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The New Left, RIP

We have to face it; we must face it: The New Left is dead. Dead as a doornail. *Kaput*. For those of us who hailed the New Left when it appeared, and urged libertarians to ally with it, this is a painful realization. But reality must be faced. That glorious, heady, revolutionary period of the life of the New Left (1964-1969) has come to an end.

First, the evidences of death. The evidence is everywhere. Perhaps the patient is not totally dead, but surely it is "medically dead"; the brain is long gone, the heart and spirit are failing fast, and what we are left with are the final reflexive convulsions of the corpse: the mindless and febrile twitchings of such pathetic and decaying groups as the Weathermen and the Patriot Party, the feeble high-camp of Yippie guerrilla theatre, the arrant nonsense of Women's Liberation. The heart and body of the New Left are gone.

Almost from its inception, SDS was the heart and soul of the New Left, the bearer and carrier of its best libertarian and revolutionary instincts. SDS is dead, in an aggravated state of rapid disintegration, its onetime open libertarianism replaced by a handful of fanatic Stalinoid sects. The broader anti-war movement, which had SDS at its core, has folded completely in a few short months. At the brink of a crucial take-off after the October and November 1969 demonstrations, the left-liberal Moratorium, possibly scared of its own potential, possibly intimidated by Mitchell and Agnew, simply tucked tail and ran, folding at the horrifying prospect of its own rapid growth. And the New Mobe, organizer of the successful November demonstration, has sundered apart, taken over by feeble ultra-Left groups who want to graft on to the anti-war issue every cause but the kitchen sink. While America's genocidal war in Vietnam goes on, virtually the entire Left has suddenly gotten bored with the whole issue and hived off to worry about the Environment—an eminently safe and co-optable issue where even Richard Nixon has become a militant. (Will the fellow who *advocates* air pollution please stand up?) Sure, Nixon's cunning and demagogic Nov. 3 speech won over the "silent majority" temporarily. But what kind of a movement is it, how viable is it, that folds up and disappears at the first sign of a setback? Even the Democratic politicians, who had rediscovered the war issue at the time of the October moratorium, have slipped back into innocuous silence.

The student movement, which again had SDS at its heart, has also faded away. Columbia, Berkeley, San Francisco State, City College, Cornell, all the great centers of past struggle, are quiet and likely to remain so. It's true that it's been a cold winter, and that come spring, the students may well start up again. But even if they do, their *demands*

are no longer in any sense revolutionary or even meaningful. Let's face it: does one more "black studies institute" really matter? Are we supposed to go to the barricades for a demand that is innocuous at best, ludicrous at worst? The revolutionary student movement is dead also.

And black nationalism, the only sometime revolutionary force outside the students, has also shot its bolt. SNCC, the great and imaginative co-founder of the New Left and of the black liberation struggle, is dead. The Muslim groups and the Republic of New Africa have faded away. The cultural nationalists have disappeared. What we are left with are the Black Panthers who have (a) abandoned black nationalism for Marxism, and (b) are being systematically chopped down by the police, who are overreacting to a threat that never really existed, since the Panthers have far more support among adoring white radicals than they do in the black community. In retrospect, black nationalism has been finished since the murder of that superb leader, one of the great men of our epoch, Malcolm X. Those who murdered Malcolm knew that the black community would not be able to come up with anyone remotely approaching his stature and his potential. Those who came after Malcolm have been pygmies, excrescences upon a dying though only emerging cause. Instead of black national liberation, we now have only . . . what? Demands of black studies institutes, and, of course, the *dashiki* and the Afro haircut. The black liberation movement is dead.

II

If, then, the New Left is dead, this does not mean that its short life was not a glorious one. Its accomplishments were many and remarkable. It created the most intense, the most notable, and the most far-flung anti-war movement in the history of protest against American imperial wars. The New Left anti-war movement was begun by SDS in early 1965, and spread to almost an entire generation, and beyond. It succeeded in toppling an American President, and in forcing a halt to the bombing of North Vietnam. It managed to use that war, furthermore, to bring a consciousness of the imperialist nature of American foreign policy to millions of people. And it also managed to use the war to radicalize countless numbers of Americans, to reveal the imperial corporate state nature of the American system.

In the process, and here is perhaps the New Left's biggest achievement, it destroyed Liberalism. Liberalism, with its muddled thinking, its hypocrisies, its almost universally accepted cover for corporate state tyranny and imperial

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aggression, has been forever exposed, in its total intellectual bankruptcy, by the young New Left movement. No one will hereafter take Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. or Max Lerner, or Walt Rostow seriously. To accomplish this destruction of Liberalism with no support in the Establishment, with virtually no financial resources, and in complete opposition to a State-subsided culture, was a remarkable feat. And it took the New Left, with its passionate dedication and its ability to expose the consequences in reality of Liberalism's rhetoric, to do the job.

The New Left began in late 1964, with the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, and while it hardly succeeded in overturning the American university system, it has made an indelible mark. Before the New Left, corporate liberalism had succeeded in establishing a monstrous educational Leviathan that treated the growing mass of students as passive cogs in the machinery, as raw material to be processed to take their place in the state-monopoly system. The New Left has changed all that; the students and the youth are no longer the passive instruments of the "Age of Apathy" of the 1950's, no longer the "Organization Men" of that epoch choosing jobs upon graduation with careful calculation of their pension rights. The youth are now almost universally active, independent, critical, even militant. Moreover, the universities will never again be able to treat the students as simple cogs; at least partial reforms have taken place, so that the wishes and views of the students will be at least consulted and to some extent heeded. The Liberal educationists will never again sit so pretty and comfortable upon their educational thrones.

Thus, the New Left made an indelible imprint upon an entire generation, a whole age-group becoming adults in fundamental opposition to bureaucracy and authoritarianism, refusing totally to be the Organization Men of their predecessors. This legacy of the New Left will remain, as will, of course, continuing notable contributions from particular individuals and scholars: the inspiring insights of Paul Goodman, the blend of moral passion and historical scholarship of Noam Chomsky, the fundamental revision of the study of the domestic and foreign American Leviathan by William Appleman Williams and his numerous and able young students in the historical profession.

III

But the New Left leaves also an unfortunate and negative tendency in American Life, and one that shows every sign of spreading through the country even as the *political* revolution goes to its grave. I refer to the so-called "cultural revolution", or "counter-culture", that blight of blatant irrationality that has hit the younger generation and the intellectual world like a veritable plague. There are strong signs, in fact, that the spread of the cultural "revolution" even as the political revolution fades is no accident; for, as Aldous Huxley foresaw in his remarkable *Brave New World* three decades ago, it is relatively easy for the Establishment to co-opt the cultural rebels by simply adopting the new "counter-culture", and keeping the erstwhile rebels content on the ancient formula of despots: "bread and circuses", except that now it's dope and circuses. What better way to pull the teeth of knowledgeable dissent than to spread the ethic of indiscriminate "love", the substitution of the hallucinatory exploration of a mythical "inner space" for a rational and purposeful acting upon reality in order to change it, the conscious abolition of reason and clarity of thought on behalf of vague, inarticulate stumblings and primitive "non-verbal communication"?

There are growing signs that the Establishment has indeed decided to embrace the "counter-culture". *Time*, in

its review of the 1960's, called for precisely this kind of co-optation. And *Time*, *Life*, and the *New York Times* all celebrated the passive puerilities of the "Woodstock Nation", while carefully and completely ignoring the murders and the systematic violence at the West Coast rock festival last December at Altamont. A particularly horrifying straw in the wind is the fact that the *New York Times* devoted the coveted front page of its Sunday Book Review of February 22 to a laudatory blurb for the works of the English psychiatrist R. D. Laing. Laing, the logical culmination of the militant irrationality of the counter-culture, goes so far as to proclaim the superior virtues of insanity in our "sick society".

Thirty years ago, Ludwig von Mises wrote of a "revolt against reason" which he saw around him. But that revolt was tiddly-winks compared to the current open, all-out drive to liquidate reason and to substitute the ethic and the epistemology and the life-style of insanity.

How did the counter-culture take hold of the New Left? It began with an admirable desire to avoid the mistakes of the Old Left, especially the Old Left's emphasis on government action and reform through government. Instead, the New Left wished to emphasize individual or personal liberation. But instead of arriving at a philosophy of individualism and rationality, the form of personal "liberation" which it came to adopt was the counter-cultural "liberation" from reason and the consequent enslavement to unexamined whim.

Let us look more closely at this spreading counter-culture: the contempt for reason, logic, clarity, systematic thought, or *knowledge* of history; the hostility to science, technology, and human material progress; the hatred of hard work, planning, and long-range forethought; the hostility to "bourgeois comfort". In education, the cultural rebels are opposed to reading, to course content, to gaining knowledge, as "structured" and "repressive"; in place of which they would put free-form, gradeless, "rapping" about their own unexamined and puerile "feelings". And, the counter-culture exalts: immediate, momentary sensory awareness, aggravated by hallucinatory drugs; a corollary Rousseauan worship of the primitive, the "noble savage", the poverty-stricken, of "back-to-nature"; dropoutism and living from moment to moment on pure subsistence. In religion, the strong rational elements of our Western Greco-Judeo-Christian tradition have been thrown overboard for a banal Oriental mysticism and devotion to magic, astrology and Tarot cards. All in all, we are being hit with an extreme, mystical, anti-intellectual degenerate form of what Sorokin called "sensate culture". What it amounts to is a systematic, multi-faceted attack on human reason.

Noam Chomsky has written, on the counter-culture: "One bad effect is the revival of fanaticism. A lot of youthful dissidents think in terms of an unrealistic time-scale when they think of social change. When Marx wrote about capitalism, he was highly indignant, but he didn't go out and have tantrums in the streets. Youth, like other marginal groups, will fail to make a distinction between what's emotional and what's rational. Rationality is not a gift you should concede to the enemy if you want to succeed."

For those who are eager to discover a different culture, what a blessed relief it is to turn from the sewage of the counter-culture to the genuine, rational culture of the Enlightenment! The recently published second volume of Peter Gay's superb history of the Enlightenment, *The Science of Freedom* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969, \$10.00, 705 pp.) carries one into a glorious world, of Condorcet, of Hume, the Physiocrats, the *philosophes*; they were not, most of them, anything like consistent libertarians; but their entire cultural framework was one of devotion to: reason, science, technology, human progress, individual liberty, free trade, and the free-market economy. We find the great Condorcet and his paean to rational liberty: "The moment will come,

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then, when the sun will shine only on free men on this earth, on men who will recognize no master but their reason." One Condorcet, one philosophe, is worth the whole contemporary pig-pen.

The time has come for us to make a stand for reason. The time has come for us to realize that liberty, no matter how glorious, is not enough; for what good would liberty be, what good any social system, if entire generations go crazy, following Leary into a drug-besotted retreat from the world, following Marcuse into a "liberated" and "un-repressed" ignorance and whim-worship, following Laing into open insanity? We must raise the banner of Liberty and Reason, Now and Forever, One and Inseparable! We must eradicate the counter-culture before it destroys the world.

IV

If the genuine, the political New Left is dead, and what we are left with, overshadowing its positive legacy, is the spreading plague of the counter-culture being embraced by the Establishment, then what of the future? What is now the prognosis for the Movement? In the first place, there is no necessity for long-run despair. All revolutionary movements proceed in zigs and zags, with revolutionary periods succeeded by periods of counter-revolution and falling-back. We are now at the beginning of a period of counter-revolution.

As the Marxists discovered long ago, there is a proper strategy and tactic for periods of recession and counter-revolution. This strategy amounts to a sobering up, a cool abstinence from provoking State repression, a quiet concentration on patient, long-range educational work, on what the Marxists call "base-building". The heady wine of r-r-r-revolutionary posturing and phrasemongering must be replaced by the cool draught of rational analysis.

Furthermore, there may well be great positive benefits from this coming period of recession. Leonard Liggio has offered a brilliant analogy between the zig-zag fortunes of the Movement and the Austrian (Mises-Hayek) theory of the business cycle. In Austrian theory, the recession is the healthy and necessary response of the economy to the excesses and malinvestments of the preceding inflationary boom. Perhaps there are similar cycles in the fortunes of revolutionary movements. For just as the late stages of an economic boom throw up excesses and malinvestments which must be cleansed by recession, so the later years of the New Left had increasingly buried its sound elements and thrown up unsound and degenerate forms which are now all that survive. Perhaps the function of the coming recession is to serve as a healthy purgative: to cleanse the Movement of these excrescences, of this diseased tissue, so that, come the opportunity, the Movement will be a sound and healthy organism ready for the next advance.

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For A New America

The now unfortunately defunct journal *Studies on the Left* was by far the outstanding theoretical and scholarly product of the New Left. It began in 1959, when the New Left was only a gleam upon the horizon, founded by a bright young group of graduate history students at the University of Wisconsin, who were under the inspiration of Professor William Appleman Williams. The first, or Wisconsin, phase of *Studies* was, in my view, its finest; there, it brought to the intellectual world the insights and researches of Williams and his students, insights that were destined to change the course of American historiography and even the way in which young scholars began to look at current America. The Williams contribution was to destroy the generally accepted

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image of the New Deal and of the Wilsonian and Progressive periods of twentieth-century America. The Williams school has shown that, rather than the Progressive-Wilson-New Deal being "progressive" movements by the mass of the people to curb and regulate Big Business and establish an anti-business form of welfare state, they were really generated by Big Business leaders themselves in order to cartelize and monopolize the economy through the instrument of Big Government. And rather than the foreign wars and interventions by Wilson and FDR being "enlightened" moves to spread democracy and "collective security" throughout the world, they turn out to have been aggressive acts to establish the world-wide hegemony of an American Empire, at the service of this same Big Business ruling class. The function of the Liberal intellectuals was to serve as ideological apologists for this neo-mercantilist corporate state. Hence, Williams' brilliant term, "corporate liberals".

After the movement of *Studies* to New York in 1963, the journal lost much of its emphasis on scholarship and revisionist American history, and plunged actively into New Left "movement" activity, with lengthy reports and commentaries, for example, on the short-lived "community action projects" among the urban poor. In its later years, *Studies* was increasingly torn apart between those of its editors who wanted to continue to stress movement activism as well as the emerging "cultural revolution", and the more theoretical who wished to turn the journal into a center for building a frankly socialist theory on behalf of a supposedly imminent socialist party. But the problem was that both tendencies were no longer interested in continuing the real genius of *Studies*, its historical scholarship. The deadlock among the editors caused *Studies* to fold in 1967.

In a profound sense, the opening and closing of *Studies* performed similar historic roles: for just as the emergence of *Studies* foreshadowed the later birth of the New Left, so its death also foreshadowed the New Left's demise. The same tendencies which tore *Studies* apart (mindless activism and the counter-culture on the one hand, sectarian Marxian socialism on the other) were two of the major reasons for the later dissolution of the New Left as a whole.

An important book has now been published which contains the best of the articles from *Studies on the Left*. It is a pleasure to see that the best articles from *Studies* have been resurrected, enshrined, and available in book form. The book is *For a New America* (New York: Random House, \$10.00), edited by James Weinstein and David W. Eakins, two of the editors of *Studies* (Weinstein being undoubtedly the single most important editor over its life-span.)

The star of the collection is undoubtedly Part I, "American

Corporate Liberalism, 1900-1948", which presents a Williamsite revision of modern American history. Every article in this section is important and to be recommended. They include William A. Williams' review-article of Ernest May's whitewash of American Imperialism at the turn of the century; Martin J. Sklar's lengthy and devastating critique of Wilsonian "liberalism"; James Weinstein's discussion and explanation of the pro-union attitudes of the Big Business Establishment during the Progressive period and Ronald Radosh's exposition of the pro-corporate state views of American union leaders; Murray N. Rothbard's critique of the widespread myth that Herbert Hoover believed in *laissez-faire*, showing instead that Hoover was the founder of Roosevelt's New Deal and corporate state; and John Steinke and James Weinstein's delightful little revelation that Joe McCarthy learned his red-baiting from none other than the liberal Norman Thomas.

Parts III and IV, which deal with ethnic questions, are also excellent, featuring one of the earliest statements of the black power position (1962) by Harold Cruse, and a scintillating defense of Hannah Arendt against her Zionist detractors by Norman Fruchter. Part II, "An American Socialism", is the least valuable part of the book, representing a tortured attempt of the "theoretical" wing of the later *Studies* board to develop a new prolegomena to the theory for a new socialist party. But even here, Weinstein's review-article of the scholarly literature on the Socialist Party is very useful, as is especially Gabriel Kolko's realistic pessimism on the viability of both the Old and New Lefts.

There are, inevitably for such a collection, a few articles from the old *Studies* which I miss, and which could easily have been included if the tendentious socialist articles had been dumped: the conflict which raged around the Fruchter article, between Fruchter and Old Left Judeophile Marxists Louis Harap and Morris U. Schappes (Fall, 1965); Michael A. Lebowitz' brilliant review-article of Lee Benson's *Concept of Jacksonian Democracy* (Winter, 1963); Joseph R. Conlin's review of Old Left Marxist Philip Foner's history of the IWW (Mar.-Apr., 1966); and Todd Gitlin's and Shin'ya Ono's searching critiques of the dominant "pluralist" theorists of American political science (Summer, 1965).

All in all, one of the most important books of the year.

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