RECENTLY there has been a spate of press predictions that 1970 will witness something of a retreat on the university front, a decline in student militancy and a return to a more moderate and restrained style of protest and action. It would be easy to dismiss these forecasts as wishful thinking were it not for the fact that the modes of student radical action in 1969 have produced an unmistakable reaction in some universities and a reappraisal by some student leaders of the tactics that characterised last year's confrontations.

There is, I believe, something of a crisis in the student left movement, here and overseas, and it is as well to recognise the fact and to try to determine its causes and possible remedies. There has already been some valuable discussion in ALR and elsewhere along these lines, and in this article I propose to widen the ambit of the debate by relating developments in Australia to those in Europe and the United States, and suggesting a general framework for the diagnosis of the crisis. Like all overviews, this attempt at analysis will be vitiated by unwarranted generalisations, but I am hopeful that this defect will be compensated for by the merits of provoking consideration of the wider context of Australian student problems.

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Looking back at the confrontations that took place in 1969 between student activists and authorities at various levels, others beside myself have been struck by the extent to which action tended to become a thing-for-itself, regardless of the significance of the issues involved or the likely social results that would flow from the actions. There were confrontations about serious and important issues; there were others, however, that were frivolous and irresponsible. Some of the leaders of these actions showed themselves unable or unwilling to discriminate between what was important and what was not, between what would arouse mass student support and what would involve only a small vanguard, between what would enhance the level of social awareness of the non-active student and what would retard it. On the whole, less and less respect came to be paid to the representative character of actions, and elitist traits among the leaders became magnified.

Along with this tendency, there was a pronounced shift towards authoritarianism and repressive intolerance among some of the elite radical groups. It became obvious that to some of these groups at least the goal of student action in the universities was not a freer and more democratic institution in a freer and more democratic society, but rather the substitution for one kind of repression of another characterised by political fanaticism.

Until the latter part of the year, the apostles of unbridled activism met with little opposition from any quarter on the left. Organisations of the non-student left appeared to be too eager to derive political profit from the heightened militancy to apply critical standards to it. Among the student activists themselves, too few possessed a developed theory of social action which would enable them to recognise the dangers implicit in the course which was being followed. Additionally, there existed among them a fear of being pre-empted on the left by extremists and being labelled “reformists” or “liberals” for opposing ill-conceived actions. Only when the self-defeating character of mindless activism became clear, did substantial criticism begin to develop. By this time, extremists were sufficiently in control of some student left organisations to ensure that they could be displaced only by a power struggle, thereby precipitating a further splintering of the radical movement. All these features were most apparent at Monash, where the ideolological and power warfare has been most acute, and where the implications for 1970 are still not clear.

The impetus for the turn towards activism (by which, in the present context, I mean a belief in action as a revolutionary weapon in its own right) stems, I believe, from the May 1968 events in
France. At that time, a quite specific and unusual conjunction of circumstances brought it about that a series of confrontations between students and the authorities, initiated without a great deal of forethought or perspective precipitated a national political crisis which came close to overturning the de Gaulle regime. The activist strain in this great contestation, represented above all in the person of Daniel Cohn-Bendit, derived considerable prestige from its role in the May events, and the influence of its ideas and styles began to percolate through the student movements of other countries, investing them with an aura and power which Cohn-Bendit's flair for charismatic projection did much to enhance.

But Benditism has a far different aspect when viewed outside the specific situation which gave it its moment of glory. I met up with the fiery redhead and a group of his followers in Northern Italy in September 1968, where their talents were deployed for the disruption of the World Anarchist Federation Congress. Apart from their overweening arrogance and vicious intolerance, I was impressed by their adamant refusal to discuss or contemplate a revolutionary perspective of social change, their insistence that action alone was its own realisation and would produce its own logic of change. Returning to Paris shortly afterwards, I experienced at first hand the practical application of the doctrine of the actionists. Hardly a night would go by on the Left Bank without a foray by miniscule groups of students, who would materialise from nowhere, smash a store window or overturn a car, then melt into the crowds on the boulevards. Within minutes, the detested flics would descend from their vans, looking in their weird get-up like outer space goons, and proceed to harry the innocent and unfortunate passers-by. The Paris intelligentsia, who in May had supported the students overwhelmingly, were by now thoroughly fed up with these senseless spectacles, and watched with aloofness the occasional skirmishes between police and those who claimed to be "making revolution" after their infantile fashion.

Despite the primitiveness of the nihilists, their notions have found a home in many student groups today which claim to be socialist, marxist, social revolutionary. The extent of the retreat from reason was underlined for me during a short visit to the United States last September, which I spent mostly on campuses in the South, in New York and New York State, in Southern Illinois and San Francisco. Having lost touch with the student scene in America over the previous two years, and carrying with me the ideas of it I had formed in 1966-67, I was overwhelmed by the change which had come over the radical student movement in the meantime. In place of the naive but appealing and optimistic moral fervour and
idealism of the earlier phase, I found almost everywhere I went a pronounced bias towards nihilism, the cult of violence and factional intrigue. The intensity of these symptoms varied from one locale to another, but the general trend was unmistakable and commented upon by every thoughtful leftwing student and staff member I met. Many veteran leftwingers among the intellectuals admitted to pessimism and depression, having failed in their attempts to deepen the social and political understanding of the student activists and interest them in the formulation of basic strategies for social change. All the vices of the old left seemed to be making a grotesque comeback, one sect in New York having resurrected as its hero none other than — Joseph Stalin! There were unpleasant but well-substantiated stories of the persecution by so-called leftwing student groups of distinguished marxist intellectuals whose only apparent crime was that they opposed the cult of irrationality. (Similar occurrences have been reported from France and West Germany.)

It would be unfair to present this as the only current in American student radicalism. I met such courage and self-sacrifice among small groups of students working in the racist South that I was humbled; and Berkeley, for all its quaintness, retains much of the spirit which made it a beacon for idealistic radicals all over the USA. But I cannot doubt that the trend I have described has made very great headway in the past two years, and as yet shows no signs of ebbing.

The achievements of the student New Left are already prodigious. To the student upsurge of the sixties we owe in large measure the breach made in the politics of consensus, the mass revulsion against the Vietnam war, a new level of concern about the rape of the third world, the exposure of the mythology of pluralism, new dimensions of social and moral critique of contemporary advanced society. The wave of nihilism that has swept over the movement threatens these achievements and the future of the left as a whole. It has many roots besides the French experience. Uncritical acceptance of Maoist doctrines concerning the power of “revolutionary will” has encouraged elitism and resort to heroics, for example. But one feature of American student radicalism has, I believe, special pertinence to the Australian scene.

In its beginning the United States’ student movement was notable for its neglect of ideology and strategic thinking, its idealistic worship of society’s victims, and its belief that a saving message would suffice to arouse mass revulsion against the oppressive social system. The initial vulnerability of the universities to radical action encouraged optimism about the brittleness of the power
structure as a whole. There was a widespread feeling that by going to the poor, the negroes, or the workers, a revolutionary conjunction would be effected that would shake the system to its foundations. Events soon exploded this disingenuous perspective—students came up against palpable facts about the resilience and ruthlessness of the power centres, and the extent to which these are sustained by the ideological hegemony which the ruling class exercises over the masses. We are now witnessing the reaction of the students to their disillusionment — idealism has turned to bitterness, worship of the masses to contempt for them, ultra-democratic politics to elitism, moral persuasion to the cult of violence. The similarities between this evolution and that which occurred in the case of the nineteenth century Russian populists is too obvious to need labouring.

The torment that afflicts American student rebels is not nearly so strongly felt in Australia. For one thing, one does not have to be long in the United States to appreciate how much more oppressively the weight of official power is felt there in comparison with this country. For another, the long tradition of moral righteousness in American politics of the right and the left is not nearly so dominant in Australia. Nevertheless, both because student radicalism has modelled itself largely upon American styles, and because the same sense of powerlessness in the face of official power and mass apathy operates in both countries (though to different degrees), there are reasons enough why we should experience a milder but sufficiently serious outbreak of nihilism.

The crucial problem in re-orienting the student left, and the left as a whole for that matter, remains what it has been for many years past: the elaboration of a coherent and viable strategy of revolutionary change, and the integration with this strategy of appropriate forms of political organisation and appropriate tactics. Since this is a major subject in itself, and one which is receiving attention in many places, I only want to make two propositions about it.

Firstly, if, as I believe, the springs of revolutionary socialist consciousness and action lie fundamentally in the social strains induced by the scientific and technological revolution, then it is obvious that strategy must be founded upon a profound critical analysis of this transformation, and a recognition that it is still in embryo. Strategy must be projected over the next decades; it must be a strategy of protracted social warfare. The student radical finds it hardest to think in terms of prolonged preparation of revolutionary change, both because patience is foreign to the young and because, for reasons connected with the nature of the scientific
revolution, his milieu (the university) has been affected more drastically in the early stages of the transformation than have other social structures. Lest there should be any misunderstanding, the recognition of the necessity for a protracted strategy does not involve a curbing of student radical action, but a conscious acceptance of the wider social integument to which it must adapt if it is to serve general revolutionary aims.

Secondly, there is the vexed and unresolved question of the major revolutionary actor. Traditionalists continue to argue that the industrial worker occupies this role, eclectics that the old and the new (or intellectually-trained) workers both have an equal place in revolutionary perspectives, and the "revisionists" that the decisive section now consists of the new working class. I do not propose to repeat here the reasons which place me in the third camp, but the importance of a correct identification of the major revolutionary actor cannot be over-emphasised. I will confine myself to pointing out the implications for the student leader who accepts the "revisionist" theory. If the intellectually-trained constitute the decisive long-term agents of transformation, then by concentrating upon the revolutionisation of the outlook of the student body, the student leader is not (as has frequently been argued) merely catering to a privileged minority, but nurturing the forces of future social change. But he must be sure that his sights embrace the entire student body, and must view the students moreover not only in their present and temporary role but above all in their more permanent role as technicians of the industrial and bureaucratic complex. Again, to avoid misunderstanding, I would stress that this perspective does not imply that the student leaders should ignore the question of the relationship between students and workers. The industrial worker does not disappear from the social and political scene merely because he is displaced as the major revolutionary actor, and the importance of the closest possible collaboration between student movements and organised sections of the intellectually-trained working class follows inescapably from the premises outlined above.

Many ill-informed people still believe that the staff of the political science department at the London School of Economics, once headed by Harold Laski, presents a serious threat to the ongoing system. In fact, almost all the teaching staff are either tired Fabian fact grubbers or ignorant Marcuse-baiters such as Maurice Cranston.

Laski's sole heir among the senior staff is the brilliant Belgian-born co-editor of the annual Socialist Register, Ralph Miliband, who is best known as the author of Parliamentary Socialism (1961). This work, an historical critique of the British Labour Party in terms of "parliamentary cretinism", demonstrated that Labour entirely excluded all forms of action except voting, debating and negotiating, including even the elementary militancy of industrial action. Not surprisingly, it was described by Bernard Crick, Miliband's former colleague at the LSE and a member of the Labour Party, as "a piece of protracted teleology, rather like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr's notorious history of the New Deal." (Most of the reviews of this book in the scholarly journals were completely illiterate, but an excellent critique by the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm appeared in Universities and Left Review). More recently, Miliband's support for the rebels during the LSE student revolt of 1968-69 did not improve his standing with the majority of his professional colleagues who when under pressure are every bit as reactionary as their counterparts in the US and Australia.

In his latest and most ambitious work, The State in Capitalist Society, Miliband begins with the recognition that since Lenin — with the exception of Gramsci — Marxists have made little notable attempt to explore the phenomenon of the bourgeois State in the light of the concrete socio-economic, political and cultural reality of actual capitalist societies. Several years ago Paul Sweezy observed that "this is the area in which the study of monopoly capitalism, not only by bourgeois social scientists but by Marxists as well, is most seriously deficient."

Miliband's book is a very substantial contribution to remedying the deficiency noted by Sweezy. It constitutes a major advance on works such as James Harvey and Katherine Hood, The British State (1958), not only because it comes to grips with and effectively demolishes the most influential schools of thought subscribed to by bourgeois political scientists and political sociologists but also because it confronts the cultural reality of advanced capitalism, an area of crucial importance which has been largely neglected by Marxists in the English-speaking world. Two long chapters are devoted to the processes of legitimation of advanced capitalist societies, e.g. education, the mass media and the churches. Miliband recognises that for the ruling classes in these societies there can be no enterprises of greater importance than the battle to persuade the subordinate classes to accept the existing social order and to confine their demands and aspirations within its limits.

After reading The State in Capitalist Society, one must turn to the lengthy
review in New Left Review No. 58 by Nicos Poulantzas who puts forward a number of very important critical comments although he recognises the fundamental merits of the work. Unfortunately Miliband does not deal with the Marxist theory of the State as such. By omitting the first step he finds it rather difficult to get beyond opposing "concrete facts" to the old notions but these can only be combated effectively by the explicit introduction of new concepts. Another important point raised by Poulantzas is that the churches, political parties, unions, schools, the mass media and the family should be considered, despite their relative independence and autonomy, as ideological apparatus of the State as opposed to the classical repressive apparatus of the State (government, army, public bureaucracy, etc.). According to Marxist-Leninist theory, a socialist revolution does not signify only a shift in State power, but it must equally "break" the State apparatus. The classics of Marxism have considered it necessary to apply the thesis of the "destruction" of the State not only to the State repressive apparatus, but also to the State ideological apparatuses. The advent of a socialist society cannot be achieved by "breaking" only the State repressive apparatus while maintaining intact the State ideological apparatus, taking them in hand as they are and just changing their function.

Notwithstanding these and other criticisms brought up by Poulantzas—which this reviewer accepts—Miliband's book remains a work of fundamental importance. He has demonstrated that the most important fact about advanced capitalist societies is the continued existence in them of private and concentrated economic power. As a result of that power, the owners and controllers in whose hands it lies enjoy a massive preponderance in society, in the political system, and in the determination of the policies and actions of the State.

JOHN PLAYFORD

Late News

The editors have pleasure in announcing that Roger Garaudy, eminent French marxist, has accepted an invitation by ALR to make a lecture tour of Australia in September this Year.

Further details will be announced shortly.