

The Cure That Ailed Us

William Shapiro

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Nineteen sixty-eight was a watershed year for the “Movement,” as well as for me personally. I graduated from Brooklyn College in May and enrolled in Cornell’s Graduate School of Government in August. The 1968–1969 academic year saw the Black Student Alliance take over Willard Straight Hall, the student union at Cornell, on parents weekend, and it was indeed an event that would put Cornell on the map as a campus rife with left-wing activism.

The events that caught up many students—the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement, the Black Power movement, the burgeoning women’s movement, the many-faceted challenges to the status quo/bourgeois order—ensured that the era that began around 1968 would be romanticized to a completely absurd degree, and eventually lead to disappointment and disillusionment. That is the legacy we are living with today.

What happened? A number of things. The influence of Black Power on the white Left should not be underestimated; it did more than anything else to move the Left, and the Students for Democratic Society (SDS), the leading radical student organization, away from Tom Hayden and Carl Oglesby’s Port Huron Statement which was an idealistic manifesto influenced by the John F. Kennedy presidency. Oglesby and Hayden expressed the hope of the early sixties, which ultimately led to a politics of nihilism in the later sixties.¹ The military draft, and then the draft lottery, were galvanizing, but the end of the draft in favor of a volunteer army in 1973 during the Nixon administration took much of the wind

¹“Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society, 1962,” <http://www.campusactivism.org/server-new/uploads/porthuron.htm>.

out of the sails of the Left. The comingling of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War, which had been greatly widened under President Johnson, was a marriage of convenience and ultimately unsuccessful, at least from the point of view of left-wing politics. The stirrings of feminism and women's liberation were added to the earlier radical causes, introducing certain complications into the mix. Finally, Eugene McCarthy and Robert F. Kennedy challenged President Lyndon Baines Johnson from within his own Democratic Party in the run-up to the presidential primaries of 1968, exposing his administration's bankruptcy to such a degree that he did not run for reelection. This loomed over that time, as of course did the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr., Robert Kennedy, and, especially for New Yorkers, Allard Lowenstein. (A congressman from New York City, Lowenstein was committed to antiwar activities and was a model for many young idealists. He was murdered by one of them, Dennis Sweeney. This happened in 1980, but I see it as yet another part of the slow deflation of the idealism that had characterized 1960s New York.)

The opposition to the Johnson administration, especially from within his own party, was unprecedented and signaled for some that the antiwar movement had won the day. But the disruptions at the Democratic Convention, which was held in Chicago, the heavy-handed tactics of the Chicago police force in response, and the challenge of the racially integrated Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to the all-white Mississippi Democratic Party at the convention, together created an atmosphere in which it was impossible to see the nominee Hubert Humphrey, who had been Johnson's veep, as anything but a lackey to Johnson and as one who would lose the election. Though he was challenged by McCarthy, there was a dispirited feeling in the air that the true candidate, Robert Kennedy, had been assassinated.

The assassinations of King and then Kennedy should not be underestimated. The death of these figures who knew how to work to change the system left the field to radicals and those who would eventually drop out of the system. The depression, at least for some time, was palpable. By the time Jimmy Carter was elected president in 1976, the Left, including the "veterans" of it who wore their experiences like badges of honor, had become moribund.

It seemed that the air had been taken out of the electoral solution to problems. This did not lead to a sense that a new political movement was necessary, but rather to a channeling of the energy of the time into the cultural atmosphere of the time, characterized by the sexual revolution, the drug culture, and the music.

The basic source of disagreement was that many wanted to create a political party to the left of the Democrat Party, a left-liberal party unshackled from the likes of the Dixiecrats. But it was an eclectic grouping composed of all who

considered themselves “leftists,” including everybody from middle-class baby boomers to communists affiliated with the W.E.B. Du Bois Clubs of America to the ultra-radical and violent Weathermen, and this made creating a unified party virtually impossible. Those of us who wanted to build a larger left-wing movement did agree with the radicals that a system based on money could not generate virtue or happiness, and was unsustainable in the long run, but our conclusion was that the capitalist system of work and rewards was far too strong to be supplanted.

Yet, from my perspective the hope and despair that characterized the Movement was centered much more around the Columbia student rebellion of 1968 rather than the Democratic Convention of that year. Most of us considered that convention, including those radicals who attended it, as a kind of “glamor” trip by the “heads” of the Movement such as Abbie Hoffman, founder of the Yippies, a former student of Marcuse, and author of *Steal This Book* (1971), and Jerry Rubin, author of *DO IT! Scenarios of the Revolution* (1970), none of whom were held in good odor by most of us. We considered the whole event, which was marked by violent radical protests and harsh police reaction, all caught on film, a kind of distraction from what was going on within the Movement—especially since we knew what was going to happen and we thought that those who went there wanted it to happen for publicity purposes, which was understood to be “organizing.” To make a long story short, it was not our “scene.”

What was going on more specifically in the university was more important to me. When I was in college the “old boy network” was very much at work, and this, coupled with the subjective opinions of senior professors, was how people were hired and promoted. Teaching, in which most students were (and I would argue still are) interested, was not given great weight. The system was unfair, it was arbitrary, and for budding scholars it was very frustrating.

Hoping to lessen the arbitrariness, administrators resorted to a “publish or perish” mentality; after all, the number of articles, books, and the places in which they were published could be counted or evaluated “empirically.” However, this too denigrated teaching as the main purpose and mission of the university. And there is no way to avoid subjectivity in evaluating teaching. Moreover, affirmative action in admitting students and in hiring professors was instituted, which in its application (as opposed to the law as written) could not be more arbitrary. That is the situation today, and the best way to understand it is to know that faculty “rewards” are framed in terms of *reduced* teaching loads.

Affirmative action, it must be understood, developed as a result of the militancy on various campuses. I distinguish this militancy from that of the civil rights workers in the South, who fought on behalf of a noble cause with great

courage. Nevertheless, the import of that cause morphed into a demand for group rights and led to affirmative action, reverse racism, and all the abuses we see today. In addition, the Left and SDS accepted the notion that black militants, represented by the Black Student Alliance, should lead the Movement because they were the ones who “suffered” and thus understood the “white power structure” best. At Brooklyn College, where I had been elected to the steering committee of SDS and as National Student Association coordinator, this attitude culminated in the notion that SDS needed to follow the lead of black leaders on campus; essentially this meant for us to do as we were told.

I never could accept the idea that my views, which reflected those who elected me, should be subsumed under the judgment of others. This led me to break with the Movement as a leader at Brooklyn College, though I continued to harbor hope, futilely, of a leftist politics coming into existence. It is enough to mention that the leader of the Black Student Alliance at Cornell, who brought guns into Willard Straight Hall and expelled the parents of Cornell students who were staying there, later became the CEO of TIAA-CREF. Most of the Black Power movement worked for its “piece of the pie,” and got it. At that point, success had been achieved. This is not what the white Left originally had in mind, but finally it was all good-naturedly, strangely enough, accepted.

The draft absorbed the energy of much of the white Left. In many ways, this was understandable but regrettable. The middle-class parents of students did not want their sons to wind up in Vietnam, and the shooting of four students at Kent State by National Guardsmen during a demonstration made this stand out in relief. Many (including me) spent much time and energy demonstrating against the draft and considering alternatives to it. Indeed, I worked with David Harris (who later married Joan Baez, then worked with Allard Lowenstein, about whose death he wrote a book) to create a volunteer army. Ironically, the transition to a volunteer army made it easier for politicians to make policy regarding peace and war; the natural middle-class constituency that might have opposed foreign “adventures” was neutralized. It also led to less awareness and education about world problems and left the stage to emotional responses to these problems. The teach-in, a real and progressive aspect of the campus movements of the sixties, went by the wayside. The teach-ins sometimes brought in experts in the field, sometimes made use of students who had done research. The teach-in movement, so to speak, started as a result of the war in Vietnam and was instrumental in educating students, and whoever attended, to the issues involved. All in all, civic knowledge as well as civic involvement has suffered by its loss.

It may be odd to say, but it is unfortunate that the Vietnam War occurred at the same time as the civil rights revolution. While there were many idealists who opposed the war, too much of the time that opposition was driven by narrow self-interest. This was not true of the beginnings of the struggle for civil rights, and “struggle” is the right word to use. The young people who put themselves on the line for civil rights could not be said to be acting in immediate self-interest, though Tocqueville’s concept of “self-interest rightly understood” has resonance and is apt.

At first there was some effort to keep the two political phenomena distinct (witness Martin Luther King’s reluctance to put them together until rather late in the day), but in the end this proved to be impossible. There was just too much energy in each of these movements to keep them separate. The problem was that the Left embraced the idea that “peace” and “civil rights” were part and parcel of the same thing, a notion promoted by communists in the Movement, especially in the form of the W.E.B. Du Bois Clubs on urban campuses. This idea filtered down to the general student bodies and was solidified by the music of the time, which had connections to what came to be known as the “drug culture.” Moreover, the youth who did go to Vietnam became part of this culture and so the mixture became complete, though tension-laden.

The combination of drugs, opposition to the war in Vietnam, and the promotion of civil rights did two things. First, it brought incompatible constituencies to the Movement that ultimately could not work together and that had no future. Second, it made it possible and even encouraged the people who lived through this time to see themselves as going through a youthful “phase,” not as people who were going to build a political movement. The “hippie” phenomenon and its paradoxical celebration of individualism and communalism (often hijacked by various “gurus,” Charles Manson being the worst and most violent but not the only example) encouraged this attitude. Eventually, the Movement and its motivations came to be regarded as an ephemeral cultural phenomenon rather than an enduring political one. Its cultural aspects were denuded as time went by (the peace symbol became a favorite decoration for lampshades) and the political aspects disappeared. What remained were the sensibilities and sensitivities of the Movement, which informed the “social justice” policies that hold sway on campus today.

The beginnings of feminism (or women’s liberation, as it was called then) began to make itself felt in 1968 as well. Its development mirrors the evolution of Black Power. In this regard, a visit from the SDS Brooklyn College chapter made in the interest of solidarity to Mark Rudd, a political organizer and antiwar

activist known for his involvement with the Weather Underground, and the SDS chapter of Columbia, which had shut the university down, is illustrative.

One of the first things I remember noticing at Columbia was the “liberation” of the bathrooms in the Administration Building (which meant they had all been made “unisex”). I was surprised because the female members of the Brooklyn College contingent were enthusiastic about this, although I had never heard them talk about women’s liberation (they had evidently been talking about it among themselves for some time). In any case, my most vivid memory of this aspect of “liberation” is of men and women using the same bathrooms and the men standing at the urinals unable to urinate, despite feeling nature’s call.²

Another, very different memory of this visit comes to mind. Herbert Marcuse was there, holding a seminar on a piece he had just written entitled “Repressive Tolerance,” which was a critique of the John Stuart Mill position on freedom of thought and speech. I don’t remember everyone at that seminar, but I do remember that Mark Rudd and Abbie Hoffman were there. Hoffman argued that we need not afford the “power structure” the ability to say whatever they liked. They were by their nature exploitative and repressive of speech that needed to be articulated. Marcuse answered, and I have taken this answer to heart, by saying that Hoffman was right—except for speech in the universities, the only place in America where one could and should be able to speak and interact freely. (Sometimes I wonder if that is sufficient. On the one hand, I want speech to be completely free for everyone. On the other, I do not see why we have to take valuable time to discuss issues with white nationalists, Nazis, et al. I have never been able to come to a suitable response to this.)

And yet the upheavals also created widespread and endemic problems. University administrations have been deeply affected by the temperament of the 1960s, to the detriment of our students. From admissions to curriculum there is an emphasis on “diversity,” affirmative action, and identity politics, all stemming from the specific type of biased egalitarianism that transformed the universities some fifty years ago. More importantly, teaching has become a footnote to the academic experience, though many institutions tout teaching as their strength, and parents either do not know better or think that in our materialistic society having students interact with well-known scholars will

²This new development was driven home for me when SDS at Brooklyn College was having a party on a night I was supposed to see my old high school girlfriend. With great trepidation I called the party and asked if I could bring her and a few of her friends with me and was told that it would be okay. I was unprepared for what transpired. The SDS women at the party, who had unshaved legs and wore no makeup, were ignored by the men, who were attracted to the girls I had brought like moths to a light. I remember in particular the sour looks the SDS women gave my friends. Evidently nature (or something) could not be so easily repressed. This was my first direct encounter with feminism in the Movement.

bring them advantages. But the well-known scholars often cannot teach, and even if they can they are not available to students except in their senior year or as graduate students. And the education of students has been left more and more to quantitative and “scientific” pedagogies instead of to the art of teaching. The principle that undergirds this understanding is that anybody can teach if only given the proper mentorship and proper technologies. This is a fundamental mistake, that teaching too can be quantified and therefore evaluated through “instruments,” through “evaluations,” through any number of “objective” standards.

I do not mean to suggest that the problems of the pre-1968 past on campus should not have been addressed. I mean that they have been addressed in a way that makes the cure problematic at best. Nor do I think affirmative action is all bad. I think the laws, as opposed to the quotas that are too often applied, are sound. But the attitude that what came later is better than what was, simply because it came later and is therefore more “progressive,” is wrong as well as provincial. I suspect that in many cases the cure has been worse than the disease.