Two activists of the student movement review past errors and experiences in the '60's, and look at possibilities for the '70's.

WARREN OSMOND

IF WE ARE TALKING about the existence of a "radical student movement" in Australia, the term needs to be qualified in two ways. The first qualification concerns its social composition; the second, its political composition.

First, the "student" movement was always, and is now more than ever, dependent upon a small handful of academic staff either as ideologists and front-runners or as organisers and tacticians. The movement has also relied upon post-graduate students who had the time to put into constant political activity. Many, in fact, were de-facto drop-outs. Now, however, the movement which once had a basically undergraduate social base, is diversifying in important ways. At the old base level, radical high school students are replenishing the radical organisations. Many radical students are beginning academic careers within the universities, either as junior staff or as post-graduate students. And, beyond the universities themselves, many students who were active in radical politics in their student years are becoming (usually reluctant) school teachers, journalists, etc. And another group is assuming importance: those who, after the unstructured and highly political life of a student, cannot meet the demands of a 9-5 job, drop-out and live on occasional casual jobs for a livelihood, and gravitate back to the university-based radical community. Often they can obtain jobs in university libraries and bookshops. All these groups, it is important to note, are elements of what we still refer to as "the student radical movement".

Secondly, the phenomenon we are dealing with is hardly a vibrant and cohesive "movement", although it certainly has the capacity to quickly become one. There is little common identification with a national "movement" for radical change; loyalties are primarily local—to the particular organisations or ideology. There is a wide split between two activist poles, the "SDS" (Students for a Democratic Society) type of group, and the "revolutionary socialist" pole. Both, for instance, hold separate
national conferences. Then there are groups on each campus, more informal though, who will not identify themselves with any organisation committed to action, and who consider that we (or they) don't have the necessary theoretical background to take positive action. Within the "revolutionaries" there are bitter divisions, mostly "theoretical": "trotskyites" oppose "Maoists", who in turn despise "New Leftists". The differences surface most regularly at national conferences: it is perhaps significant that they don't arise so often at the local level, where joint activity is often possible. And, more subtly, the rigid "splits" serve important psychological functions, giving the members of each group, once they are "identified" with it, a sense of group-importance, that they are the bearers of responsibility, or "correctness" or whatever, besieged and misunderstood (as all martyrs are).

These rivalries have a definite air of unreality. Not only does one's ideological attachment vary with the capital city you come from (Sydney-Trotskyite, Melbourne-Maoist, Adelaide and Brisbane-New Left), but it is also true that when it comes down to action, hard organising, each group, on either activist pole, has had to resort to the same issues, language, political methods, etc., to gain support and to "politicise" their campuses. That is, there is a common political approach amongst most groups, along the following lines.

1. ISSUES
   (a) Internal University: student representation, composition of governing bodies, discipline, political, sexual, etc., freedom on campus, the university's complicity with the military establishment.
   (b) Non-University: Vietnam War, Conscription, police brutality at demonstrations, civil liberties cases arising from them, New Guinea and aborigines land rights, etc.

2. STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES:
   Some form of "Student-Staff power" in Universities, and the building of a "worker-student alliance" outside the universities.

3. LANGUAGE:
   agitation has had to be justified almost universally in American New Left language, referring to key decisions, and the lack of control/influence that people affected by them might have — both in universities and society in general.

4. ORGANISATION & TACTICS:
   small hard-core of activists, often led by a single "leader" (orator-ideologue),
   off-campus headquarters for holding meetings, producing broadsheets, etc.
   "confrontation*" as the major tactic: sit-ins, demonstrations, civil disobedience, "go-ins", and open, general, student meetings of a regular kind. (*See note at bottom of next page.)
The widespread "splits", then, are basically ideological, or "theoretical", and recur in each capital city. This clearly calls for explanation. There is a clear difference between students on the SDS-pole and those on the revolutionary socialist pole, and this concerns the nature and role of theory and its relevance to practice. But differences between the revolutionaries in each state need explaining further, since they are so accidental. Without a detailed argument, I am arguing that mostly these differences are ideological, in the marxist sense—they mask true differences, and serve purely psychological functions, reinforcing the group and its sense of self-importance vis-a-vis other groups.

It is also true that another strain exists at most universities, of students who consider themselves radicals, but who argue that theoretically the movement is not yet capable of much positive action, until more intellectual work, research, etc., has been carried out. By definition, this group cannot be said to be "ideological" in the sense of the revolutionaries' position just mentioned. As the potential for action within the confrontation approach dries up, this group can be expected to play a more obvious leadership role.

How was this "movement" brought about, and what has it achieved? To answer these questions is beyond the scope of this article. But certain points need to be made. If we ask the radicals themselves, they will invariably say that they have "radicalised" or "politicised" their respective campuses. They have, that is, changed "consciousness" through confrontation methods. If we asked less committed observers, however, we might be told that things had changed, but they have also remained the same; that there had been a polarisation of opinion, and it has been against the radicals, and that there was no longer any communication between the two groupings. Minds were closed. The mass of the students still despised "politics", whether it is "bourgeois" politics, or "revolutionary" (or "participatory democracy") politics.

This type of observation can easily be placed into a radical or revolutionary framework, properly conceived. That is, what the radical movement has been doing, it can be argued, is to force adjustments by capitalism (the "radicalisation" of each

* This approach, which can be called the "confrontation" approach, since this method or tactic is what has held most groups together until recently. See my article in Arena No. 19, "Student Revolutionary Left", for a criticism of the confrontation approach. A different type of criticism is that of J. Spigelman, "The Politics of Confrontation", Honi Soit (Sydney University), March 4, 1968. A more radical criticism is also in Honi Soit, by Chris O'Connell, "Orgasm Politics", October 17, 1969.
campus, growing participation in "politics", changes in student representation), but that its underlying logic and power has not been challenged. Capitalism, in fact, has been provoked, but provoked into widening the social base of its support. In these terms, the radicals have confirmed Marcuse's argument about "repressive tolerance" and the great absorptive power of capitalism.

If this is accepted, we are back at first base. That is, we have to ask, what is consciousness, and how is it changed? These two questions must be answered, if a rational form of radicalism is to be possible. At the moment, it is hard to see that such a radicalism is possible within the confrontation framework. This is for one major reason: the confrontation approach cuts the radicals off from the mass of the students. Not only do they become unpopular, they become so unpopular that the majority of students will never converse, literally, with the radical group. And all this, in the name of actions designed to "radicalise" the masses! It is not surprising that most students have their prejudices about socialism, communism, radicalism, etc., reinforced by the radicals themselves; radical politics is seen as an attempt to force the masses into accepting something they don't want. And that is, by and large, a correct assessment from their position.

And if we are to answer the questions posed above (what is consciousness and how does it change) then they cannot be finally answered in the present framework. All that can be answered is this: that a movement, no matter what its weaknesses, has developed, a certain number of people have been radicalised by something. This is the raw data from which an answer could come. What is required is that each individual must, by a process of retrospection and introspection, and in discussion with others, question the roots of his or her own political commitment, and discover what roots he or she shares with other students. Hence . . . what degree of radicalisation is possible. Without a theory of the present radicalism, no future rational politics is possible. What is needed, then, is basically self-awareness.

What is required, then, is a frank re-appraisal of the approaches and "achievements" of the movement so far, and the development of an alternative which embodies something of the old approach, as well as overcoming, in theory and practice, its limitations. An alternative, ready-made, does not exist. It will have to be developed over a long period. The alternative that is needed, in terms of the criticisms of confrontation that have been put, might be called a "mass line" strategy, as distinct from a "vanguard" or confrontation strategy, involving high risks, small, well-organised "armies" of students, attempting to impose change
on the mass of students. To put my aims another way, to answer the key questions of the nature of consciousness, and the ways in which it changes, we need a new approach to organising which does not isolate the radicals (or the organised ones) politically and psychologically from the rest of the students. The old approach maximises the possibility of misunderstanding because it is based on a world-view (including a theory of radicalisation) that is socially reinforced. What is needed is an approach which minimises mistakes and ideology, by integrating the radicals with the “mass”.

Politically, the weaknesses of confrontation manifest themselves in a vicious circle along the following lines: the radicals develop a campaign at an advanced level; opposition sets in, eventually finding its leaders; a decision-point is reached and the radicals are “defeated”, followed either by repression (university administration), and (bourgeois) civil liberties trials afterwards. This vicious circle must be broken through. There is little evidence that radicals both here and overseas recognise the problem, however.

A new approach must shift attention from an aim of radicalising others, to developing and understanding what exists (the movement) already. The appeal to students en masse, or to all Australians, as a “public”, is clearly relying upon a non-entity, or, a “group” to which people feel no loyalty of their own choosing. People must be appealed to in their own communities, to which they have intimate and personal, and more voluntary, loyalties and ties. In the university context, this means a shift to what might be called “classroom organising”.

And the new approach, most importantly, must overcome a very decisive (in terms of the radicals’ own claims) weakness of the former approach, which was that it treated the mass of students as objects to be radicalised, with “consciousness” to be changed. In this sense, other students were means to an end, and it was inevitable that they would respond to this alienation by rejecting it. So, inner communication, development and radicalisation must be the aim, rather than that of radicalisation of those who don’t see any need for radicalisation in the terms given to them.

This has an important consequence—that organising must be based on felt needs, insofar as they embody some rejection of things as they exist now. In the university context, this might take the form of a program for non-collegiate housing, for example, or a definite student voice in deciding the means of assessment, such as tests, examinations, etc. Demands could be raised around
libraries, students' fees, etc. All these, far from being a capitulation to some form of reformism, have the advantage that they appeal to students according to felt needs, rather than attempting to force changes in the students' whole structure of needs, implying a massive jump from being a "bourgeois" student to a "revolutionary" student. And this, in turn, means a new recognition, that the large gap which is said to have existed between radicals and non-radicals has been artificially created and preserved.

Also, methods of communication and distribution of views are extremely important. The radical group must act in such a way that it can know, with concrete evidence, how it is being responded to. This means that campaigns which rely largely or even to a small extent upon the mass media for communicating ideas, facts, etc., are no longer desirable. Media of communication must be restricted, as far as possible, to personally-known and identified (to other students) individuals. Hence, word-of-mouth and hand-to-hand methods are vital links to the consciousness of students. They minimise, in terms of this argument, the possibility of misunderstanding others. They might mean that no occupations will take place, un-announced and unsupported, but this is a healthy thing, unless, of course, one is intent on seeing an overseas model of "radicalisation" followed through to its conclusions in occupations, siege, destruction, police violence, student counter-violence, and (possibly) the complete destruction or demoralising of the radical community itself.

So the outlines (and they are nothing more) of a new, "mass line" strategy, will be the following —

1. Organising must be based upon individuals, operating in areas where they are known and can be communicated with "as friends" by other students.

2. The area of struggle must be, in some sense, a self-chosen (by other students) community of interest, with which the student identifies positively, and on which he is unsatisfied.

3. A program must be largely based on the felt needs of students.

4. Student organisations must be developed which have large membership, and in which the students, through their own desires and for their own reasons, personally come into confrontation with the power structure, rather than having the radicals' experience of the power structure pointed out to them as decisive proof.
5. Mass media communication must be replaced with personal methods of contact, to prevent isolation of radicals from other students.

6. In short, it must be recognised that the differences between radicals and non-radicals have been exaggerated, and thus must be abolished; in a sense, the radical must drop his "mass media identity" or his identity as part of an international phenomenon, disseminated primarily via the mass media, and become an ordinary student, relating to others in a direct, personal way, basically in what can be called "work-situations".

ROWAN CAHILL

BETWEEN THE YEARS 1945 and 1948 there was a large increase in the total enrolments at Australian Universities. This was largely due to the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme for ex-service personnel. These people were older and more mature than the usual university student; they had been through a war; some were people who had missed out on a university education because of the depression in the thirties. Barcan notes that the post-war students who came into the universities straight from high school were also more mature, for:

In the Australian society in which they had grown up they were afforded sights and issues and problems which accelerated their achievement of intellectual and personal maturity, and which thrust them right into problems involving standards and outlooks and theories.¹

One effect of this increased enrolment was to be seen in student activity; the National Union of Australian University Students increased its influence, the left political clubs developed, and student activity was aroused over issues of foreign policy.

Then came the fifties and the student energy of the post war years declined. The left political clubs waned, and the religious clubs underwent a revival. Two points can be made to account for this. First, the generation of the fifties had no experience of war, so the concerns of the post war generation were no longer theirs. Secondly, there was the cold war. As one commentator put it:

That, I think, is why undergraduate life has lost its vigour and its self-confidence. The Cold War has imperceptibly intruded its ambiguity into every remote corner of our landscape. We are afraid of everything except

our local and personal intimacies — and who can be sure that they will sustain us?2

The sixties however saw the revitalisation of student life. The left political clubs were reactivated, new groups formed; there were mass student demonstrations and subsequent arrests; there were sit-ins, free universities; the issues motivating the students ranged from internal issues like the condition and treatment of aborigines, to issues of foreign policy.

Some obvious reasons account for this revitalisation. First there was the slackening off of cold war hysteria which had crippled student life in the fifties. Secondly there was the influence of overseas events—such things as CND, the rise of the civil rights, protest and revolutionary movements in America and Europe. Thirdly there was the Vietnam war and the commitment of Australian troops to it, a supply fueled by youth conscripted under the National Service Act. Fourthly there is the point relating to all university students; being students they usually have no families to support, they are not committed to a 9 to 5 routine, they do not have to fear losing a job because they voice what some regard as unpopular social ideas. To these must be added the fact that the nature of universities makes “it relatively easy to mobilise students who are disposed to act politically.”3 Thus students have the ideal conditions facilitating political activity.

This and the previous point are significant when it is realised that in the sixties the universities increasingly became the repositories of youth between the ages of 17 and 22. In 1969, 8.3% of the Australian youth population in this age bracket was enrolled in the universities. Thus a large proportion of those most affected by something like the National Service Act were located in institutions which, by their nature, facilitated political activity.

The final point relates to the historic tradition of students as rebels and dissenters; they are expected to hold vital minority opinions and ideas, and be a thorn in the side of convention. A Daily Telegraph editorial (Nov. 16, 1946) for example expressed this when it stated that: “If (universities) don’t maintain a steady output of young revolutionaries they are not worth their salt.”

Together with this tradition is the universal point regarding educated young people, that they “tend disproportionately to

2 Murray Groves, quoted in Barcan, A., loc. cit., p 73.
support idealistic movements which take the ideologies of the adult world more seriously than does the adult world itself.”

This is relevant to what happened here in the sixties. For example when students began to look at the aborigines, instead of finding equality they found inequality in housing, education, and civil rights. The Student Action for Aborigines bus ride of February 1965 into Northern NSW revealed some of the tensions, the racial discrimination and segregation, that exist under the egalitarian facade of Australian society. This inequality in a society that proclaims equality motivated students in support of campaigns around aboriginal land rights, education, working conditions and social services, during the sixties.

Underlying these points is a more basic factor and this relates to the changes that have taken place in the universities themselves during the sixties. It is simply that the activity of students during this period, be it for increased participation in the decision making processes of the university, or against the National Service Act, “is founded on a substratum of frustrations and accumulated discontents related to the present character of the university,” The student activists of the sixties have been alienated by the university institutions.

These days the Australian universities are costing the taxpayer over $140 million. In the 1940’s the cost was nowhere near this. Universities were not intended to churn out 10,000 or so graduates a year but to replace and supplement a highly trained and specialised elite of technicians and professionals. Since the time of Menzies the demand has changed. It was during his term of office that

private businesses and State and Commonwealth public services put increasing pressure on the Government to expand tertiary education so that the Australian economy’s growing need for University trained specialists, technicians and economists, etc., could be met. The Government complied with these demands and started a rapid expansion of University facilities.6

However whilst there was a student population explosion there was no accompanying change in teaching attitudes; the relationship between student and teacher remained the same (that is there was a tremendous impersonal gap maintained between them), the ratio between staff and students fell, facilities were too inadequate to cater for the new demands. In fact the first “stay-in” by university students in Australia occurred over the

---


6 Allan, P. The Student Revolt in Australia, Honi Soit, September 19, 1969, p. 6.
issue of inadequate university library facilities. The issue of student power was first raised over the matter of fines at Sydney University's Fisher Library in 1967.

The increase in university size and enrolments brought about an increase in university bureaucratisation; students became computer numbers, they were photographed for identification purposes. University administration became a field in itself giving rise to professional administrators intent on "keeping in good" with business interests, and the State and Commonwealth Governments which finance their institutions. In turn the purse strings determined the type of education offered by the institution. The 1969 Australian Universities Commission grants to Sydney University, for example, favoured those faculties which produce graduates of value to business and the professions (engineering, medicine, dentistry, architecture, biochemistry) rather than those which enable students to gain a liberal education (Arts), and an application by the university to establish a chair in Sociology was knocked on the head.

However whilst the business and government interests favoured the professions and faculties providing graduates for industry, students themselves during the sixties wanted to study in the non-science faculties. In 1967 62.4% of new enrolments in Australian universities were in such faculties (e.g. Arts, Economics, etc.). The effect of this was twofold; first there was an overproduction of graduates for which the capitalist system had no use; second, there was a great proportion of students being trained to analyse and criticise the assumptions and values of modern society as they studied history, economics, political science, philosophy, psychology.

These then, as I see it, are some of the tensions, frustrations, and discontents beneath university life in the sixties, which provided the substratum for student revolt during the decade. And because this substratum exists in the universities they will remain as alienating institutions, and in the seventies they will have amongst their intakes students who first experienced radical politics in the high schools. The trends of the sixties will, I believe, continue. Universities will become more and more dependent upon government and industry, and subsequently more attuned to their dictates (wants). University autonomy will be threatened by the professional administrators and those faculties consciously geared to producing graduates for the capitalist system. The sixties were only a prelude.