

# Against Student Power

By JUAN RODRIGUEZ

## (A NECESSARY INTRODUCTION)

The following article might seem, at first glance, to be an out-and-out condemnation of student power. It is not. I am criticizing the "mentality" of student power, in its present form, more than anything else. What disturbs me is the general lack of self-criticism that seems to be inherent within the ranks of student powerites. It seems to me that the motives of any particular power-play or political group should be examined, and student power is no exception.

Many of the arguments raised in my article are deliberately ambiguous. My aim here is not to "prove" anything. Rather, I would hope that the article will act as a catalyst for serious thought and discussion on the various characteristics of student power.

"...if you are carrying pictures of Chairman Mao, ...you're not going to make it with anyone anyhow..."

-the Beatles in "Revolution"

On the walls of many student offices in universities across the country you will likely find a poster of Che Guevara. If not Guevara, you will see either Mao Tse-Tung, Fidel Castro, or Stokely Carmichael. Or, as a joke, a poster of Moshe Dayan with a "We Try Harder" button pinned to his lapel. The posters, of course, are symbols. They depict the heroes of the revolution in all their glory. They are larger than life, easy to look at, and it is considered hip to have them on the wall. A Mao poster is a status symbol of sorts; one look at it and you know that the inhabitant of the space between those four walls must believe in Student Power, and all of the other affiliated movements that are sweeping the minds of the current university generation.

No other student phenomenon has received so much attention from the mass media than Student Power. We see countless numbers of pictures of unkempt youth sitting-in, protesting what call authoritarian university management. We view student leaders, on makeshift rostrums, bitterly denouncing and demanding the resignation of university governors. We are constantly exposed to a flood of articles that inform us of the presence of Student Power. "The long cold winter" is how some analysts might describe the upcoming university year. However, for all the accounts we have read on student power manifestations, there are few commentators who are willing to take issue with the main characteristics of this phenomenon.

## POWER FOR ITS OWN SAKE

The university activists are after one thing: power. They argue that, since students support the university "industry", students should be given an important voice in university management. If student leaders would have a concrete ideology to work from, if they had a workable program available for use, then perhaps they might be more effective in the implementation of their desires. Unfortunately, they do not. Their aim is "power". Their technique is characterized by sensationalism and disruption, and little substance. Student leaders do not bother to advance proposals as to how they would better the educational system. They never say what they would do once power has been achieved. All we do hear is a boring rhetoric that maintains dogmatically, "Don't trust anyone over thirty". This slogan is typical of the mind of the student activist. The student powerite assumes that anything "old" must, by nature, be viewed with cynicism, that every nook and cranny of the establishment, must, by concept, be infested with worms.

Impatience with the establishment is a natural trait of the young, and it is not altogether undesirable. There is, after all, much to complain about. But this impatience achieves nothing when it is used with reckless abandon. Student leaders do not consider the element of time in their protests. Indeed, they hold a romanticized view of "revolution". They have not realized that revolutions do not come easily, and that no revolution in world history has succeeded one hundred per

cent. The opinions of people are not changed overnight. It takes time, and, quite often, the time spent changing people's minds is tedious and painstaking. Change is usually effected from the inside, not the outside, and since it is much more difficult to work from within, the students want no part of it. This position indicates to me, that the student powerites are not willing to sacrifice part of their king-sized egos to work for a lasting change. Indeed, the student power movement can be accurately described as a glorification of the ego.

## STUDENT POWER AND TOTALITARIANISM

Student powerites also find it fashionable these days to dabble in questions of "morality", and, their happy hunting ground is the Viet Nam war. They profess moral outrage at this war, and as a result, they demand that such companies as Dow Chemicals — which manufactures goods for use in Viet Nam — discontinue on-campus job recruiting. Here is where their moral outrage becomes warped and fascist-oriented. No matter what side you are on, the morality or immorality of American involvement in Viet Nam it still a matter of opinion. To suppress Dow Chemicals for being involved in this "bad side" of the coin is a totalitarian gesture. This type of thinking is comparable to Hitler's view of the socialists and Communists in pre-war Germany; it is not unlike Joe McCarthy's witch hunt of the early fifties. Furthermore, this type of thinking would enable anyone to outlaw a campus Communist club, or any other "disagreeable" campus element, and, before you'd know it, you would not have protesters in the first place. There are two courses of action for antiwar protestors in the Dow Chemical case: 1) press to ban the company from the campus, or, 2) try to persuade fellow students not to apply for jobs at Dow Chemicals because, to do so, would be to knowingly comply with the killing of innocent Vietnamese.

The student powerites have chosen the first approach because it is the easiest thing to demand, and no real effort has to be undertaken to change people's minds on the subject. The latter approach is naturally the more difficult one (although it seems to me to be the only ethical one); thus, student power people have nothing to do with it. This stance indicates that, as well as being immature and impatient, they can be as narrow-minded as their opponents. They are convinced that the only way to change people's opinions is by arbitrary action; their years at university have not taught them that social change is a process of continuing education, and that the only way things change in a democratic society is when an active and thinking majority gives its nod to the implementation of that change. To confront the masses and create such a majority is the difficult task the student powerites constantly evade. It is the glamour of it all that interests them.

## THE BOORISHNESS OF ACTIVISTS

It is the boorishness of student activists that repels me. They are convinced they have a monopoly on good, on righteousness. When pressed for a philosophical explanation of why they protest, they seldom speak from an individually thought-out position; instead they will root out the same well-worn clichés from Che Guevara or Herbert Marcuse, and they will point knowingly to their poster of Stokely and say "That's where it's at, baby". To them, no further explanations are needed. To them, it is immaterial whether the ordinary citizen understands their protest. This attitude, to me, underlines the basic arrogance of the student protesters. If they are really attempting to change the society they live in, it is the ordinary citizen that the protesters must inevitably face. Most great advances and social changes are implemented by the middle class, and it is hoolhardy and irresponsible to ignore this group.

This unpredictable year of political strife and conflict has brought out some noteworthy achievements from a sector of the young generation that wants change. That sector was not made up of hippies who sit around idly doing their thing (which, in most cases, is nothing) nor was it constituted of the student hippies who have yet

to produce anything positive for their society as a whole. But, one need only look at Eugene McCarthy's campaign to see that organized dissent can be channelled into a politics that is able to produce a real consensus. Without the selfless work of thousands of young people, the McCarthy campaign would never have been realized. Nevertheless, many still feel that the McCarthy campaign was a failure, but this is surely a narrow-minded view. McCarthy, and his band of "kids", has laid the foundation for serious dissent within his own party. His political philosophies may have been repulsed this year, but it is obvious that they constitute the wave of the future, and that they pose a threat to the most notorious of the establishment politicians. (In contrast, student power — in its present form — tends to do the opposite. It solidifies the establishment against the students, because of the support of an angry, confused mass public.) By waging his campaign, McCarthy gave young people a chance to protest from the inside, and he also polarized a segment of public dissent that previously had no representation in either of the two Main American political parties.

## THEIR RHETORIC IS FUZZY

This kind of spirit has not found its way into the hearts of student protesters. Instead, we see young people fleeing the very ideals of freedom and individualism (for all) that some of their so-called heroes have fought for. Because they have never bothered to study varying political or moral philosophies with anything but surface attention, the political pronouncements of many student activists take the form of garbled, simple-minded rhetoric. This rhetoric is an immature, fuzzy conglomeration of the fashionable protest philosophies of the day and the latest edicts of the current cult heroes. When student leaders begin to talk about poverty and civil rights they expose their basic hollowness; they hardly know what they are talking about because they've never gone hungry and they have never been discriminated against to any large real perspective on such matters, they speak about them with the piousness of a priest and the long-time suffering of a martyr.

Finally a word or two on the actual style of the student protests. Fundamentally, this style is singularly characterized by a complete lack of conflict. It is smug. Student dissent seems to be fabricated beforehand, and applied to a given situation without much real thought. The protesters merely go through the motions. Outrage. Definition of "rights" and "wrongs". Sit-in or sit-down strike. The results are usually unclear; there is talk of a more liberal-minded approach on the part of university officials, but things usually fall by the wayside. More importantly, they fall out of context. The real problem of the modern university — overcrowding, inadequate texts, alienation and automation, new teaching and learning processes — are almost never tackled with earnestness. These things are never a part of the all-important student rhetoric. The students are out solely to better their own lot, and they do not seem to have education as their aim. There is little soul-searching within the Movement. There is little dedication to the society the students will inherit. Because of this, student power is ultimately boring, and irrelevant to the needs of the future. The student activists may accurately be termed the charlatans of the sixties.

The student power movement owns all the characteristics of die-hard conservatism.

Does it take courage, moral or physical, to be an advocate of student power in its present obtuse form? Is there any kind of heroism involved in marching for such self-centered purposes? I am of the opinion that there is no such heroism in evidence, because there is little at stake and even less danger involved. Police brutality? (Students cannot look at a policeman without muttering that slogan.) Police brutality exists (and sometimes in excessive proportions, as was seen at Chicago,) but, to me, police brutality is a logical extension of a society that is baffled by the student power phenomenon ("What do they want?") And, because of their refusal to provide a liaison with the "straight" world, the student power movement must shoulder some of the blame for this confused, if brutal, reaction.