

The tactics are . . .**all wrong**

We need university reform—and soon

"Conventional wisdom" has a very bad press these days, so much so that we tend to consign any proposition readily identifiable as conventionally wise to the outer darkness. By we, I mean of course those of us who consider ourselves politically sophisticated, and who may even have been confirmed repeatedly in that opinion by high grade-point averages or at least by encouraging remarks on term papers. And by outer darkness, I mean (no less evidently) that region—guarded by the Forces of Evil—known as The Establishment. One particularly grating piece of conventional wisdom runs roughly as follows (imagine a preliminary quivering of jowls and agitated but pompous a-hemming):

"The taxpayers support our universities, and they have a right to expect them to turn out educated individuals, not crackpot demonstrators [comma, 'God damn it' optional at this point]. If these students would spend more time studying they wouldn't have time to go around demonstrating and they'd be better off for it."

I have put this argument almost as crudely as possible (not quite: I've omitted the well-known Hair-cut and Hygiene peroration!) so as to emphasize that in this form, it really is objectionable. Moderate radicals will cite Gandhi and Martin Luther King, radical radicals will cite Che, and Really Insightful People will be equipped with a raft of lesser names, by way of immediate refutation.

More objectionable even than the argument as such are the people who usually give voice to it. I will say nothing about Mr. Businessman, who has already been shot down effectively by Sinclair Lewis, as well as by a current CHED Golden Goodie. But even students who come out with this line are, as Dr. C. Bay has demonstrated in a magnificently obvious

paper, generally fairly unimpressive people.

Okay. But I have slowly become convinced that lurking within this particular morass of conventional wisdom is some *legitimate* wisdom, wisdom which I hope we don't have to be cynical disillusioned, and/or over thirty to profit by. To avoid pontificating vaguely about this, I'll take a specific situation as a jumping-off point.

Consider the question of the reform, or to put it more accurately, the projected democratization of the Universities—as envisaged at this university by the SDU and assorted maverick polemicists.

The first important fact, and not a value-laden one at all, is that thus far in this university the organization has been almost completely ineffective. I add the caveat "almost" in case some apocalyptic event is on the wing, and somebody can show me that it is.

Taking a brief historical inventory, we have first the abortive Fee-Increase Protest March, in which I had the misfortune to participate. The SDU claims the honour of instigating it, and I won't quibble about awarding it the crown of thorns. (I might additionally stigmatize the incredibly puerile brief which accompanied the epic march. Let those who have the strength to read it, do so.)

We have the abortive birth control booth, if I may so describe it; at best, monumentally bad taste, and worst (and, I think, in fact) an exercise in irrelevance.

We have the recent Students' Union elections, in which our current President, who evidently occupies a place in the hearts of student Democrats inferior to that of Richard Nixon, was nevertheless unopposed.

We have, lastly, the noon-hour public education operation—touchingly reminiscent of the activities of the Fabian Socialist

society matrons.

This does not mean that the fee increase was justified. It does not mean that the ideas of the people who spoke at the noon-hour meetings are beneath contempt; they were in general important ideas, lucidly put. It doesn't imply any disapprobation of premarital sex, either.

What it does imply is that at the very least, the tactics of—may I call it pre-revolutionary agitation?—are all wrong. And in this case, the tactics are a direct function of the fundamental principles of the movement.

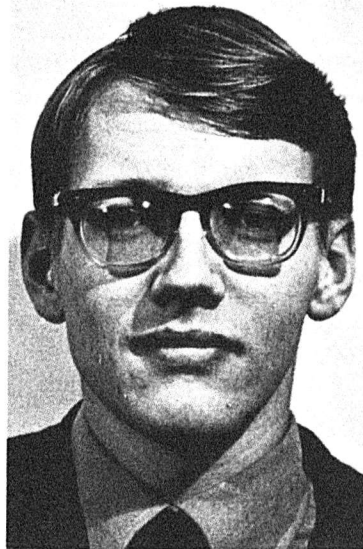
I use the term "fundamental principles" advisedly: it refers to the fuzzy sort of Marxism which (with many individual exceptions) pervades the atmosphere in which such organizations operate. The students are the proletariat, and are somehow analogous to the oppressed black Americans. (Brave new proletariat, that has such bourgeois in't) The administration is analogous to the capitalists, or alternatively, to the ubiquitous Mr. Charlie.

On the principle of immiseration, Freedom is going to . . . happen. That is, the worse things get, the better they really are; which is to say, the closer we are to what readers of Marx will recognize as the "negation of the negation": academic Armageddon.

Thus, obvious failures like the ones I've outlined above are good, because they're signs of an unrest which will inevitably culminate in the cracking of the administrative superstructure.

I don't think even extensive attempts to mine the earlier Marx (the rehabilitation of whom means, for most adherents, that you don't have to read the *later* Marx), will justify the analogy—even when the analogy is phrased in a more sophisticated idiom and sympathetic context than I've provided for it.

Why? Essentially because it's a



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hideous and glaring over-simplification. Yes, we need university reform, and soon. We seem to be heading rapidly towards what Lewis Mumford calls a Post-Historic society, or, on the other hand, some form of anarchy, against which Dr. Johns inveigled at last year's graduation exercises. University reform is a prerequisite, and perhaps the major one, for the avoidance of these alternatives.

I don't pretend to have solutions to, or even adequate definitions of, the problems. But it isn't necessary to come armed with solutions to see that University Reform is so much more complex than radical student groups think. Take Galbraith's analysis in *The New Industrial State*, for example. There he asserts the crucial importance for the future of the universities—and further, for society itself—of the attainment by the universities of financial autonomy. Only this

way, he claims, can academic priorities be revised properly.

Even given the acceptance of such an argument, the problems involved in figuring out how to go about achieving financial autonomy are immense; worse, they are not yet within the compass of social science, and are outside the area of interest of those in our university who "do philosophy."

May I drop one last name in defense of this particular thesis—Prime Minister Trudeau. An examination of his article, "Federal Grants to Universities," in the paperback everybody's got a copy of, should be a sobering experience for a student voluntarist. As Trudeau writes in a different context, "If politicians must bring emotions into the act, let them get emotional about functionalism."

The moral—and *moral* is the right word, because this is an exhortation—is that what we need most now are people who insist on educating themselves in spite of the forbidding aspect of the multi-versity, who have the courage to resist premature action, to resist easy activist solutions, to try to suspend their judgment and think. For one of the easiest solutions for most of us, who are not liable to become philosopher kings, is some kind of immediate action—the chief prerequisite for which is a hardening of the intellectual arteries.

The fact is that a significant number of us, at any rate, have a chance to work and think for a few years in relative freedom from mundane responsibilities.

The important thing is how few those years are, and how soon we must begin to act—or to choose not to act—on the basis of what we've learned. This is not a unique situation. It's the occupational hazard of being a student. But it appears that (for better or for worse!) North American society may have not much longer a breathing spell than we have.

Theory and practice must go hand in hand

We must not "segregate intellect from action"

The trouble with "conventional wisdom" is usually not that it's false but that it's too fuzzy to be helpful.

The piece of same which Brad Willis urbanely recommends to those interested in university reform seems to be: Draw back from the fray and think about what you're doing; avoid action until you've thought all the problems through in all their complexity—and then act fast, there's not much time left.

Which there certainly won't be if everyone waits to achieve perfect knowledge before acting.

If all that Brad means is that no movement is going to get anywhere without a good deal of contemplative intelligence guiding its course, fine: we'll all drink to that.

I've never met a serious radical in these parts who wasn't clear about the need

for study, theory, analysis, self-criticism.

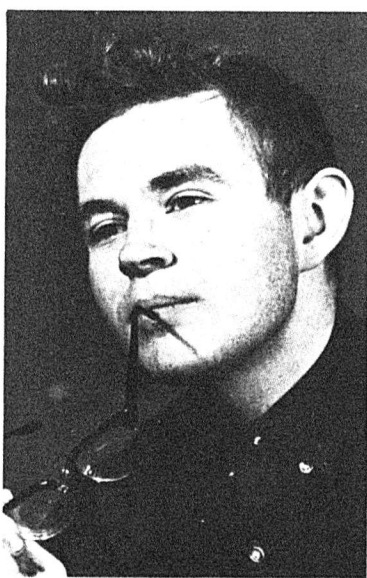
But Brad implies more than this when he assumes a strict linear sequence — thought, then action.

Here he seems to me unrealistic.

Education cannot precede action, in many cases, because only through action does the problem to be solved reveal itself. As Marx insisted, theory and practice must go hand in hand: each is meaningless without the other.

So I wish Brad had been more specific in his criticism of the practice of SDU last year.

The point about the fee-march is not that it failed to prevent the fee increase—who ever imagined it would?—but that it may have led its participants to think about the morality and efficiency of a system unable to rationalize itself even to the extent of



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ensuring that the intelligent poor are made as much use of as the (often barely) intelligent rich.

Even judged strictly as

power-play, it has probably increased the reluctance of the authorities to raise fees again in the near future.

Brad's notions of good taste differ from mine, apparently, since I fail to see the bad taste involved in bringing to the public's notice the inequity and hypocrisy of our present attitudes towards pregnancy and the pill.

As he must know, these attitudes lead directly to an appalling amount of needless mental anguish, so I find the charge of "irrelevance" hard to understand. What ultimately is politics save the social struggle to diminish pain?

Finally, last year's noon-hour meetings almost single-handedly transformed radicalism on this campus from a negligible mutter to a force fearsome enough to panic Dr. Johns (not, I admit, a supreme achievement) and

serious enough to have attracted some of the ablest minds around here—including, dare I hope, Brad Willis.

None of the three actions were "apocalyptic", or even perfect. All I'd claim for them is that they were useful. But their true usefulness can only be judged by what they lead to this year.

As I understand it, the SDU has decided to face the problem of internal and external education squarely, by structuring the organization around CEGs (pronounced "kegs") — Counter-Education Groups, in which unity of thought and action can flexibly be striven for.

Our problem won't be resisting the lure of "easy activist slolutions" (name five!), but overcoming the temptation to segregate intellect from action, which can result only in stupid acts and impotent thought.