit.)*.

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constitutional government. The Parisian student movement of 1830, the Chinese movement of 1917, the Berkeley movement of 1964, and many others are similarly tales of tragedy.

No European student movement arose in the 1930s to do battle with the Nazis and Fascists. The failure of the students was more profound than that of the workers.

The essential illiberalism of seemingly all student movements — unless part of an nationalist, ethnic, or class struggle — can possibly be explained by the theory of generational conflict : the authority of the fathers (the Establishment) is discredited, and the sons seek to usurp their places.

History therefore suggests that student idealism and energy may not be unalloyed blessings. More often than not, the result of student rebellion has been repression and reaction, not reform.

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