

Commentary About the Assertion and Impact of the New Left Movement in America in the 1960s

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Abstract

The New Left movement in America in the 1960s made a violent attack on the human oppression and devastation brought by the developed industrialized society and arouse intense echo among the post-war American young people. The New Left movement took on a tint of keen idealism and a tendency of anarchism, and was more a cultural and ideological revolution than an economic revolution. This movement had a great impact on America: It compelled the American troops to withdraw from Vietnam; It shook the traditional values in America; and it advanced the reform in the American society.

Key words: 1960s; America; The New Left movement; Assertion; Impact

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INTRODUCTION

The 1960s was a distinctive era in the American history. With the black civil rights movement of the 1950s as the forerunner, it was filled with surging torrent of the

campus democracy movement, anti-war movement, feminist movement, environmental movement and hippie counterculture movement. From today's perspective, the "New Left" movement was undoubtedly the center of all these movements. Almost from the emergence of the movement, a lot of discussions and studies have been focused on. From the perspective of student intellectuals, the movement was a critique of the American society. Problems and policies at home as well as abroad were perceived as the main motives for the movement. An early student activist once said that the new radicalism seemed an ethical revolt against the hypocrisy that divided America's ideals from its actions. While on the other hand, some people argue that the movement was an aberration in the 1960s. Such analysts are interested in examining the personalities behind the movement. In a survey of sixties scholarship, I find that some theoretical questions still need considering: What were the main assertions of the New Left movement? What were the consequences of the New Left's protests? etc. This paper aims to take a comprehensive view of the overview of the New Left movement in the United States, as well as its assertions and impacts.

1. PROFILE OF THE NEW LEFT MOVEMENT

The term "New Left" first appeared in Britain in the late 1950s. At that time, a group of young believers in socialism who gathered together and were looking for a new way claimed to be "New Left", which distinguished itself from the "Old Left" such as the Communist Party and the social Democrats. The New Left was in its prime stage and formed its own system in the 1960s, directly affecting the rebel movements during this period.

The main representative of the "New Left" movement was "Students for Democratic Society" (SDS), whose

activities ran through the rise, growth and decline of the movement. SDS officially made its debut in June 1962 when the congress of the New Left students was held in Port Huron, Michigan. The congress passed the famous Port Huron Statement, which marked the birth of the New Left. In its early stages, the New Left took the reformist route in the main form of demonstration. Although it didn't advocate the abolition of the American social system, it denounced the existing defects of the American society and put forward such radical slogans as "do your own thing!", which indicated that the New Left movement would be gradually radicalized.

On April 17, 1965, SDS assembled 25,000 against the Vietnam War in Washington and began its meteoric growth. This was a complete negation of American foreign policy and opposition to the President of the United States for he had used force against Vietnam's political demonstrations without congressional authorization. In October this year, SDS took part in the anti-war demonstrations across the country initiated by "the Vietnam Day Committee". In December 1966, SDS promoted the anti-draft movement to the new stage of collective action through the Draft Resolution. In 1967, the anti-war boycott reached the climax. Affected by Marcuse's "youth revolt philosophy", SDS put forward the theory of the New Working Class, which means that the students would replace the old working class (coal-mining and such like) and assume the historic revolutionary role of the proletariat anticipated by Marxism. Entering the summer, under the multiple role of the black rebellion, anti-war movement and counterculture movement, the American society was changing rapidly.

In late April 1968, the students captured and occupied five buildings at Columbia University, including the principal's office, which rocked the American society and marked the transformation of the movement from relatively peaceful resistance to political violence. In the spring of 1969, violence, injury and property damage appeared on about 1/5 of the campuses, and a third of the student groups were directly involved in protests. In the depressing atmosphere against the Vietnam War, the youth's cultural tendency was brought to a climax. In August 1969, 450,000 youths rocked and roared in the pouring rain at Woodstock Festival. They expressed their dislike of the Vietnam war and contempt for the hypocritical politics and mediocre culture by taking drugs, playing in the mud or meditating. The Festival shook the whole American society and had a profound historical influence.

The New Left movement fully demonstrated the pluralist characteristics of post-war politics. It began with a fringe movement and eventually became the center of the American political life. A poll made by the magazine *Fortune* asserted that only 12.5% of college students held the "revolutionary" or "radically anti-government"

view and college students only accounted for 7% of the SDS members. However, in the 1960s, 81% of college students expressed dissatisfaction with the administration of colleges and universities and more than 50% disagreed with American domestic and foreign policies. This suggests that, although a relatively small number, the radical left had a lot of actual or potential allies who were not happy with the reality and becoming more and more radicalized.

But, in the run up to the national convention in Chicago in 1969, the most important organization of the New Left SDS fell apart. By the autumn of 1969, Weatherman was the most well-known branch in SDS. Although there were only a few hundred members, it became a new symbol of radical movement due to its distinct propensity for violence. It's said that from September 1969 to May 1970, the New Left was responsible for at least 250 explosions and fires.

The extreme violence the New Left used led people to call its legitimacy into question. According to a Gallup poll in March 1969, 82% of people approved of dismissing radical students from colleges and universities. This is because most people in the United States witnessed the rapid development of the economy and the great change of society after the Second World War, so they could feel the benefits the society gave them though they were dissatisfied with social problems of the consumer capitalism. They had experienced war and peace, chaos and stability, and they knew the importance of the value of peace and stability. In this case, they could tolerate, or even supported the young rebels when they were in the stage of peaceful protest; But while they became the destructive force of the existing order, people began to act as a resistance force of the movement. This could probably explain the collapse of the New Left.

2. ASSERTION OF THE NEW LEFT MOVEMENT

2.1 Critique of the Unreasonable Phenomena of Modern Civilization of Capitalism

In Port Huron Statement, the New Leftists point out that modern civilization represented by America has deep crisis hidden therein. One-sided emphasis on the role of instrumental rationality and the belief that man can conquer nature lead to unrestrained exploitation and damage of natural resources, greatly deteriorating the ecological environment and making a deadly threat to the survival of mankind. The Statement unequivocally opposes to the excessive developing trend of instrumental rationality in modern society: "Societies cannot successfully perpetuate themselves by their military weapons; Democracy must be viable because of its quality of life, not its quantity of rockets".

In the Statement, the majority of the youth protest against the bureaucracy of monopoly capitalism. In their own special way, they make people realize the huge risk of excessive rational development of modern civilization and show the social and cultural forces youth want to restore human spirit and dignity.

2.2 Advocate of “Participatory Democracy”

Democracy literally means “rule by the people”, that is, the people have the right to decide the public affairs. In the New Left’s point of view, the United States didn’t make true democracy. Big companies controlled the economy and excluded the working people from basic decision-making. The unions fell into a mire of organizational routine and ignored the unemployed. The government’s system allowed the country to be manipulated by commercial interests, which obstructed the public opinion. The New Left members would like to see citizens involved in public life more actively and directly, so they put forward “participatory democracy” as the most basic political goal. In Port Huron Statement, Hayden points out that the democracy of individual participation is governed by two central aims: “that the individual share in those social decisions determining the quality and direction of his life; that society be organized to encourage independence in men and provide the media for their common participation”. Participatory democracy directs against form democracy in capitalist society; in practice, it is a kind of direct democracy, which advocates absolute personal democracy with a clear tendency of anarchy. New Leftists believed that the freedom of contemporary society was a false freedom based on the repression of a true individual freedom and the present system didn’t need any personalities or differences but producers and consumers with no difference. In this case, the New Left went against the current order which molded individuals into producers and consumers. These ideas, though idealistic, embody the awakening of self-consciousness and yearning for a better society of the youth.

2.3 Transformation From the “Revolution of Consciousness” to the Thought of Violent Protest

In tactics of struggle, the New Left had a clear shift in thinking. At first, they thought that humans have the potential of “self-education, self-guidance, self-understanding and invention”. This, they believed, would play the role of social change so long as it’s been discovered, and to do this, it was necessary to launch a “revolution of consciousness”. SDS national Secretary Calvert said: “if the false consciousness is the main obstacle to organize a revolutionary movement, accordingly, our main task at this stage of development is to encourage and establish the revolutionary consciousness, the consciousness of a restrained environment”. The free speech movement and the hippie

meditation at that time can be seen as attempts to liberate the consciousness of their own as well as others’. But, with the failure of these activities, especially with the emergence of anti-war climax, the New Left began to give up the moderate attitude and showed increasingly a propensity for violence. They began to oppose any form of compromise or alliance with mainstream political power. Tom Hayden once argued that, with the growing success of the movement, the system would become more violent and depressed, which would be conducive to a more direct revolution. At this time, young people began to act aggressively against the police and any protectors of the current system, and peaceful demonstrations turned into direct violence. This, apart from strategic consideration, reflects youth’s helpless and desperate mood while facing the disappointing social reality.

The New Left of the United States, however, didn’t set up a new coordinate system after destroying the old one. As ex-chairman of SDS, Carl Oglesby, publicly declared, the revolution’s basic motivation is not to build a heaven, but destroy a hell. Therefore, what distinguishes the New Left from previous generations of youth is the abandonment of the mainstream politics, rather than the development of an alternative political orientation, which, seemingly, makes the New Left movement a destructive one, thus greatly weakening its mass foundation. This is one of the major reasons why the New Left radical movement couldn’t last long and finally faded away.

3. THE IMPACT OF THE NEW LEFT MOVEMENT

The advent of the New Left movement in the 1960s in America marks the courage and determination of the youth to challenge the society and the tradition, and its impact on the capitalist society is quite outstanding.

3.1 Impact on America’s Vietnam Policy

The influence of the New Left movement on US government’s Vietnam policy is especially illustrated in its “veto” power on the behavior of the decision makers. At the end of 1966, when the pentagon officials urged President Johnson to bomb Hanoi and destroy north Vietnam’s industrial capacity, President Johnson said: “I have one more problem for your computer-will you feed into it how long it will take five hundred thousand angry Americans to climb that white house wall out there and lynch their President if he does something like that? “Johnson knew the importance of public opinion quite well. He told a reporter: “our biggest problem is not with Ho and with the fighting out there. It’s with our situation here.” Many other U.S. government officials also believed that anti-war protests were a support for the communist cause. American Pacific Commander, Grant Sharp, attacked protesters at the Department of Defense

news conference that they inspired Hanoi and destroyed all the favorable situations in the United States. Also, the U.S. Ambassador to Saigon, Rocky, stressed that the domestic dissent inspired Hanoi. Under the pressure of youth anti-war, American policy makers had to consider the influence of domestic factors in the foreign policy. Although there were “doves” and “hawks” within the U.S. government and their understandings of the war and the anti-war movement were different, they shared the same opinion that the anti-war movement successfully restricted the acts of the United States in Southeast Asia.

3.2 Impact on the Social Consciousness of the United States

Prior to the New Left, there was a widespread belief that industrialized societies were harmonious social systems which, internally at least, contained no major oppositional forces. The “end of ideology” was proclaimed in one form or another by Daniel Bell, Raymond Aron, and Seymour Martin Lipset. Since the New Left, however, a key question for social research has been the legitimation crisis of the system. The New Left movement exposes the inherent contradictions of the developed capitalist society and encourages people to reexamine the social reality of capitalism. Objectively, it challenges the consistency of American politics and promotes the development of American multiculturalism. Morris Dickstein points out in his famous “Gates of Eden” that critical thinking is one of the most enduring legacies of the 1960s.

Under the impact of the New Left movement of the 1960s, the American society’s tolerance for unorthodox values and way of life was significantly enhanced. Richard Flacks argued that many Americans had an unprecedented wide range of choices, rich resources of self development and freedom of self expression ever since. A comparison of campuses in the 1960s with those of today reveals that the values previously owned by a small number of university students have spread to a whole generation. The new culture youth required in the 1960s has become the important content of social life ever since.

3.3 Impact on Promotion of the Reform of the American Society

Under the impact of the New Left movement of the 1960s, American society conducted a series of reforms. In foreign policy, Congress began to play a bigger role and the President’s power was limited. Different from the Vietnam war period, Congress no longer adhered stubbornly to information which the President and his advisers provided. From 1947 to 1976, the number of private employees Congress hired rose from 2030 to 10190. In 1966, there were very few senators who had foreign policy advisers, but almost everyone had no less than one adviser after the Vietnam war. These people played an increasingly important role in foreign affairs by

providing foreign policy information to MPS and made many MPS become experts at foreign policy, which, in the end, limited the President’s “freedom” in dealing with foreign affairs and legitimized foreign policy to a certain extent. In November 1973, the U.S. Congress passed the War Powers Resolution, which weakens the President’s power on the problem of war since world war II., thus avoiding the power abuse by “imperial presidency” and restoring confidence of the American people suffering from the Vietnam war in the government. As for domestic policies, many politicians concentrated on perfection of the mechanism of the supervision of the President and other officials at all levels. On July 12, 1974, Congress passed the Congressional Budget and Impoundment Control Act, introducing some procedures to limit unlimited abeyance of congressional budget during the Nixon era. In 1978, the Independent Counsel Act was brought into being. According to the Act, the independent counsel can be enabled if senior officials of the federal government have confirmed a violation of public interests or been charged with a criminal offence. Meanwhile, states successively passed the “Sunshine Act” including laws and regulations concerning civil rights, national defense, education, employment and so on, to increase the transparency of the government.

CONCLUSION

All in all, under the impact of the New Left movement in the 1960s, the American society has become more rational and humane, more vigorous and vital. The reason why the New Left movement has such great impact is that the core of the movement is to break monopoly of all the “orthodox” forces on political, economic, and social life, and to restore democracy and power to the people. It holds moral weapons and has widespread social foundation so that it became a power to compete with the government during the 1960s. The “New Left” historiography genre represented by Howard Zinn argues against the elite-ruling theory and put an emphasis on the people’s historical role, which, without doubt, is a big step forward on cognition.

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