

The New Left in the Sixties: Political Philosophy or Philosophical Politics?

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Abstract

This paper analyzes what the New Left, a multi-faceted protest organization which emerged in the Sixties, was all about. It presents its slow evolution—from the Old Left to the New Left—its main organizations and the different stages it went through to become the main counter-power in the United States striving to transform American society. The paper also insists on the philosophical and political aspects which gave birth to the New Left, while showing to what extent it was different from the Old Left, mainly because it favored direct actions, deemed more effective by its members than time-consuming ideological debates.

Introduction

The fact that a New Left exists in the United States today (...) is the proof of a reality which manifests itself both in society at large and in the political arena. What this New Left is is more difficult to say, because there is very little unity between the various organizations, programs, and ideological statements which form the phenomenon usually referred to as ‘the Movement.’¹

According to Massimo Teodori, a historian and political scientist, it is particularly difficult to understand the American New Left which emerged in the Sixties. It is even more complicated to analyze it. Paradoxically enough, it also found it difficult to analyze it because of the numerous strategic and ideological changes it went through. The New Left is in fact a broad expression which included most progressive organizations attracting young Americans coming from middle-class backgrounds. Those organizations protested Washington politics and tried to give birth to a counter-society on a social, cultural, and political level. The New Left disappeared from the American political scene in the late Sixties and left a bitter feeling of underachievement when the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), one of the major students protest movements, disintegrated in 1969.

Over forty years have gone by since then, and none of the projects or ideals of the New Left which had been listed in its manifesto, the *Port Huron Statement* (1962), has become reality. Although the legacy of the New Left is meager, people can see what it achieved by having a look at the remains it has given to the next generations. Most of them are ideological and political. They enable people to better understand what this period was all about and the political shifts that the Western world is currently going through, or the transformations it will face in a not-too-distant future. The New Left was the result of a strong desire from young people to change the world.

Any political movement or organization whose goal is to take the opposing view of the established policies has to act like this. What are the reasons behind the emergence of the multi-faceted New Left which tried to turn the American political scene upside down and inside out between 1960 and 1972? What are the major steps which led to its birth? Is the American New Left part and parcel of a certain political and philosophical progressive tradition? What are the main differences between the “Old” Left and “New” Left? To what extent did the New Left represent a new potent political trend? Is the American New Left part and parcel of a certain political and philosophical progressive tradition?

¹ Massimo Teodori, *The New Left: a Documentary History*, The Bobbs-Merrill Company: Indianapolis, New York, 1969, p. 3.

Towards The New Left: From the Old To The New

The post-war years were difficult years for the American left. The West had won the war against fascism and Nazism. In this period which carried many uncertainties for the future of the world, some left-wing groups could get organized to denounce the way the war had ended. A favorable period for left-wing ideology was possible. A great number of countries had indeed embraced left-wing ideas: a socialist government was elected in Austria by 1946—it was to remain in power until 1966—Great Britain disavowed Winston Churchill and elected Clement Attlee with a large majority in June 1945, Hungary fell into the Communists' hands in 1947, Poland also elected left-wing leaders, Edvard Benes took over Czechoslovakia in 1945, Josip Broz (Tito) came to power in Yugoslavia, and France entered the Fourth Republic, with socialist President Vincent Auriol in 1947. In other words, a large part of the world's electorate seemed to be receptive to left-wing ideologies.

The Communist Party of America took advantage of such a situation. Contrary to the CPA, which became the main left-wing political organization, the Socialist Party of Eugene Debs painfully tried to survive on the political scene. The situation was not the best for the CPA: although it had officially emerged in 1919, it remained a sort of lunatic fringe. The CPA went through some major difficulties because it was perceived as Moscow's propaganda instrument spreading all over the United States, as the Kremlin informed American Communists on the strategy to adopt through its New York-based office in Union Square. Adapting a Marxist-Leninist ideology to a country like the United States was no easy task. A growing number of American People, who considered themselves hard-core Communists, were convinced that the social, cultural, political, and strategic differences between the two countries could be wiped out. When the social situation became tense in the United States, some citizens even believed that the Soviet system was effective and that Washington should imitate what Moscow was doing. Such rivalries came to an end during World War II, at least for a while, since both countries had common interests and common enemies; they started again after 1945 and communist sympathizers in the United States were once again ostracized.

The main bone of contention between the sympathy some Americans might have for Soviet ideals and the American realities was Marxist-Leninist ideology, considered a real religion by its partisans and sympathizers. Marxist theory is not a philosophy as such. Indeed, it was even opposed to any kind of philosophy, mainly Hegel's idealist philosophy. Marx does not study Man in his most abstract sense, but what he calls the "real man," who can be defined through his actions and determined by the economic and social realities. Solving all the philosophical problems necessarily implies going through a science of man's history, and first of all through an analysis of economics. Still, the science of economics does not only aim at understanding the world, it wants to turn it into a classless society in which free sovereign workers might live. Marx also transforms Charles Fourier's utopian socialism into scientific socialism.

The fundamental aspect of Marxism is to unify scientific theory and revolutionary practice: it links a philosophy—historical dialectical materialism—to a science of society and of its economic structure, and a political doctrine—scientific socialism. The expression "Marxist philosophy" may seem paradoxical, since Marxism defines itself as the end of all philosophies. Consequently, Marxism denounces the image of the philosopher contemplating the world and interpreting it because in the end he takes it for granted and justifies its existence as a given fact. According to Marxist criticism, this philosophy does not explain anything because it does not consider "real man." Yet, historical materialism can explain what this philosophy is all about. Historical materialism sees the world globally and in concrete terms. In such a world, the surrounding conditions determine the philosopher, as any other individual, although he is not aware of them. Though Marxism tries to explain all philosophical currents, it is also a philosophy since it tries to interpret the world.²

This philosophy is materialistic, dialectical, and historical. It is materialistic because it posits that the interpretation of the world derives from an elaborated scientific rational study based on some objectively determinable facts. It is dialectical because it does not find a spontaneous harmony between man, society and the world. Some contradictions exist between individual interest and general interest, between the passions that individuals or social groups can feel, and reason and scientific knowledge.

²Thomas Sowell, *Marxism: Philosophy and Economics*, New York: Quill, 1985.

In other words, man must struggle against Nature on a regular basis. These contradictions, which create deep tensions, are the driving forces of progress, for they encourage man to overcome obstacles and give birth to new realities. As a result, pessimism and optimism have no grip on Marxism. Finally, this philosophy is also historical and as such, it differentiates itself from idealism and ordinary materialism. Contrary to idealism, for which man can escape determinism through his living conditions, this philosophy thinks that man, because of his actions, is no longer capable of breaking the tight bonds he has developed with Nature. Consequently, man is determined by natural conditions, but especially by social conditions which can be both theoretical—religious and moral—and practical, *i.e.*, economic and socioeconomic. Man is alienated although he is not aware of it. Marxist philosophy is also different from ordinary materialism because the future of man does not depend on Nature and natural evolution only. Man is a social human-being in the making, working hard to have the upper hand over his living conditions, which will enable him to be really free. Therefore, this philosophy relies on an accurate analysis of any historical situation, as well as a scientific approach of economics and society.

The relationship between man and Nature is fundamental: through hard work, man will be able to survive to go beyond the state of nature. At that stage, men are involved in determined relationships of production which depend on three elements: natural conditions, production capabilities, and the organization and division of labor. These elements constitute what is most commonly referred to as the productive forces of a determined society. Marx mainly analyzes the shift from an artisanal agricultural society to a capitalist society based on technological development. The craftsman owned the tools he used to perform a highly skilled task, which became unnecessary because state-of-the-art machines could do the same thing more rapidly and more effectively. Thus, the very rich were the only ones able to acquire these expensive machines. The craftsman could not compete anymore and got into financial trouble as mass production lowered the cost of most manufactured goods.

The farmer faced the same situation: either he had to sweat it out by working harder and harder to survive, or he did not have any other option but to leave his farm because he could not compete with mechanization. Capitalists, the only ones owning the means of production, paid their workers in exchange for their work. The profits made by the capitalist derived from his employees' labor and his profit margin comes from the difference between what the worker has produced during his day's work and the salary he is given. As a result, wealth is to be found among a limited number of people as in any capitalist society. The proletarian, who is aware that the profits made by the capitalist are the result of his hard work, realizes that he is exploited by the bourgeoisie. This awareness is the basis of the class struggle whose historical driving force is revolution. This strategy will make the workers' economic emancipation possible through the socialization of the means of production. The end of the division between ownership and work gives birth to the communist society freed from the class struggle. This transformation will become real, however, once political power is taken by the proletariat.

Indeed, Marx shows that the State is not above classes to serve the general interest, it is nothing but an instrument helping the ruling class: elections are a lure enabling the bourgeoisie to safeguard a pseudo-democracy while making sure it will remain in office and control the political debate. The role of the state is to contain social strife, which explains why it tries to defend a class society because it is part of it. If the revolution puts an end to class division, the state will automatically become useless and it will be forced to disappear. However, the acts of resistance of the bourgeoisie, aimed at fighting against the proletariat's desire to seize political power, encourage all proletarians to implement the dictatorship of the proletariat whose role is to prevent a counter-revolution so as to organize a classless society.³

This is the general context in which Marxist theory developed in the United States in the Twenties after the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. Because American society was truly a capitalist society during these prosperity years, a great number of observers had thought that the American working class might have become interested in Marxism. Such was not the case, however. Indeed, contrary to European workers, American workers mostly enjoyed their working and living conditions, which led to a lack of interest in Marxist ideas as some workers even showed contempt for Marxism. American society was not really the best place for its development. Did it have some exceptional features that made the development of left-wing ideas impossible?⁴ The people, who were convinced of American exceptionalism, put forward the idea that Americans had established a consensus at the sociopolitical and ideological levels which prevented Soviet theories from spreading in the United States.

³Duncan K. Foley, *Understanding Capital: Marx's Economic Theory*, Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1986.

⁴Seweryn Bialer and Sophia Sluzar, eds., *Sources of Contemporary Radicalism*, Boulder: Westview, 1977, pp. 31-149.

For some historians, exceptionalism was only a pretext which was not based on anything tangible. According to them, three main reasons could explain the reasons why socialism was not particularly attractive: Marxist ideas were not very popular both among the working class and American society at large, the groups advocating the transformation of society did not play an important role on the political scene, and there was no political party in the United States defending the workers' rights and acting hand in hand with unions to influence political decisions. The reasons why socialism could not make it in the United States were not new. In that respect, two examples are striking. In the 19th century, Alexis de Tocqueville had declared that American citizens had not become equal but were born equal and enjoyed a status of landowner whose only concern consisted in defending their own interests. As a result, they were not in a position to understand those revolutionary ideas which were likely to ruin their existence. Gus Tyler also believed that the reasons why socialism was not successful were due to a strong nationalist sentiment that was very popular even within the working class.⁵ Some major ideological, social, and economic structural changes were the only ones able to change the situation.

The Thirties were better years for communist ideas. Indeed, the Roaring Twenties ended with the Wall Street Crash of October 1929 and the Great Depression which came in its wake showed to many that Marxist theories were right because the capitalist world was falling apart. A great number of workers, as well as a great number of people who had grown disillusioned with capitalism, joined the Communist Party. More than ever, Communists could express themselves and give their points of view on social and political life. The CPA's membership was not its main asset: it also attracted the intelligentsia, and therefore became more credible and respectable in the eyes of public opinion. Moreover, Marxist predictions had become plausible as they were no longer regarded as wild flights of fancy coming from hard-core Soviet agents. Another element reinforced this new perception that Americans had of Communism. As fascism had become increasingly popular in Germany, as well as Francoism in Spain, American public opinion considered Communism differently because Moscow had decided to fight the dictators who were trying to subjugate Europe. However, when the Soviet Union signed a pact with Germany on August 23, 1939, the members and sympathizers of the CPA decided to leave their party. The situation changed again when Germany invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941 as Moscow became the new ally of the United States. The Soviet Union became popular again as Americans were impressed by the courage and bravery of the Red Army.

After 1945, the Soviet Union fell into disgrace again. The diplomatic relations between the two countries became tense and the Cold War was looming. A wave of paranoia swept the United States and propelled Republican Senator Joe McCarthy of Wisconsin under the spotlight. The American population feared that the Soviet Union might invade the country, which led millions of Americans to have a Manichean image of the world: Communism was evil and capitalism was good. McCarthy fought against any person suspected of trying to overthrow the American government and its institutions. Socialist and communist sympathizers rapidly became McCarthy's targets of choice. Juries were set up to determine whether these people were real Communists about to destroy America. These juries included the most conservative Congressmen. They tried to diagnose the degree of communist contagion of anyone testifying before them and worked under the control of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).

According to Democratic Representative Francis E. Walter from Pennsylvania, American communists had been strongly influenced by *Operation Abolition*, a movie produced by HUAC, showing that some American people intended to overthrow the government and all the juries.⁶ Todd Gitlin, one of the charismatic figures of the New Left, thought that *Operation Abolition* was nothing but a hoax as it presented only a biased image of Communism, an ideology that had to be eradicated once and for all. A great number of people testified under oath before HUAC. These hearings had been made possible by Truman's Executive Order 9835 of March 21, 1947, which allowed HUAC to check the loyalty of all the people working for the federal government. On May 27, 1953, Eisenhower even enlarged the scope of HUAC's investigations: people suspected of being homosexuals or alcoholics were asked to testify in order to show that they were good American patriots in spite of these problems.⁷ These hearings or loyalty oaths, already used during the first Red Scare after 1917, almost ended the

⁵John Laslett and S.M. Lipset, eds., *Failure of a Dream? Essays in the History of American Radicalism*, New York: Doubleday, 1974, p. 578.

⁶Mark Kitchell, *Berkeley in the Sixties* (documentary), Berkeley: University of California, 1990.

⁷Ellen Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism: a Brief History with Documents*, Boston, New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1994, pp. 151-54.

same way as most people, even those who denied their being Communist or communist sympathizers, were nonetheless found guilty. These were political trials during which those who did not share the opinion of the jury were instantly found guilty. If the people dodged the questions, by invoking the First or the Fifth Amendments to the Constitution, they were sentenced to pay a fine or go to prison.⁸ Most hearings were Kafkaesque: refusing to answer the jury meant that the people were guilty despite the provisions of the Fifth Amendment. Sometimes, some fake evidence was used to make the suspects react or confess that they were communist sympathizers. The jury decision could not be appealed in any case even when fake evidence and fake witnesses were used. Some lives, families and careers were ruined but that did not matter much to HUAC.

However, these anti-communist practices could be left aside, at least for a while, under specific circumstances. Indeed, the right could join forces with the left when national interests were at stake, during military conflicts for example. A sentiment of patriotism could be felt between WWI and the Korean War (1950-1953). On these occasions, the American left was undecided and divided between the nationalists and those who favored military intervention. Similarly, the American middle-class, receptive to the message of the Democratic Party, was not particularly willing to take part directly or indirectly in these revolutionary activities. Thus, there was a sharp break between those who were still convinced that overthrowing the government was feasible and those who were convinced that it was necessary to protect national interests under such circumstances. The people who favored Communism and revolution did not really know which political line to follow. There were two options: either they moved to the right, which was much appreciated at the time, or they moved to the left. By doing so, they made their positions more specific while disconcerting their political groups and endangering their chances of lasting on the political scene because of these never-ending ideological changes.

After Franklin Delano Roosevelt came to power on March 4, 1933, the Communist Party gave up some of its revolutionary ideals, which enabled the party to survive in politics. Such a strategic decision discredited it in the eyes of its most dedicated members as they could not understand such a political shift. This lack of political consistency came up at a very delicate time and had some serious repercussions on the party as its members felt ignored and betrayed. As a result, they thought that no other radical organization would be ready to take its inspiration from the Communist Party, since its leaders were incapable of sticking to a political line over a long period of time.

Such ideological and strategic disagreements were not good for the popularity of the party, either among its members or in the eyes of American public opinion, which already considered it a threat to individual liberties. The party found it difficult to survive in American politics as an increasing number of its members intended to leave it. They were convinced that going back to the roots of Communism was no longer possible. For Peggy Dennis, the Communist Party was too doctrinarian and unable to implement its political program aimed at the transformation of the United States.⁹ It found it hard to implement revolutionary strategies and considered that the approach of the Democratic Party, which wanted to reshape society while keeping a capitalist economy, was rather effective. Thus, the right wing of the party, which was more moderate, viewed the revolution from a democratic angle—*i.e.*, wiping the slate clean so as to reconstruct democracy while preserving capitalism—while the left wing favored revolutionary actions. Such ideological divergences weakened one of the main opposition parties in the United States. It was a historical moment which left a political vacuum that a new radical political force, more modern and more idealistic, could fill.

McCarthyism tried to take advantage of the national and international situation which was rather hostile to left-wing rhetoric to purge the country from its most subversive elements. McCarthy's favorite hunting grounds were the State Department, universities, intellectual, scientific, and artistic circles.¹⁰ He prevented Liberals from taking part in meetings organized under the aegis of the Communist Party, for fear they might be attracted by its Marxist message and be tempted to join the party. These Liberals, who favored—and still do—more individual liberties, more social progress, state intervention to help the underprivileged, the poor, and those left behind, might have used American Marxists to reach their political goals, as they enjoyed more freedom to express themselves.

⁸Marie-France Toinet, *La Chasse aux Sorcières : le Maccarthysme (1947-1957)*, Bruxelles : Editions Complexe, 1984, p. 54.

⁹*The Autobiography of an American Communist: a Personal View of Political Life, 1925-1975*, Westport: Laurence Hill and Co., 1977, pp. 49-113.

¹⁰Richard M. Fried, *Nightmare in Red: the McCarthy Era in Perspective*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 3-37.

American liberals could similarly pursue their political goals while helping those who could not exercise their constitutional right of freedom of speech. The Cold War sped up the arms race and urged both scientists and industrialists to intensify their work so as to be better than the Soviet Union and keep it under control. American pride was severely affected when the Soviet Union exploded its first nuclear bomb on August 29, 1949. A growing number of Americans thought that some of their fellow-countrymen had betrayed their country and sent documents about the bomb to the Reds.¹¹ The United States, more determined than ever, kept working on bombs, and exploded its first H bomb on November 1, 1952. On January 12, 1954, Eisenhower announced what was to be known as his “massive retaliation” policy, designed to deter the Soviets from using nuclear weapons: the country was ready to use a great number of nuclear weapons if it were attacked, as well as its key allies—by the Soviet Union or any of its allies. The balance of terror was under way as too many events had taken place since Churchill delivered his Iron Curtain speech in Fulton, Missouri, on March, 5, 1946. The time had come for a new political current to emerge to challenge the established order.

Emergence of the New Left: A New Political Force in American Politics

That period, which offered a rich multi-faceted context of economic prosperity and ideological crackdown, saw the progressive decline of the American left. As Teodori put it, it was losing more and more ground and the political scene looked like a real “no man’s land” for this type of ideology. The Community Party whose membership amounted to 75,000 in 1945 had 3,000 members only in 1958.¹² The left-wing press was also experiencing serious problems when *The Daily Worker*, the major communist newspaper whose publication began in 1924, published its last issue on January 13, 1958. *Partisan Review*, a radical review, very popular in the Thirties, was the shadow of its former self, *Monthly Review*, an independent Marxist journal established in 1949 and published in New York, attracted only intellectual readers specialized in Marxist studies.¹³ The days of the Old Left were numbered. The situation was much better for the paternalistic and religious right. Paradoxically enough, its conservative image was less frightening than before for many Americans as some organizations such as the John Birch Society, set up in 1958, or the American Nazi Party, founded by George Lincoln Rockwell in 1959, attracted many new members, except in intellectual circles where they were not appreciated.

As the old traditional left was fading away, a new, more active and dynamic political organization emerged to give a new impetus to left-wing ideas. Contrary to the “Old” Left, it did not view the world in a binary way, nor did it think in terms of past and present. It considered that the two-party system was unnecessary in politics because there were only two social classes: those who oppressed and those who felt oppressed. The main thinkers of what was to become the New Left, Charles Wright Mills, Paul Goodman, Herbert Marcuse, to name just a few, rejected this simplistic vision. They thought that social tensions had different origins: the working class was ready to confront the authorities, and so were other silent minorities. SANE (Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy), a pacifist movement which protested against nuclear proliferation, and the Civil Rights Movement, were the two groups which linked the New Left to the Old Left.¹⁴

A great number of students went to the South to help the black community because they felt sympathy for it. They joined some organizations such as CORE, SNCC, or SCLC. A major event made the New Left—more precisely Berkeley students who were to become really active in the fall of 1964—sensitive to what was going on out there. Caryl Chessman, accused of robbery and rape, was executed on May 2, 1960. His case attracted worldwide attention and he became one of the symbols used by the movement fighting to ban capital punishment. Several Berkeley students, who had joined SLATE, a student protest movement, even demonstrated in front of the San Quentin State Prison where Chessman awaited execution on Death Row. Public opinion also became sensitive to the case and some politicians even tried to have him acquitted. These examples, which might seem insignificant, showed that something was happening and that new ideas were about to come up because young people responded more to social realities.

¹¹Fried, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-23 and Toinet, *op. cit.*, pp. 105-16.

¹²*Op.cit.*, p. 6.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁴Godfrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time: From World War II to Nixon, What Happened and Why*, New York: Vintage Books, 1978, pp. 186-89.

Surprising as it may seem, the United States was not the place where the expression “New Left” appeared for the first time. It was used for the first time in Great Britain in the Fifties by young socialists who wished to give a more radical impetus to the traditional political program of the Labour Party.

They published a document entitled *New Left Review* in 1960 that the American student community really enjoyed. Some influential intellectuals took a stand. Paul Goodman, for example, denounced American society in his article entitled “Growing Up Absurd,” published in 1959 in *Commentary*, a liberal newspaper. Others followed suit, such as William Appleman Williams or C. Wright Mills. Several Berkeley history students like Lloyd Gardner, Lee Baxendall, Saul Landau, or James Weinstein joined Williams, who had already published “Go Left or Go Under,” a left-wing article in *Liberation* in April 1957, and *Studies on the Left*, a critical review denouncing American society. Mills, who was professor at Columbia University, thought that students were an exploited class just like any member of the working class. He wrote several books criticizing American society, such as *The New Men of Power* (1948) and *White Collar* (1951). His criticisms were radical and sharp as revolution seemed to be the only solution to cure the country. America was not Czarist Russia, however. That was the reason why these leftists had to attract more sympathizers to give more scope to their protest. Although John K. Galbraith had written *The Affluent Society* in 1958, a growing number of Americans felt disappointed and bitter. The American Dream had turned into a nightmare.

The New Left, as well as the whole radical movement in the Sixties, whose main aim was to go down to the roots of problems, while differentiating itself from what had existed before, was not founded on a clear political basis making it possible to justify the real nature of its actions. Therefore, it had to take its inspiration, more or less rapidly, from the ideology and the means of action of the Marxist-based Old Left. The New Left was very close to a political tradition favoring decentralization and non-leadership, as it was done in some organizations inspired by populist, libertarian and anarchist ideas. This tradition is somewhat different from the one used by movements resorting to some principles influenced by some centralized and directive policies, sometimes Marxist-based, insofar as the target of their direct actions is the implementation of an alternative and decentralized counter-power more than the conquest of a centralized and bureaucratic form of power. In other words, these activists who believed in this political ideal intended to replace the established order by some democratic structures giving power and clout to the grassroots.

The New Leftists’ political commitment was the result of their personal experiences, as well as the outcome of their deepest feelings influenced by some moral or spiritual ideas. This commitment was by no means motivated by some specific knowledge about socialism or political theories. This lack of knowledge of political history which offered an alternative to Marxism and American liberalism, while trying to aim at the entire decentralization of political power, was one of the main flaws of the New Left. This ignorance can explain the reasons why the New Left was not ready, from a theoretical point of view, to defend its instinctive policy based on direct actions when several of its members, willing to embrace Marxist-Leninist ideas, considered taking control of the political organization. Surprising as it may seem, the American New Left knew very little about the direct actions of the British New Left, which had benefited from a renewal of libertarian ideologies in the late Fifties, contrary to some other left-wing movements which had emerged in the world at the same period of time. It goes without saying that some American activists were well-informed about the anarchist and union-oriented tradition of the labor movement in the United States whose main spearhead was the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). By 1965, some SDSers joined the IWW mainly for sentimental reasons.¹⁵

The protest movement of the Sixties did not emerge by accident in order to give a new impetus to libertarian ideas. Nonviolence was at its core. Although other social movements had resorted to nonviolence in politics, the New Left gave it a greater importance because its members had been strongly influenced by Gandhism and its spiritual and political dimension.¹⁶ This current had given some credibility to a political movement using nonviolence to defend its rights so as to be respected by the British crown. It inspired most New Leftists in America. Protest in the Sixties was mostly nonviolent and libertarian up until 1968.

¹⁵Kirpatrick Sale, *SDS*, New York: Random House, 1974, pp. 283-84.

¹⁶Robert Cooney and Helen Michalowski, *The Power of the People: Active Nonviolence in the United States*, Culver City, California: Peace Press, 1977.

As the activists did not defend, as they should have done, the tradition of social and political change which went hand in hand with a libertarian and nonviolent approach, the New Left embraced Marxism, a political ideology that was both more traditional and materialistic, rather than nonviolence regarded as too spiritual. Moral and religious values have never been compatible with politics, and neither liberalism nor Marxism has taken them seriously.

This political, spiritual, and moral approach by the Marxist and liberal left has always been viewed with suspicion and contempt. The trend goes back to Machiavel and Hobbes, for example, who linked the notion of social contract to the one of absolute power, and to the very beginnings of modern political theory for which there were moral, spiritual and political problems. During the Sixties, the New Left adopted a different position both in terms of theory and in terms of direct actions when it decided to focus on these problems. However, a great number of members felt uncomfortable when a speech they would have liked to be more pragmatic, abounded in spiritual connotations. Consequently, it is quite logical that a Marxist rhetoric became increasingly popular in organizations such as SDS or Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) that intellectuals had joined. It eventually became their only source of inspiration. Not all the protest movements in the Sixties were as theory-oriented as SDS and SNCC. Indeed, the movements, which wanted to confront the authorities on the countercultural scene, used a rhetoric influenced by spiritual currents like Zen Buddhism.

The New Left could resort to direct actions to convey its message. Still, it was mainly its diversity which attracted the interest of the public, as any American citizen could inevitably find a theme he or she was interested in in the various organizations which had embraced the New Left philosophy. The most dynamic organizations were the Civil Rights Movement, advocating nonviolent resistance to defend the rights of the black community. Its main groups were CORE (Congress of Racial Equality), set up in 1943, famous for the Freedom Rides it organized in the South, Martin Luther King's Southern Leadership Conference (SCLC) whose role consisted in making sure that the Supreme Court rulings, according to which segregation in transportation was unconstitutional, were respected. SCLC urged blacks to participate in politics and fought for racial integration. SNCC was also a nonviolent organization until 1966, when Stokely Carmichael turned violent as he opted for Black Power. The Black Panther Party (BPP), set up by Bobby Seale and Huey Newton in Oakland in October 1966, became the spearhead of black protest.

Despite the numerous strategic changes, black activism went through; it made American public opinion even more sensitive to the evils and malfunctioning of American society. Although it partly succeeded in transforming the United States, it nonetheless influenced the actions of the other protest movements which emerged at the time. Women were one of them: they played an important role in the New Left, mainly in the mid-Sixties. They wanted to be appreciated for what they were and considered human beings equal to men, and not as sexual objects living in a man's world. NOW (National Organization for Women), founded in October 1966 by Betty Friedan—author of *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963—was the main active women's group, with 3,000 members in 1969, 5,000 in 1970, and over 10,000 in 1971. Three other groups were also active within the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM): Women's International Conspiracy from Hell (WITCH), mainly composed of revolutionary women, the Redstockings, a more moderate organization, and Valerie Solanas' Society for Cutting Up Men (SCUM), a radical organization calling, purely and simply, for the complete extermination of men! Although the WLM was rather diversified in its direct actions, it did not succeed in demasculinizing American society.¹⁷

The Gay Movement was also involved in sexually-oriented protest. The Gay Liberation Front (GLF), set up in July 1969, fought for Gay Power: its members wanted the homosexual community to be able to live freely on the national level and not only in cities like New York, San Francisco, or Los Angeles. Still, they found it very difficult to make a great number of conservative people change their minds about their community.¹⁸ Ethnic minorities represented the last major influential group within the New Left. Indians mainly used the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC), influenced by black protest, and the American Indian Movement (AIM) to defend their rights—AIM occupied Alcatraz in November 1969. Chicanos joined the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC), set up by Cesar Chavez in 1966. 58,000 Chicanos had joined UFWOC when it joined the AFL-CIO to become the United Farm Workers Union (UFWU).

¹⁷Myra Marx Ferree, *Controversy and Coalition: the New Feminist Movement across Three Decades of Change*, New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1994.

¹⁸Jennifer Smith, ed., *The Gay Rights Movement*, San Diego, California: Greenhaven Press, 2003.

Ethnic minorities were not able to last very long on the protest scene because of a lack of structure, cohesion, and collaboration. All these organizations, which defended a large variety of interests, came to be known as the Movement. Despite the numerous tensions and rivalries within them, they represented a strong counter-political power. Their common denominator was the countercultural movement in which psychedelic drugs, rock music, and the underground press had become the new means of expression enabling the participants, mostly Hippies, to distance themselves from the materialistic society of the time.

Americans remember the New Left more because of its spiritual commitment, its marches like the March on Washington to End the War in Vietnam, organized by SDS on April 17, 1966, its multi-colored human be-ins, or its remains like People's Park in Berkeley, than its Marxist ideology or the participatory democracy it tried to implement on the national level.

Although American society was strongly criticized at that time, the Sixties also had some positive aspects, more positive than what most protesters were willing to admit: poverty was declining, women got more independent, racism was not as rampant as before, or so it seemed, the black middle class developed, its resources went up more rapidly than for whites, and an increasing number of black students could get to college. Moreover, American foreign policy had not evolved much: the presence of the United States could be felt throughout the world: in Iran, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, and Vietnam, to name just the most sensitive areas. Therefore, the situation was not as new as some might have thought. The New Left was different from the Old Left because it was opposed to any political and philosophical theory, considered to be time-consuming by most of its members. The time had come for a new type of protest: direct actions. Another major difference was that New Leftists were much younger than Old Leftists as very few of them were born before the late Thirties. The emergence of this new movement, composed of young educated people, particularly dynamic and determined to transform the American political system from top to bottom, was not only going to change the radical tradition in the United States, but it was to offer a political alternative by reorganizing the whole American political scene until the early Seventies.

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