

WHY RADICALISM

WHY RADICALISM, is one of the hardest questions the radical student is constantly confronted with because the answer is usually personal, very involved and constantly being refined.

The Port Huron Statement, from which the following article is extracted, is generally agreed to be one of the best answers to this question. Originally published in 1962 the document acted for a long time as the manifesto of the Students For a Democratic Society in the United States. The principle author of the statement was Tom Hayden.

We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit.

When we were kids, Western Society was the wealthiest and strongest in the world; the only one with the atom bomb, the least scarred by modern war, prime mover of the United Nations, and we thought that we would distribute Western influence throughout the world. Freedom and equality for each individual government of, by, and for the people — these democratic values we found good, principles by which we could live as men. Many of us began maturing in complacency.

As we grew, however, our comfort was penetrated by events too troubling to dismiss.

First, the permeating and victimizing fact of human degradation and symbolized by the struggle against racial bigotry, in the United States, compelled most of us from silence to activism.

Second, the enclosing fact of the Cold War, symbolized by the presence of the Bomb, brought awareness that we ourselves, and our friends, and millions of abstract "others" we know more directly because of our common peril, might die at any time. We might deliberately ignore, or avoid, or fail to feel all other human problems; but not these two, for these were too immediate and crushing in their impact, too challenging in the demand that we as individuals take the responsibility for encounter and resolution.

We witnessed, and continue to witness, frightening paradoxes. With nuclear energy, whole cities can easily be powered, yet the dominant nation-states seem more likely to unleash destruction greater than that incurred in all wars of human history. Although our own technology is destroying old and creating new forms of social organization, men still tolerate meaningless work and idleness. While two-thirds of mankind suffers undernourishment, our own upper classes revel amidst superfluous abundance.

Uncontrolled exploitation governs the sapping of the earth's physical resources

Although world population is expected to double in 40 years, the nations still tolerate anarchy as a major principle of international conduct and uncontrolled exploitation governs the sapping of the earth's physical resources.

Not only did tarnish appear on our image of Western virtue, not only did disillusion occur when the hypocrisy of Western ideals was discovered, but we began to sense that what we had originally seen as the American Golden Age was actually the decline of an era.

The worldwide outbreak of revolution against colonialism and imperialism, the entrenchment of totalitarian states, the menace of war, overpopulation, international disorder, supertechnology — these trends were testing the tenacity of our own commitment to democracy and freedom and our abilities to visualize their application to work in upheaval.

The message of our society is that there is no viable alternative to the present

The vast majority of our people regard the temporary equilibriums of our society and the world as eternally-functional parts. In this is perhaps the outstanding paradox: we ourselves are imbued with urgency, yet the message of our society is that there is no viable alternative to the present. Beneath the reassuring tones of the politicians, beneath the common opinion that Western society will muddle through, beneath the stagnation of those who have closed their minds to the future, is the pervading feeling there simply are no alternatives, that our times have witnessed the exhaustion not only of Utopias, but of any new departures as well.

Feeling the press of complexity upon the emptiness of life, people are fearful of the thought that at any moment things might be thrust out of control. They fear change itself, since change might smash whatever invisible framework seems to hold back chaos for them now.

For most Western people, all crusades are suspect, threatening. The fact that each individual sees apathy in his fellows perpetuates the common reluctance to organize for change. The dominant institutions are complex enough to blunt the minds of their potential critics, and entrenched enough to swiftly dissipate or entirely reform, thus limiting human expectancies. Then too, we are a materially improved society, and by our own improvements we seem to have weakened the case for further change.

Some would have us believe our fellow citizens feel contentment amidst prosperity — but might it not better be called a glaze above deeply-felt anxieties about their role in the new world? And if these anxieties produce a developed indifference to human affairs, do they not as well produce a yearning to believe there is

an alternative to the present, that something can be done to change circumstances in the school, the workplaces, the bureaucracies, the government?

It is to this latter yearning, at once the spark and engine of change that we direct our present appeal. The search for truly democratic alternatives to the present, and a commitment to social experimentation with them, is a worthy and fulfilling one which moves us today.

Making values explicit — an initial task, in establishing alternatives — is an activity that has been devalued and corrupted. The conventional moral terms of the age, free world, people's democracies — reflect realities poorly, if at all, and seem to function more as ruling myths than as descriptive principles. But neither has our experience in the universities brought us moral enlightenment. Our professors and administrators sacrifice controversy to public relations; their curriculums change more slowly than the living events of the world; their skills and silence are purchased by investors in the arms race; passion is called unscholastic. The questions we might want raised — what is really important? Can we live in a different and better way; if we wanted to change society, how would we do it? — are not thought to be questions of a "fruitful, empirical nature," and thus are brushed aside.

It has been said that our liberal and socialist predecessors were plagued by vision without program, while our own generation is plagued by program without vision. All around us there is an astute grasp of method and technique — the committee, the ad-hoc group, the lobbyist, the hard and soft sell, the make, the projected image — but if pressed critically, such expertise is incompetent to explain its implicit ideals. It is highly fashionable to identify oneself by old categories, or by naming a respected political figure or by explaining "how we would vote" on various issues.

Theoretic chaos has replaced the idealistic thinking of old — and, unable to reconstitute theoretic order, men have condemned idealism itself.

Doubt has replaced hopefulness — and men act out a defeatism that is labelled realistic. The decline of Utopia and hope is in fact one of the defining features of social life today.

The reasons are various; the dreams of the older left were perverted by Stalinism and never recreated; the parliamentary stalemate makes men narrow their view of the possible, the specialization of human activity leaves little room for sweeping thought; the horrors of the twentieth century, symbolized in the gas-ovens and concentration camps and atom bombs, have blasted hopefulness.

To be idealistic is to be considered apocalyptic, deluded. To have no serious aspirations, on the contrary, is to be "tough-minded."

Perhaps matured by the past, we have no sure formulas, no closed theories

In suggesting social goals and values, therefore, we are aware of entering a sphere of some disrepute. Perhaps matured by the past, we have no sure formulas, no closed theories — but that does not mean values are beyond discussion and tentative determination.

A first task of any social movement is to convince people the search for orienting theories and the creation of human values is complex but worthwhile. We are aware that to avoid platitudes we must analyze the concrete conditions of social order. But to direct such an analysis we must use the guideposts of basic principles. Our own social values involve conceptions of human beings, human relationships and social systems.

We regard men as infinitely precious and possessed of unfulfilled capacities for reason, freedom and love.

In affirming these principles, we are aware of countering perhaps the dominant conceptions of man in the twentieth century — that he is a thing to be manipulated, and that he is inherently incapable of directing his own affairs. We oppose the depersonalization that reduces human

beings to the status of things. The brutalities of the twentieth century teach that means and ends are intimately related, that vague appeals to "posterity" cannot justify the mutilations of the present.

We oppose, too, the doctrine of human incompetence because it rests essentially on the modern fact that men have been "competently" manipulated into incompetence — we see little reason why men cannot meet with increasing skill the complexities and responsibilities of their situation, but for majority participation in decision-making.

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Men have unrealized potential for self-cultivation, self-direction, self-understanding and creativity. It is this potential we regard as crucial and to which we appeal, not to the human potentiality for violence, unreason and submission of authority.

The goal of man and society should be human independence — a concern not with image of popularity but with finding a meaning in life that is personally authentic: a quality of mind not compulsively driven by a sense of powerlessness, nor one which unthinkingly adopts status values, nor one which represses all threats to its habits. Rather one which has full, spontaneous access to present and past experiences, one which easily unites the fragmented parts of personal history, one which openly faces problems which are troubling and unresolved; one with an intuitive awareness of possibilities, an active sense of curiosity, an ability and willingness to learn.

This kind of independence does not mean egotistic individualism — the object is not to have one's way so much as it is to have a way that is one's own. Nor do we defy man — we merely have faith in his potential.

Human relationships should involve fraternity and honesty. Human interdependence is contemporary fact; human brotherhood must be willed, however, as a condition of future survival and as the most appropriate form of social relations.

Personal links between man and man are needed, especially to go beyond the partial and fragmentary bonds of function that blind men only as worker to worker, employer to employee, teacher to student, American to Russian.

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These dominant tendencies cannot be overcome by better personnel management, nor by improved gadgets, but only when a love of man overcomes the idolatrous worship of things by man.

As the individualism we affirm is not egoism, the selflessness we affirm is not self-elimination. On the contrary, we believe in generosity of a kind that imprints one's unique individual qualities in the relation to other men, and to all human activity. Further to dislike isolation is not to favor the abolition of privacy; the latter differs from isolation in that it occurs or is abolished according to individual will.

We would replace power rooted in possession, privilege or circumstance by power and uniqueness rooted in love, reflectiveness, reason and creativity.

As a social system we seek the establishment of a democracy of individual participation, governed by two central aims: quality and direction of his life; that society be organized to encourage independence in men and provide the media for their common participation.

In a participatory democracy, the political life would be based in several root principles: