

Conflict of Generations

"As David wept for Absalom, many later generations were to weep for their sons. If the fathers were forbidden to send their children into the fires of Moloch, the children sometimes seemed to seek the flames themselves in obedience to a demon within."

By LEWIS S. FEUER

GENERATIONAL conflict, generational struggle, has been a universal theme of history. Unlike class struggle, however, the struggle of generations has been little studied and little understood. Labor movements have a continuous and intelligible history. Student movements, by contrast, have a fitful and transient character, and even seem lacking in the substantial dignity which a subject of political sociology should have. The student status, unlike that of the workingman, is temporary; a few brief years, and the quantum-like experience in the student movement is over. Nevertheless, the history of our contemporary world has been basically affected by student movements. Social revolutions in Russia, China, and Burma sprang from student movements, while governments in Korea, Japan, and the Sudan have fallen in recent years largely because of massive student protest. Here, then, is a recurrent phenomenon of modern times which challenges our understanding.

Generational struggle demands categories of understanding unlike those of the class struggle. Student movements are born of vague, undefined emotions which seek for some issue, some cause, to which to attach themselves. A complex of urges—altruism, idealism, revolt, self-sacrifice, and self-destruction—searches the social order for a strategic avenue of expression. Labor movements have never had to search for issues in the way student movements do. The

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wage demands and the specific grievances of workingmen are born directly of their conditions of life. But the conflict of generations derives from deep, unconscious sources, and the outlook and philosophy of student movements are rarely materialistic. If labor seeks to better its living conditions as directly as possible, student movements sacrifice their own economic interests for the sake of a vision of a nobler life for the lowliest. If historical materialism is the ideology of the working class, then historical idealism is the ideology of student movements. If "exploitation" is the master term for defining class conflict, then "alienation" does similar service for the conflict of generations.

WE may define a student movement as a congregation of students inspired by aims which they try to explicate in a political ideology, and moved by an emotional rebellion in which there is always present a disillusionment with and rejection of the values of the older generation. Moreover, the members of a student movement have the conviction that their generation has a special historical mission to fulfill where the older generation, other elites, and other classes have failed.

To their own consciousness, students in student movements have been the bearers of a higher ethic than the surrounding society. Certainly they are at odds with the "social system." As Walter Weyl said: "Adolescence is the true day for revolt, the day when obscure forces, as mysterious as growth, push us, trembling, out of our narrow lives into the wide throbbing life beyond self." No society altogether succeeds in molding the various psychological types which comprise it to conform to its material,

economic requirements. If there were a genuine correspondence between the material economic base and the psychological superstructure, then societies would be static, and basic social change would not take place. In every society, those psychological types and motivations which the society suppresses become the searching agents of social change. Thus psycho-ethical motives, which are not only independent of the socioeconomic base but actually contrary to the economic ethics that the social system requires, become primary historical forces.

The Russian revolutionary student movement is the classic case of the historic workings of the ethical consciousness. When in the 1860s and 1870s several thousand student youth, inspired by feelings of guilt and responsibility for the backward people, embarked on their "back-to-the-people" movement, it was a collective act of selfless idealism.

The students' ethical consciousness was utterly independent of class interests and class position. The largest single group among those who were arrested in the back-to-the-people movement from 1873 to 1877 were children of the nobility. They could have availed themselves of the ample openings in the governmental bureaucracy. Instead, many of them chose a path of self-sacrifice and suffering. Rebuffed by the peasants, the revolutionary student youth later gave themselves to the most extreme form of individual terrorism. And when terrorism failed to produce the desired social change, circles of student intellectuals provided the first nuclei of the Social Democratic party. Lenin aptly said that the intellectuals brought a socialist consciousness to the workers, who by themselves would not have gone



—Black Star.

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beyond trade union aspirations. The intellectuals Lenin referred to were indeed largely the self-sacrificing revolutionary students.

The universal themes of generational revolt, which cut across all societies, produced in Russia a "conflict of generations" of unparalleled intensity because of special social circumstances. The Russian students lived their external lives in a social reality which was absolutist, politically tyrannical, and culturally backward; internally, on the other hand, they lived in a milieu imbued with Western cultural values. Their philosophical and idealistic aims transcended the social system, and were out of keeping with it. The Government opened universities to provide recruits for its bureaucracy. Some students followed the appointed path, but the universities became the centers not only for bureaucratic education but for revolutionary dedication. The idealistic student as a psychological type rebelled against the specifications of the social system.

The civil rights movement in the United States has likewise owed much to students as the bearers of an ethical vocation in history. A wave of sit-ins which spread through Negro college towns began on February 1, 1960, when four freshmen from the all-Negro Agricultural and Technical College at Greensboro, North Carolina, sat down at the lunch counter of the local Woolworth dime store. The surrounding community was

puzzled that it was precisely the best educated, the most disciplined and cultured—and essentially middle-class—Negro students who took the self-sacrificing initiative. In the next years came movements which resembled even more the "back-to-the-people" movement of the Russian studentry. The freedom riders of 1961, the several hundred white students in the Mississippi summer project of 1964 risking their lives to establish freedom schools among the Negroes, were descendants in spirit of the Russian students of the preceding century.

Nonetheless, the duality of motivation which has spurred student movements has always borne its duality of consequence. On the one hand, student movements during the past 150 years have been the bearers of a higher ethic for social reconstruction, of altruism, and of generous emotion. On the other hand, with all the uniformity of a sociological law, they have imposed on the political process a choice of means that are destructive both of self and of the goals which presumably were sought. Suicidalism and terrorism have both been invariably present in student movements. A youth-weighted rate of suicide is indeed characteristic of all countries in which large-scale revolutionary student movements are found. In what we might call a "normal" country or one in which there is a "generational equilibrium," suicide, as Louis Dublin said, "is much more prevalent in advanced years than during youth." But a "normal" country is one without a revolutionary student movement. Where such movements have existed, where countries are thus characterized by a severe conflict of generations, the rate of suicide has been highest for the youthful group. Nihilism has tended to become the philosophy of student movements not only because it constitutes a negative critique of society but because it is also a self-critique moved by an impulse toward self-annihilation.

Every historical era tends to have its own most significant choices, but the double-edged choice which confronts student movements is perhaps best expressed in the title of an essay by Ivan Turgenev, *Hamlet and Don Quixote*, written as the Russian student movement was being born. For Hamlet, with his negation, destructive doubt, and intellect turned against himself, was indeed the suicidal pole in the Russian student character, whereas Don Quixote, with his undoubting devotion to an ideal, his readiness to fight for the oppressed and to pit himself against all social institutions, represented the messianic, back-to-the-people component. The Russian student activist, like his successor, oscillated between these polar impulses; rejected by the people, he would often find in terrorism a sort of synthesis, for thereby he could assail a social institution in a

personalized form and hurl against it all the aggressive passions which menaced himself. Don Quixote thus became a student terrorist. When his ventures in terror miscarried, his passions turned against himself; in the last act, he was Hamlet destroying himself. Yet Turgenev believed that if there were no more Don Quixotes the book of history would be closed.

A student movement thus is founded upon a coalescence of several themes and conditions. It tends to arise in societies which are gerontocratic—that is, where the older generation possesses a disproportionate amount of economic and political power and social status. Where the influences of religion, ideology, and the family are especially designed to strengthen the rule of the old, an uprising of the young will be most apt to occur. A gerontocratic order, however, is not a sufficient condition for the rise of a student movement. Among other factors, there must also be a feeling that the older generation has failed. We may call this experience the process of the "de-authoritization" of the old. A student movement will not arise unless there is a sense that the older generation has discredited itself and lost its moral standing. The Japanese student movement which arose after the Second World War was based on the emotional trauma which the young students had experienced in the defeat of their country. Traditional authority was discredited as it never had been before; their fathers, elders, teachers, and rulers were revealed as having deceived and misled them. Japan in 1960 was far more technologically advanced than it had been in the Twenties, and also far more democratic. Yet because in 1960 the psychological hegemony of the older generation was undermined, there arose a large student movement where there had been none previously.

A STUDENT movement, moreover, tends to arise where political apathy or a sense of helplessness prevails among the people. The young feel that the political initiative is theirs, especially in countries where the people are illiterate. The educated man has an inordinate prestige in a society of illiterates. Throughout human history, whenever people of a society have been overwhelmingly illiterate and voiceless, the intellectual elite has been the sole rival of the military elite for political power.

This brings us to what is most significant for the theory of social change—namely, the consequences of the superimposition of a student movement on a nationalistic, peasant, or labor movement. Every student movement tries to attach itself to a "carrier" movement of much more major proportions—such as a peasant, labor, nationalist, racial, or

anti-colonial movement. We may call the latter the "carrier" movements, analogous to the harmonic waves superimposed on the carrier wave in physics. But the superimposition of waves of social movements differs in one basic respect from that of physical movements. The student movement gives a new qualitative character and direction to social change. It imparts to the carrier movement a quality of emotion, dualities of feeling, which would otherwise have been lacking. Emotions issuing from the students' unconscious, and deriving from the conflict of generations, impose or attach themselves to the underlying political carrier movement, and channel it in strange directions. Given a set of alternative paths—rational or irrational—for realizing a social goal, the direction of a student movement will tend toward the most irrational means to achieve the end.

In the case of the Russian student movement, it was the opinion of the most distinguished anarchist, Peter Kropotkin, that "the promulgation of a constitution was extremely near at hand during the last few months of the life of Alexander II." Kropotkin greatly admired the idealism of the Russian students, yet he felt their intervention had been part of an almost accidental chain of circumstances that had defeated Russia's hopes. Bernard Pares, the historian, who had witnessed the masochist terrorist characteristics of the Russian students at first hand, wrote: "The bomb that killed Alexander II put an end to the faint beginnings of Russian constitutionalism." A half-hour before the Czar set out on his last journey on March 1, 1881, he approved the text of a decree announcing the establishment of a commission likely to lead to the writing of a constitution. Instead, the students' act of Czar-killing and self-killing brought into Russian politics all the psychological overtones of sons destroying their fathers; their dramatic idealism projected on a national political scale the emotional pattern of "totem and taboo," the revolt and guilt of the primal sons Freud described.

STUDENT revolutionary leaders made their debut in world literature in the novel *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo. The traits of the student activist, this new psychological type, were delineated there for all time. With a few changes, the characters of the Parisian student movement of the 1830s are identical with those of the Russian movement of the 1890s, the Chinese movement of 1917, and the Berkeley movement of 1964. The psychological types in history are universal; in diverse eras the same cast of characters acts out eternal human drives. Thus Victor Hugo describes the student revolutionary

"The unconscious ingredient of generational revolt in the students' idealism has tended to shape decisively their political expression. . . . Wherever a set of alternative routes toward a given end presents itself, a student movement will usually choose the one that involves a higher measure of violence or humiliation directed against the older generation."

activists in their secret circle, the Friends of A.B.C. :

It was a secret society, in a state of embryo, and we might almost call it a coterie, if coterie produced heroes . . . Most of the Friends of the A.B.C. were students who maintained a cordial understanding with a few workmen. . . . These young men formed a species of family through their friendship. . . .

[Their leader, Enjolras, twenty-two years old, the scion of a wealthy family] was angelically beautiful, and looked like a stern Antinous. You might have fancied that he had gone through the revolutionary apocalypse in some previous existence. He knew the traditions of it like an eye-witness. . . . He was of a pontifical and warlike nature, strange in a young man; he was a churchman and a militant; from the immediate point of view a soldier of democracy, but, above the contemporary movement, a priest of the ideal . . . He was serious, and did not appear to know that there was on the earth a being called woman. He had only one passion, justice, and only one thought, overthrowing the obstacle. On the Mons Arentinus, he would have been Gracchus; in the Convention, he would have been Saint-Just . . . He was severe in his pleasures, and before all that was not the Republic he chastely lowered his eyes . . .

Saint-Just, the *enfant terrible* of the French Revolution, was indeed, as Victor Hugo perceived, the precursor of the revolutionary student leaders. Twenty-four years old in 1793, the youngest man in the Convention, he overawed it as "an idea energized by a passion," deporting himself as one above humanity. Only a short time earlier, he had run away to Paris with his mother's silver and written an epic of pornopolitics, the *Organt*, in twenty cantos, which interspersed its critique of kings and priests with long scenes of passion, "the raping of nuns, and discourses on the right to pleasure." The university students at Rheims, where he studied law, were drawn to the character and leadership of Saint-Just, and took him as their hero. He evidently had a passion for equality, the back-to-the-people spirit of the student activist, and was said to walk the roads in all weathers to bring help to needy families.

Young Saint-Just had the austerity of death-seeking. "I am going to get myself

killed," he said as he left Paris for the armies, and he voiced his sense of alienation: "The man who is compelled to isolate himself from his fellow-beings, and even from his own thoughts, finds anchorage in time to be." A skeptic at twenty, an idealist at twenty-two, an executioner at twenty-five—and himself executed the next year—the student leader Saint-Just, who declared, "*Formons la cité*" ("Let us found the city"), became instead the symbol for inflexible terrorist dictatorship.

From the combination of youth, intellectuality, and altruistic emotion, arise certain further basic traits of student movements. In the first place, a student movement, unlike a labor movement, has at its inception only a vague sense of its immediate goals. It emerges from a diffused feeling of opposition to things as they are. It is revolutionary in emotion to begin with, and because its driving energy stems largely from unconscious sources, it has trouble defining what it wants. A Japanese student leader of many years' standing, Shigeo Shima, remarked: "One cannot understand the student movement if one tries
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Students demonstrating in St. Petersburg, 1905—"The Russian revolutionary student movement is the classic case of the historic workings of the ethical consciousness."

—Historical Pictures Service.



Reach, Touch, and Teach

By TERRY BORTON

THERE are two sections to almost every school's statement of educational objectives—one for real, and one for show. The first, the real one, talks about academic excellence, subject mastery, and getting into college or a job. The other discusses the human purpose of school—values, feelings, personal growth, the full and happy life. It is included because everyone knows that it is important, and that it ought to be central to the life of every school. But it is only for show. Everyone knows how little schools have done about it.

In spite of this, the human objectives describe the things all of us cite when we try to remember what “made a difference” in our school careers: the teacher who touched us as persons, or the one who ground out our lives to polish our intellects; the class that moved with the strength and grace of an Olympic team, or the dozens of lessons when each of us slogged separately toward the freedom of 3 o'clock. What we learned, and what we became, depended to a significant degree on how we felt about ourselves, our classmates, and our teachers. The schools were right—the human purposes *were* important. But with the exception of those teachers who were so rare we never forgot them, the schools did little to put their philosophy into practice.

Recently, however, a variety of programs have begun to build curricula and teaching methodology that speak directly to the human objectives. These programs, stemming both from within the schools and from various branches of psychology, point the way to a school practice which not only recognizes the power of feelings, but also combines academic training with an education directly aimed at the student's most important concerns. Schools may soon be explicitly teaching students such things as how to sort out and guide their own psychological growth, or increase their desire to achieve, or handle their aggressive instincts in nonviolent forms.

The new impetus has a variety of names: “psychological education,” “af-

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—Photos by Paul Fusco.

“Education which deals with feelings is often facilitated by skipping over the verbal labels which have been learned relatively late in life, regaining the other senses, and then reintegrating them with verbal thought and new behaviors.”