The College Student and Public Concern

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Is TODAY's college student a concerned citizen or an apathetic mouse?

During the 1950's the prevailing image of the college student portrayed a well-behaved and thoroughly unheroic young person. The same catch-phrases appeared again and again in diagnoses of campus life: "student apathy," "student conformity," "the quest for security," "no interest in politics."

Although such generalizations remain with us today, in recent years a differing opinion has been heard. The editors of *Time* and *Life* discovered a "conservative revival" on several campuses —evidence of political activism from a conservative stance. More recently, newspapers like the *New York Times* have linked the participation of the college students in civil rights sit-ins to another sort of political activism, the "liberal" crusade. Among scholars, too, there are those who claim to identify among students a new "intellectual commitment" to public affairs.

Which portrait of the student is right? The answer is that *both* are right yet *neither* is right, because both are over-generalizations.

If one judges by the majority, it is quite fair to say that college students are politically passive. The Cornell Value Study, which surveyed the attitude of 2,975 students in eleven universities, reported that under-graduates were, in general, "politically disinterested." The Cornell investigators made this survey in 1952, but there is little reason to believe that the *(Continued)*

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concern for social problems or for social acceptance?

statement would not hold today. A Brookings Institution report, just published, suggests that high school youths generally become less favorable to the idea of government service after they go to college.

Foreign comparisons confirm this general pattern of political and social uninterestedness. A survey of college students in ten countries found that a peculiar characteristic of most of the Americans was accent on "privatism": the yen to seek a "rich, full life" for themselves and their families, to think in concrete and practical terms about the material benefits that the future might hold—all this while remaining relatively unconcerned about social problems. The Americans' attitude was in marked contrast with the outlook of students in Mexico, Egypt and Bantu society, whose fondest hope—though often distorted by excessive emotionalism—was to contribute something to the community: to help raise the standard of living in their villages, or to help their countries in their struggles for national independence.

So far, however, we have only been talking about the *majority* of American students. Co-existing with this majority is a small proportion of college students who are intensely and vocally interested in political issues. It is these individuals who have inspired reports of a general political revival on the American campus. (They constitute very much the minority—although I would guess from my own talks with students that the passive majority has become more friendly in recent years toward the few who champion political causes. By showing tolerance for the active few, many students assuage their own prickings of conscience about not becoming active themselves.)

Today's political minority is in no sense a new phenomenon. The "campus radicalism" of the early 1930's was largely a fiction derived from the activities of relative handfuls of students at a few highly visible institutions. This we know from recent studies of graduates from that era. Even in 1950, when McCarthyism had cowed many of their elders, a strong minority of Berkeley undergraduates signed a written protest against the requirement that their professors take a loyalty oath and disclaim any past connection with pro-communist groups.

If political interest on the part of the minority is nothing new, neither is political apathy on the part of the majority. In World War II, a period when one would have expected a heightened sense of identification with the community, a survey of college attitudes showed that most students were cautious, conventional, uninvolved. The evidence of history has dogged student life ever since the Civil War.

The situation is thus much the same as ever it was—and yet it is not the same. What has altered is the *kind* of political indifference, the *kind* of apathy about social issues, that some students show. On many campuses there can be seen a student type who a generation ago would have been a highly political rebel, but who today is almost fervently *apolitial* and *asocial*. Where the old version showed social concern by vehemently criticizing existing institutions *within* society, the new type rejects society *in toto*. Or rather, he tries to. One variant of this new type is the beatnik who, instead of rebelling, simply withdraws.

To account for this phenomenon we can point first to the students' family backgrounds. A predominant characteristic of modern parents is their failure to realize that love and reasonable authority can be combined. As a result the child, on feeling a natural desire to oppose his parents, can often find no authority to rebel against. His alternative is to withdraw, to comply outwardly with the gentle requests of his parents but to shut them out from an inner world of his own.

The psychological effect of this pattern is reinforced at college. Here a host of requirements and examinations all too often induce the undergraduate to "think small," to concentrate on clearing each hurdle in an academic obstacle race rather than on thinking widely and imaginatively about the world around him. If he resents the system, to whom can he make an effective complaint? We, the professors, are frequently inaccessible to the student. Even more frequently, we are content merely to fill the student full of professional know-how. At the same time we decry the absence of creative enterprise among students —as if the absence wasn't our own fault.

And yet it is not entirely our own fault. A feeling of individual helplessness is induced by certain factors in U.S. civilization as a whole.

First, there is America's advanced state of industrialization. When a college student looks at our society's vast impersonal processes—and humbly asks himself where he can *fit in*—he is not simply being a conformist. Perhaps he is also being realistic; perhaps he sees that we live in a society which organizes intelligence ever more closely—a society where opportunities for individual initiative or for the exercise of talent on one's own terms have actually decreased.

Accompanying our advanced industrialization are the extraordinary phenomena of modern communication and modern standardization. These are not necessarily evil in themselves, but they have had one unhappy effect on college life: We no longer get those diamonds-in-the-rough who provided such joy for the teacher— those boys and girls from different traditions and backgrounds, "unspoiled" by more effete, modern ways but intelligent and eager, ready to shine under a teacher's devoted hand. Today the boy from the lower East Side and the girl from Chestnut Level arrive with relatively the same mannerisms and material baggage. It is harder, and much less interesting, to tell where a student comes from.

THIS uniformity, be it noted, is not primarily the result of any psychological need to conform. (I doubt that this need is essentially different from that found in students of 20 to 30 years ago.) Today's students simply live in a less differentiated society; there are fewer patterns with which to conform.

There is, also, the disappearance of the *responsible* individual in our society—his disappearance into a web of social roles and group memberships. Once we could identify stuffed shirts in high places and complain about them; now it appears that substituting a group image for the individual man is a major national trend. Instead

of bad decisions by responsible officials, we have mediocre decisions by anonymous committees. Instead of leadership, we have administration. Instead of a Teapot Dome scandal, in which a few scoundrels lined their pockets at public expense, we have corporate immorality. Vast networks of functions are performed, and in the end an immoral effect is achieved; but we can find in such a network no individual to blame nor anyone who feels guilt.

ANOTHER factor in our civilization which inhabits political initiative is the Cold War. In the Cold War era, people feel they must not move lest something snap. But people cannot live in the condition of being constantly poised to run for cover. So, wishing for stability, it is easy to convince oneself that everything is fine and will stay that way. Students, at any rate, tend to see present arrangements in our society as likely to persist indefinitely, provided we all are not exterminated. It is easier for them to imagine extermination than to imagine social change. This is not a good climate for dedication to social reform.

Granting that the present phase may be due more to rigidity than to genuine stability, the contrasts with other recent periods of history are nonetheless marked. We do not experience the mobility, the open-endedness, the excitement of wartime, or of a depression era, or of a jazz age. Correspondingly, there is relative quiet on the intellectual and ideological fronts.

In the early years of this century we had the movement toward the greater freedom for women; in the twenties we had Freud and the revolution in morals; in the thirties we had the depression and social change; in the forties we had war, fervent democratic idealism, imaginative post-war plans. What are the big ideas of the present? The surly and automatic anti-communism of recent years has not been exactly inspiring. Efforts to bring about a return to religion, or to evolve a new religious outlook, have been feeble. One hears little intellectual discussion on the college campus for the simple reason that there is not very much to discuss.

And in many of our leading institutions, there is not time for truly intellectual matters; the faculty and their recruits are preoccupied with the own little scientific and scholarly specialties.

Times will undoubtedly change, and new ideas will appear, but for the time being we are in the cultural and intellectual doldrums. This I would set down as a major source of current lethargy. Not only are students not inspired by the scholarship in which their teachers willy-nilly participate; they are put to sleep by it.

But undoubtedly the most serious effect of the Cold War has been moral deterioration in our national life. Thomas Mann, I think, was the first to say that the worst thing about totalitarianism was that it forced its opponents to imitate its methods. Over the years, a gradual identification with the enemy has been taking place. Loud voices in this country have been demanding that we ought to fight fire with fire. Any means are justified, so long as they are believed to contribute to the defeat of communism. Control of the press, the manufacture of opinion, the manipulation of people in the interests of some temporary strategy, the acceptance of brutality as an ordinary part of modern life: these have been common in high places. Almost any national plan for reducing international tensions is immediately labeled "soft on communism"; almost any plan for improving our national life is condemned as "socialistic." When some thoughts cannot be allowed, all thinking tends to deteriorate in quality; myths and stereotypes flourish, and wishful or fearful ruminations take the place of realistic attacks on problems. In short, the country is brought to a state in which thinking itself is impaired.

Students differ, of course, in their response to the present state of affairs. Many never become aware of the situation in the larger society. Liberal education fails to reach them and they never enter the phase of social criticism. Stuck with beliefs and values automatically accepted long before they entered college, they go on to become unthinking cogs in the social machinery. Others take a hard look at their society and decide it is not for them; instead of actively rebelling, they refuse to become involved. Still others, perhaps the largest group, see the situation well enough and decide to "play it cool." To make sure that they find a comfortable place in the world, they become respectable professional people; but they keep certain reservations about society to themselves and may even promise themselves to take a hand later on. Finally, there is the minority who take action now.

Perhaps things are not as bad as I have suggested. We may take hope from the fact that, when corruption or folly is revealed in high places, there are a great many people who are still capable of being shocked. And when something imaginative and positive, like the Peace Corps, is put forward, the student response is most encouraging.

It is here that teachers have a crucial role to play. No one is in a better position than they to think about our goals and to represent the best in our traditions. They can strive to understand the situation of students, and to tell the truth to the young. Whether they desire it or not, they are bound to serve as models for the young, who will be guided not so much by what their teachers *say* as by what their teachers *are*.