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The Old New Left: Student Radicalism in the 1930s

November 7, 2017 by Nulle Terre Sans Seigneur

Ho Chi Minh! Ho Chi Minh!

There has long prevailed a certain exceptionalism about the 1960s. It all went so well with the decade prior, with *Father Knows Best* on the air... and then, the Yippies are nominating a pig for President, "free love" reigns freely indeed, and the Jews sell America out in 1965. Except really big this time around.

It wasn't that exceptional, not even the youthful vitality. For there was a student radical movement contemporaneous (sometimes collaborating with) the New Deal some 30 years before. It has been swept under the dust and much of it thrown into the memory hole, but it's a fascinating little episode. It's the link between Old and New Left, as these terms tend to be used. Grounded on class analysis, but with very strong concerns for racial equality and *fighting fascism*.

Common wisdom is that America could never swallow the social-democratic pill like Europe. Yet in an interview with former American Student Union (ASU) leader Joseph P. Lash, he confided that (<https://web.archive.org/web/20130304220635/http://newdeal.feri.org/students/lash.htm>). FDR was "accomplishing social reforms beyond the dreams of most of the Socialists of Europe."

(Lash discusses in his interview that his conversion to radical politics came proximately because of liberals like Adlai Stevenson and John Dewey, adding a data point to the thesis that the liberal is a useful idiot for communist subversion.)

There was also a Communist-Socialist split. The Communist party line having moved on to the Popular Front strategy, meant becoming accelerationist cheerleaders for Roosevelt both in terms of domestic policy and of advocating a "collective security" pact with the Soviet Union to encircle fascism. The ASU's policymaking organs were dominated by the Young Communist League (YCL), so they promptly followed. The Roosevelt administration swallowed it up too, as we shall see.

Hal Draper, in his review of the era published in 1965 (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1965/xx/student30s.htm>), as a first-hand observer and sympathizer ultimately concludes that the alumni of the 30s student movement (ASU, SLID, NSL) were all present afterward "wherever anything was stirring in the labor movement or in liberal campaigns, wherever there was action for progressive causes."

One of the major figures who went on to become a liberal muckraker for the New York Post, James Wechsler, would admit (<https://web.archive.org/web/20130704124539/http://newdeal.feri.org/students/asu10.htm>), half a century later in 1986, that there existed a parallel between Norman Thomas in 1932 and Eugene McCarthy in 1968. He still tried to pathetically distance himself from New Left antics by positioning himself as the sensible “democratic humanist.”

Now, the two main players in this movement were the NSL (National Student League) and SLID (Student League for Industrial Democracy). The former was a front for the YCL (Young Communist League). The latter was the renamed version of the Intercollegiate League for Industrial Democracy (from 1933 onward), the youth division of LID, the LID having early champions like Jack London and Upton Sinclair.

The movement was based primarily in New York, and its strongholds were CCNY and Columbia University. The former had more kikes in its ranks, the latter more WASPs. Columbia then was also under the supervision of Nicholas Murray Butler, one of the arch-globalists of the 20th century, who nonetheless didn't like what the NSL and SLID were doing.

NSL and SLID would join forces with liberal fellow travelers to create the ASU (American Student Union) in late 1935.

Many ASU members would also be involved in the so-called “student brain of the New Deal,” the American Youth Congress (AYC).

Its epithet was not coincidental. One of its organizers, Abbott Simon, recalled in 1986 about a sit-in strike in front of the White House in March 1937, violating their permit for a moving parade. After being arrested, *he was bailed out on Roosevelt's orders*:

That afternoon a number of Youth Congress leaders met with President Roosevelt, who was amused by the incident, told everyone of having been arrested five times in one day in Austria when, as a Harvard student he had gone on a summer mountain-climbing trip to the Alps, and directed Tom Corcoran, (“Tommy the Cork”) one of his key New Deal assistants, to call up the police and arrange for our release.

“Tommy the Cork,” for fuck's sake. If that isn't gangsta, what is?

That wasn't all. Simon goes on to describe (<https://web.archive.org/web/20130704124455/http://newdeal.feri.org/students/asu18.htm>), the many insider perks they got at the White House:

These early years were years in which we were closely allied to and on the whole supportive of the New Deal. We were friendly and dealt on intimate terms with members of the Cabinet, with Aubrey Williams, the head of the National Youth Administration and above all with Mrs. Roosevelt. For many of us, the “icing” on the cake, were such rare experiences as being invited to stay at the White House (to save hotel expenses!), having our meals there frequently, sitting in the Presidential Box at the opening of Congress, etc. (then returning to the office, afterwards in black tie and tux, to run the mimeograph machine!)

Joseph P. Lash, in his ASU pamphlet *Toward a “closed shop” on the campus* (<https://archive.org/details/TowardAclosedShopOnTheCampus>) (1936), confidently proclaims that the “traditions of American life are on our side,” and that the “instincts of the American people are with us.”

These instincts and traditions being “academic freedom,” “democratization of the university” and “elimination of fascist ideologies and groups [among American students].” Democratization of the university entails, among other things, the creation of a system of student and instructor-elected kangaroo courts for greater democratic responsiveness. As for the college administration, they are alright when they “prevent the patrioteers from turning our universities into breeding grounds of fascism” (patrioteers being the ROTC), but otherwise they’re verboten. Notably, Lash also voices a commitment to “to claim allegiance to complete racial equality.”

Now, the initial antiwar stance would quickly be muted when among other events the Spanish Civil War broke out, and in order to get on the good side of the Roosevelt administration. Lash in *The student in the post-Munich world* (<https://archive.org/details/TheStudentInThePost-munichWorld>) (1938) stated that “had American foreign policy been a force for peace yesterday, America would not be in such great peril of war today.” In a world “imperiled by fascist aggression,” American foreign policy must be an ally of “the popular forces throughout the world that are struggling for peace and democracy.” Humanitarian aid for Spain is a must. All in all, he’s on board with the progressive Secretary of State Cordell Hull.

The NSL’s *Building a militant student movement: program of the National Student League* (<https://archive.org/details/BuildingAMilitantStudentMovementProgramOfTheNationalStudentLeague>) (1934). Taking their definition of fascism straight out of Georgi Dimitrov (and demonstrating their Marxist-Leninist affiliation), they call fascism “the open and most brutal dictatorship of capital.” At the same time, they decry the New Deal’s corporatism because at the time the party line was in the “Third Period” phase that social democrats and reformists were “social fascists” (probably the truest thing the communists ever said) before they went for the Popular Front and did a 180 a few years later. Nevertheless, they state that the path to a classless society involves agitating for unemployment insurance. But, even more pertinently: “The fight to defeat fascism is a fight to preserve the right of students to free speech, press and organization. Failure to wage an uncompromising struggle against every manifestation of fascist ideology and organization is identical with toleration for the suppression of academic freedom.” The fight against fascism is the fight for free speech, comrades! Where have I heard that before? Ah yes, woke centrists and their allies.

The NSL leaves some friendly advice on practicing entryism, too:

Another extremely important question to raise and resolve is — what agencies we can employ to reach the students and to gain our demands. Student government — is it powerful and can we influence it? Campus clubs — French Club, Mathematics Club, Chess Club, Discussion Clubs — have we any influence in them? Let’s join them and win them to us, at least on one specific demand. Raise the issue of fascism in the German Clubs. School newspaper, — how does one get on the staff? Will they publish letters and articles that we write? Faculty — are there any sympathetic men among them, who will speak for us and help us in any other way?

Raise the issue of fascism in the German Clubs. OK.

We also have the *Handbook of the Student League for Industrial Democracy: history, program, organizational guide* (<https://archive.org/details/HandbookOfTheStudentLeagueForIndustrialDemocracyHistoryProgram>) (1935), which is meant to give us all the hot tips on turning the campus into the next Kronstadt Petrograd Soviet. Other than the obligatory nod to students having the right to “think, discuss, assemble, and act freely and without hindrance from college administrations”...

It is important that you hijack the student press to promote your activities:

It is imperative that more and more L.I.D. members secure places on the staffs of student papers. Publicity is frequently begrudgingly given or denied to the activity of the L.I.D., and to the news of nation and community which might jolt the consciousness of the students. The Syracuse Daily Orange, Columbia Spectator, Wyoming Branding Iron, Chicago Maroon, Vasaar Miscellany News and other student papers have done excellent work at times along this line.

That you redirect patriotic holidays for your own purposes:

The use of patriotic holidays, May Day, Armistice Day, and special community events which have a class significance should not be overlooked. Often the student group can take the initiative in stimulating the unions, progressive churches, the Socialist Party Local, or other groups to capitalize those occasions, instead of letting them go by default to the American Legion, D.A.R., Chamber of Commerce, or other reactionary groups.

Harry Magdoff, a participant in the scene, expressed his contempt for American students' political ambivalence "with their fur coats and with parties, and getting drunk." Students should be *concerned*, he thought. (p.28)

Now, the formation of the NSL itself had its proximate cause the suppression of a communist student magazine in CCNY entitled *Frontiers* due to an issue attacking the ROTC and calling the subject of military science "the agency for the dissemination of jingoist, imperialist propaganda." (Cohen 1992, p.29)

The convergence between mainline American liberalism and socialist radicalism is illustrated by an anecdote from the Yale chapter of LID (p.33) in the 1920s. They would ask students willing to join the club whether or not they read *The Nation* and *The New Republic*. If they answered no, they were rejected.

Student conversion experiences at the hands of liberal professors and even high school teachers were not uncommon. A female ASU member for instance shared her recollection that in a private high school she learned (p.243) "why workers organized, what a blacklist is, the techniques utilized by labor and capital, the value of social legislation, and the danger of thoughtless 'conservatism.' By the time I was ready for college I considered myself a full fledged progressive, having traveled in those two years from a disinterested Republican to an avid New Dealer to theoretically more inspiring and revolutionary horizons."

(Even more laughable was the Antioch College student who started researching socialist theory because his radical mother, despite ostensibly trying to separate her politics from her parenting, found that after her son started browsing through the family bookcase she could not explain to him why Edward Bellamy's "beautiful system" in *Looking Backward* was not adopted! (p.252)).

When in 1932, the NSL declared the emergence of a "new student learning to battle for his rights as a social individual," one of the most famous cause celebres of the movement would also happen: the Reed Harris case.

The traditional doctrine of student rights was that the university acted *in loco parentis*, that the university was not a space for free expression, and that the research prerogatives and administrative duties of instructors and faculty put them on a privileged plane above students. The university was not some soapbox for whatever pie-in-the-sky ideals of social reconstruction were in vogue at the moment.

One of the best statements is by Chancellor Charles Wesley Flint of Syracuse University in 1935:

Academic freedom covers only the freedom to speak under compulsion of thought that which is worthy of being said by one who is qualified to be heard... In other words, [academics] are free only to speak on subjects on which they have earned the right to be heard... Academic freedom is not a blank check; it is limited by deposits to the teacher's credits, the degree of his scholarly attainments. It is not the right to unlimited expression **whether or not possessing anything worth expressing**; not license to scatter about publicly half-baked theories, egotistical vagaries, or to vocalize loose thinking masquerading as liberal thinking.

Nicholas Murray Butler, too, stated that academic freedom with regard to undergraduates "has no meaning whatever. It relates solely to the freedom of thought and inquiry and teaching on the part of accomplished scholars."

At Columbia University, on April 1, 1932 (yes), the firebrand and until then editor of *Columbia Spectator* Reed Harris was expelled by President Nicholas Murray Butler. University football he dubbed a "semi-professional racket," and his journalistic philosophy was that student journalists should be "free to say what we think regardless of the consequences." The direct impetus for his expulsion, however, was a series of editorials in March 1932 where he brutally lambasted the university dining halls, charging the staff with "profiteering, exploiting student waiters, and serving poor food." (p.57)

The dean, Herbert Hawkes, called him in to prove the charges and disclose his sources. He declined to do either and was expelled.

College newspapers across the country expressed their solidarity with Harris. The NSL mobilized a meeting of over 2000 students in protest on April 4, 1932, followed by a strike on April 6 where leaflets were distributed and "free speech" banners were carried. Some three-fourths of the student body boycotted their classes that day. The administration's primary source of muscle against the radicals was varsity football players, which didn't help optics in the press. On April 9, Columbia's Commons Committee announced investigations into the management of the university's dining halls. On April 20, Harris was reinstated after an out-of-court settlement.

Butler confided to the university attorney that the reinstatement was done on the basis of bowing to outside pressure rather than on any wrongdoing on part of their decision for expulsion, saying that "the annoyance and misrepresentation which would follow upon widespread and sensational newspaper publicity would far outweigh any advantage to be gained by winning a court action."

The NSL declared their victory as signifying that "a new day had dawned in American student life." (p.67) Years later, James Wechsler would describe the Harris case "as a first glimpse of Communists in action" for many students.

As to the AYC (American Youth Congress), this organization with its fervent support for the National Youth Administration (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Youth_Administration), (NYA), became a Roosevelt administration favorite.

The AYC was truly a behemoth presence. Its member organizations were numerous, including: the National Student Federation, the National Intercollegiate Christian Council, the Young Communist League, the National Council of Methodist Youth, the Southern Negro Youth Congress, the Chinese Student League, the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, the United Auto Workers, the NAACP, among others.

It was probably the single most ethnically diverse organization in American history up until then. Truly, it was their strength. Their mission: to lobby for the American Youth Act (<http://newspaperarchives.vassar.edu/cgi-bin/vassar?a=d&d=miscellany19360314-01.2.5>), a massive and now forgotten proposal for a public works scheme for high school and college students. Estimated budget: minimum of \$3.5 billion, max. \$15 billion.

The AYC were a very convenient tool to use against Republican opposition to New Deal fiscal policy, and they were recruited as such. Despite some disappointment by radicals at the AYC when they realized Eleanor Roosevelt didn't have her diaphragm up to speed, they nonetheless warmed up (p.194):

Mrs. Roosevelt invited the Youth Congress leaders to tea at the White House [after their January 1936 meeting], assuring them that she understood their impatience at the pace of reform, since changes did seem to "take forever."

Mrs. Roosevelt's tolerance of dissent and her ongoing interest in the youth issue ensured that this first meeting would be the start of a long term relationship with the Youth Congress. She not only kept her lines of communication open to the Youth Congress leaders, but assisted them in gaining access to other prominent New Dealers. Mrs. Roosevelt was responsible for setting up the meeting between AYC leaders and the president during the 1937 pilgrimage. At this meeting the president took the same position on the Youth Act that the First Lady had, refusing to endorse it on the grounds that it was too expensive. But here the president also made some sympathetic statements, telling the AYC leaders that they "were on the right track in seeking federal aid for the nation's hard hit young population." President Roosevelt assured them "I am glad of what you are doing," and pledged to try to expand the NYA.

President Roosevelt was not merely being polite in praising the youth delegation. The president was facing considerable Republican pressure to cut the NYA, and he and his administration perceived that the AYC's campaign for greater federal aid could help offset this pressure. The same impulse toward converting the AYC and the student movement into allies of the New Deal helped prod NYA Director Aubrey Williams to begin supporting and befriending the movement's national leadership. Indeed, on the day of the 1937 youth march on the White House, Williams congratulated the AYC for helping to turn public opinion against cuts in federal aid to students. Williams told the protesters, "I know that your work has yielded some good results and will yield more. And I am in a good position to know whether it yields anything or whether it doesn't."

Mrs. Roosevelt would later use her syndicated newspaper column and personal prestige to defend the AYC during their investigation by the Dies Committee in 1939, successfully. AYC leaders personally reassured her there was no communist infiltration, and she went on to rebut charges before the New York Times against Joseph Cadden and William Hinckley that they had been members of the Communist Party. They were, and Roosevelt was duped.

The combination of liberal naivete, complicity and radical dedication would explode in the 1960s, but the student movement of the 30s was a crucial and overlooked predecessor, indeed a training ground.

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