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PROTESTER DESOCIALIZATION AND THE FRAGILITY OF AMERICAN POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

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Numerous studies of American New Left activists have greatly increased our understanding of political protest phenomena. Particularly our comprehension of the sociological and psychological characteristics of protesters has been significantly enhanced (Keniston, 1968; Hampden-Turner, 1971). However, as some researchers have noted (Szliowicz, 1972:6-9), protesters' characteristics have been emphasized to the virtual exclusion of political variables.

While protest theorists (Useem, 1972) have frequently observed that a good deal of ideological change takes place during activists' protest careers, detailed studies of changes in the political attitudes of New Leftists over time have been notably absent. Whereas the processes by which political systems socialize the young into acceptance of prevailing political institutions have been extensively studied (Dawson and Prewitt, 1969; Langton, 1969), little attention has been devoted to the processes of desocialization.

For several reasons we should expect that regime socialization of the young is not always permanent. In their study of 5600 citizens in six developing countries, Inkeles and Smith (1974) found that individuals are not as resistant to political change after childhood as expected. Modern political attitudes are heavily influenced by experiences in later adolescence and early adulthood. Moreover, the Third World citizen's later acceptance of modern political attitudes tends to be enduring and irreversible.

Involvement in New Left protest activities by young citizens can be expected to result in significant ideological movement away from acceptance of the regime's political institutions. First, as Erikson (1970:164) noted, ideological experimentation is a

primary characteristic of late adolescence. Second, New Leftist psychology stresses process rather than achievement (Keniston, 1968:20). The purpose of New Left activities is the constant development of human potential rather than the attainment of a stable, mature, adjusted, and finished individual. Thus, we should expect a continuing willingness to reject existing political institutions in favor of experimentation with new political forms. Third, psychological studies (Hampden-Turner, 1971) have repeatedly shown a significantly higher degree of flexibility among New Leftist protesters than among their non-protesting counterparts. Hence, a substantial movement away from the dominant political system and a perpetual openness to new political institutions might be expected. Finally, actual participation in protest demonstrations and the like can frequently result in ideological radicalization. As Fendrich (1976:82) observed, "Participation in student protest is a powerful socialization experience. The behavior was intense, extensive, and produced strong reactions during a period of ... national crisis." Frequently experiencing the political system as unwilling to grant concessions but ready to apply repression should result in significant alienation from existing political institutions for many protesters (Adamek, 1973). Indeed, in a study of Japanese student activists, Kazuko (1969) found participation in demonstrations to be an important determinant of ideological change.

Not surprisingly, Maidenberg and Meyer (1970), Rosen (1975), and Keniston (1968) found American political protesters increasingly estranged from established political processes over time. By 1970, New Leftists had begun to attack the entire system (Adelson, 1972:9). However, our knowledge of exactly which political institutions suffered the greatest erosion, and particularly the correlates of that erosion, is highly limited. As Brown (1973:416-18) noted,

[A] n... important question for researchers may be to consider the effect of student political activity, especially demonstrations, on student political values and outlooks.... Although it is a commonplace by now that protest facilitates radicalization, most of the research has failed explicitly to examine this issue.

METHOD

To determine the exact nature of protester desocialization, an "expedient sample" (Gurre, 1972:40) of thirty-six New Left activists at the University of Kansas was interviewed in 1976-77. Many previous studies of New Leftists were conducted in the heat of political struggle and possibly elicited distorted responses (Isenberg et al., 1977:13). Horn and Knott (1971:977) noted that "when studies of emerging phenomena are based on observations gathered in a charged atmosphere and under changing conditions, the results are often inconsistent." Thus, the relative calm on campuses in the 1970s offers a unique opportunity for quiet reflection on New Leftist phenomena.

Popular conceptions of the conservative Midwest notwithstanding, the University of Kansas was a major center of campus unrest in the 1960s. Bayer (1972:88-91) found Midwest location of universities significantly associated with the absolute number of faculty supporting student unrest. According to a random sample survey of 490 students conducted by the Committee on Student Affairs of the Kansas University chapter of the American Association of University Professors in 1969, students were widely supportive of many protest causes.² Of those expressing opinions, 54.4 percent thought that government had too much influence in university policy-making, 74.3 percent thought the Kansas legislature and the Board of Regents had too much control over university life, and 35.5 percent felt that universities should become centers for the radical reform of society. Protesters were active in the publication of underground newspapers, sit-ins, antiwar vigils, and the disruption of ROTC activities. Bombings and violent clashes with coercive organs also took place.

A list of potential interviewees was drawn up from informal contacts (Crain and Crain, 1974). Two inclusion criteria—ideological and behavioral—were used. Each potential respondent was critical of "corporate liberalism" (Jacobs and Landau, 1966:74) and Old Leftism (Keniston, 1968:17) and desired a change of rather than in the system in favor of greater freedom, equality, and community (Wood, 1974:10-11). This criterion effectively excludes from the sample right-wing and moderate activists, liberal

fellow-travelers, and Old Leftists. A second criterion—participation in at least one physical form of confrontation with political authorities in 1960-76 (marches, picketing, demonstrations and the like)—effectively excludes the alienated who are less politically active ("hippies"). The last criterion of protest behavior appears more accurate than membership in protest organizations, which has been found unsatisfactory by other researchers (Kerpelman, 1972:61).

To a much greater extent than other surveys, studies of political extremists present the problem of respondent suspicion. A high level of repression substantially increased New Leftist distrust of researchers. Whereas Keniston (1968:10) was able to obtain a 100 percent response rate in 1967, later researchers have been less fortunate. Astin and others (1975:11), Turner (1975: 425), and Braga and Doyle (1971) reported campus protesters increasingly distrustful of social science researchers. Hadden (1970:330), Warren (1973), and Rosen (1975:46) also found black and Chicano activists highly suspicious of interviewers. Thus, to maximize response rate, a number of precautions were necessary. First, to avoid forcing compromising responses, inquiries were kept at a high level of abstraction. The proportion of open-ended questions, which also enhance depth, accuracy, completeness, and flexibility (Merritt: 1970:144-45; Mankoff, 1970:37-42), was maximized. Second, no tape recorders were used. Third, the respondents were informed that the research was totally independent and not associated with any institution, public or private. Fourth, complete confidentiality was assured. Finally, a wide familiarity with New Leftist goals, organizations, and personalities was demonstrated at the initial contact (see Glazer, 1966:368-369). As a result of these techniques, only 10 percent refused to participate, a response rate comparable to earlier studies (Crain and Crain, 1974:119; Glazer, 1966:372; Arciniega et al., 1973:91).3 The interviews were conducted in the respondents' residences and ranged from one to three hours. Despite the length, respondent attention never lagged seriously.

Table 1 reports sample characteristics. The frequency distributions are comparable to other analyses of New Left activists in terms of sex (Donovan and Shaevitz, 1973:383; Crain, 1972;

Braungart, 1971:446), academic major (Braga and Doyle, 1971), religion (Crain, 1972), and marital status (Keniston, 1968:261; Frendrich, 1974).

TABLE 1
SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Race ^a	Black	8.3%
	White	91.7
Sex	Male	77.8%
	Female	22.2
Religion	None	50.0%
	Jewish	2.8
	Catholic	5.6
	Protestant	41.6
Major ^b	Social Sciences	30.6%
3	Humanities	55.6
	Physical Sciences	5.6
	Mathematics	5.6
	Business	2.8
Mean Years Education		18.4
Marital Status	Single	33.3%
	Married	36.1
	Divorced	25.0
	Divorced and Remarried	5.6
Mean Number of Protest ^c		39.8
${\it Mean \ Number \ of \ Years \ Active \ in \ Protests}^d$	11.2	

^a The black respondents shared the basic political assumptions of the whites and favored joint activities with sympathetic non-blacks.

D Rounding error.

d Question: How many years have you been protesting actively?

The informal contact method appears to yield a disporportional representation of those at the most intense category of the characteristic studied. The present sample thus appears biased toward the "professional protester" or the most active of the activists. The average respondent had actively protested for 11.2 years and participated in almost 40 protest events. Moreover the interviewees were active in other parts of the United States. At least one protester had registered black voters in the South in the early

^c Question: How many times have you publicly and physically protested against political authorities?

1960s, joined the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, resided in Haight-Ashbury, rioted at the Democratic Party Convention in Chicago in 1968, traveled on the Venceremos Brigade to Cuba, participated in the famous 1969 SDS Convention, and demonstrated at Kent State University on May 4, 1970.

The sample size, though small, is comparable to similar studies (Crain, 1972; Rosen, 1975; Redding and Rice, 1975). However, attempts to extend the findings beyond the frontier of the merely exploratory and suggestive may entail certain inferential risks.

A thorny methodological problem is discovering whether political protesters become desocialized before or during their unconventional political activities (Fendrich, 1976:95). Evidence suggests, however, that the latter interpretation is more valid. As mentioned above, numerous reasons exist for contending that New Leftists actually changed their political beliefs during their protest careers. Moreover, few "red-diaper babies" have been found among New Left activists. Rather than being socialized as children into anti-systemic political beliefs, the protesters were highly socialized by parents into acceptance of existing American democratic institutions (Keniston, 1968; Miller, 1970). New Leftists scored very high on measures of participation in conventional political institutions prior to their protest (Thomas, 1971). Thus, protest activists tended not only to receive cognitive socialization into the system but also to be actively involved in its processes.

Nevertheless, to insure valid responses, the subjects were asked specifically whether they became more or less favorable or experienced little change toward major political institutions as a result of their protest activities. Although room still exists for measurement error, others (Christie et al., 1976:50-56) have found self-reports of protest characteristics valid measures.

FINDINGS

In Table 2 the frequency distribution of protester desocialization from five major American political institutions are given. Clearly, these institutions suffered serious erosion as a result of

protest activities during the New Left movement. Of the five, four were preceived by at least one-third of the respondents as less favored after protest activities than before. Only one was viewed more favorably by a majority of respondents.

TABLE 2
PROTESTER DESOCIALIZATION

Institutions	More in Favor	No Change	Less in Favor
Private Property	5.6	27.8	66.7
Rule of Law	13.9	36.1	50.0
Elections	16.7	38.9	44.4
Free Speech	61.1	38.9	0.0
Majority Rule	2.8	58.3	38.9

Views toward private property made the greatest shift in ideological valence. As one observer (Runkle, 1972:195) noted, "There is fairly general agreement among the student leftists that capitalism should be replaced by . . . [public ownership]." A minority of respondents either became more favorable or changed not at all—albeit with caveats.

Radio Technician:

No change. I respect it. I own

property now.

Psychology Major:

More in favor. I want a place to

call mine, but nobody should

have too much.

Former Political Prisoner:

No change. But it's the way

people get it that should be

questioned.

Yet a clear majority (66.7 percent) became less favorable.

Black Communalist:

It's a myth. It's property stolen

from the Indians.

SDS Member: Male Anarchist: It's adverse to orderly society.

We've come to a point now where we need force to take the wealth away from those who

are concentrating it.

Generally, the interviewees felt the bulk of private property to be concentrated in the hands of a few who used their wealth in their own self-interest to the detriment of the working classes, particularly non-whites. Concentration of economic power was used to influence public officials to make decisions contrary to the common good. The ultimate result of private property was the loss of citizens' control over their daily lives.

The rule of law suffered the next greatest erosion. One-half of the respondents became alienated from it as a result of protest activities. Crain (1972:215-17) and others (Bacciocco, 1974: 185; Jacobs and Landau, 1966:214-15) also found left-wing activists less willing to believe laws are necessary than non-activists. The Philosopher was representative of many respondents when he declared, "Now I think it's more proper to resist unjust laws." The respondents stressed informal, unwritten modes of conflictresolution rather than written, formal ones (Hampden-Turner, 1971). They also viewed the legal system as contrary to the ideal of full popular involvement ("participatory-democracy") in decision-making. From the beginning of the protest movement New Leftists saw the practical failure of the legal apparatus to protest civil rights activists in the South (Lakey and Oppenheimer, 1965:104; Grant, 1968:314-326; Blackstock, 1975:7). Finally, the legal machinery was seen in extreme cases as the means to repress protest activists (Draper, 1965:46). As the Quaker housewife noted, "I'm much more suspicious now about how law is used to reinforce the status quo."

Likewise a plurality of respondents (44.4 percent) came to disfavor elections, a phenomenon suggested by other observers (Garson, 1970:195-98); Lothstein, 1970:16). The most common response of those alienated from the electoral process was, "They are a farce." The undemocratic nature of the electoral college, the influence of corporate campaign contributions, the absence of real differences between candidates and their refusal to discuss important issues, and the false consciousness of the voters were the most frequently cited reasons for estrangement. Respondents generally preferred the emergence of situation-specific natural leaders to an apparatus easily manipulated by the powers-that-be (see Crain, 1972:217).

Although most interviewees (58.3 percent) did not change their position on majority rule, more came to disfavor (38.9 percent) than favor (2.8 percent) this institution.

Psychology Major:

I didn't like the way Nixon abused the country with his

"silent majority."

Commune Member:

What do you do when the majority decides to execute everyone with callouses on his left hand? There's no brother-hood or love in it. When there's brotherhood you don't even

need majority rule.

Psychologist:

It's all right if minorities are

protected. But they're not.

Thus, the alienated tended to prefer decision-making by consensus through extensive discussion, rather than majority-rule (see Crain, 1972:217).

The only institution showing not only little fragility as a result of protest activity but even a strong bolstering was free speech. Although some observers (Gerberding and Smith, 1970: 7-10; Brustein, 1971:144) have stated that New Leftists were contemptuous of free speech, none of the respondents agreed. Not a single interviewee became less favorable, while the great majority (61.1 percent) gained increasing respect (see Astin et al., 1971; Lowe, 1971). The Radio Technician insisted, "Free Speech is the best thing that came out of the protest movementpeople aren't getting as much static for saying what they think." Structural limits on impulse-expressiveness, a primary trait of New Left protesters (Hampden-Turner, 1971), was viewed as anathema by all the respondents. Thus, not surprisingly, restrictions on free speech by public officials were major precipitants of many protest demonstrations (Turner, 1975:446-47; Smith, 1971:151; Seabury, 1966:350).

CORRELATES OF PROTESTER DESOCIALIZATION

In Table 3 the correlates of desocialization from political institutions with various background, attitudinal, and behavioral variables are presented. Whereas background and behavioral variables are poorly correlated with desocialization, protest attitudes are often associated with estrangement. Whereas only 13.3 percent of the possible correlations of desocialization with background variables and 12.0 percent of those with behavioral variables are statistically significant at the .05 level or above, 28.8 percent with attitudinal variables are so.

TABLE 3 CORRELATES OF DESOCIALIZATION

	Institution				
	Property	Rule of Law	Elections	Free Speech	Majority Rule
Background					
Sex ^a	.24	.01	02	.12	.14
Years Education	01	14	11	.29*	.08
Age	.33*	08	.09	.08	.00
Protest Attitudes					
Instrumentalism ^b	.28*	.33*	.41*	51 *	.06
Protest Legitimacy ^C	.09	.06	.05	.13	.29*
Lower Class Legitimacyd	.05	08	.07	30*	10
Violence Justification ^e	.07	.33*	.33*	15	.31*
Lower Class Violence					
Justification	.30*	.03	.10	- 24	.16
Racial Violence			•		
Tustification ^g	.09	.21	.27	24	.05
Marxian Influenceh	.27	.34*	.22	46*	.33*
Protest Behaviors					
Leadership ⁱ	.05	.08	.06	25	12
Number of Protest				- •	4.5
Actions ^j	.27	04	07	04	.15
Issues Protested					0.7
Race	.07	07	11	26	.07
Vietnam	08	19	23	.10	.07
Labor	.32*	.25	.28*	39*	.33* .34*
University	.23	.17	.16	16	
Feminism	.24	.20	11	15	.14
Total Number of		• •	0=	27	.20
Issues	.22	.08	.07	27	.20

TABLE 3 CORRELATES OF DESOCIALIZATION (Concluded)

	Institution				
	Property	Rule of Law	Elections	Free Speech	Majority Rule
Repression ^k Years Active Protest	.09 .30*	.10 01	11 .17	05 19	.01 .00

*Significant at .05 level or above

a Coding: (0) Male; (1) Female.

b Question: How would you define political protest? (0) A mode of expressing one's beliefs (Expressive View); (1) A means of concrete political change (Instru-

mental View).

^c Question: Do you believe protest against political authorities is always legitimate?

(0) No; (1) Yes.

d Question: Do you believe protest by the lower class is more justified than protest by

other groups? Coding: (0) No; (1) Yes.

e Question: When is violent protest justified? Coding: (1) Never; (2) Sometimes in defense; (3) Sometimes in Aggression; (4) Always.

f Question: Do you believe the lower class is more justified in protesting violently than other groups? Coding: (0) No; (1) Yes.

g Question: Do you believe blacks are more justified in protesting violently than other

groups? Coding: (0) No; (1) Yes.

h Question: Were there any writers who moved you to protest publicly and physically against political authorities? Coding: (0) Marx unmentioned; (1) Marx

Would you consider yourself primarily a leader or follower during your

protest activities? Coding: (1) Always a follower; (2) Both; (3) Always a leader.

J Includes petition-collection, demonstrations, marches, vigils, strikes and the like.

k Question: Did you suffer any official repression as a result of your protest? Coding: (0) None; (1) Any harassment, administrative sanctions, imprisonment,

The respondents' sex, age, and education, as well as the degree of leadership influence, personal experience of repression, and extent and intensity of issue-involvement, show little association with protester desocialization. Only involvement in protest for better labor conditions and wages is connected somewhat consistently with ideological alienation. Those who protested for blue collar workers came to devalue private property, elections, majority rule, and to some extent, the rule of law. Apparently these institutions were viewed as especially poor machinery for redressing worker grievances in comparison with more unconventional modes such as picketing, slowdowns, strikes and the like. Anomalously, however, labor-protesters increasingly valued free

speech, presumably because they saw attempts to suppress the flow of information concerning labor grievances as particularly detrimental to worker causes.

Attitudes toward protest, however, are frequently related to desocialization. Of particular importance are instrumental views of protest, Marxian influence, and justification of political violence. Those who stressed an instrumental rather than expressive conception of protest reported Marx to be a major impetus to their initial involvement, and tended to justify violence as a legitimate political tactic in protest activities, thus revealing a high degree of ideological movement away from the political system. In another anomaly, however, these same respondents were increasingly socialized into the value of free speech. One might suggest that the instrumentalists saw a growing need for free speech as a necessary mechanism for achieving their goals. Likewise, respondents influenced by Marx were impressed greatly by his writings on liberation from alienation but not at all by his dictatorship of the proletariat theory. Thus, those influenced by Marxist beliefs increasingly came to accept free speech a necessary mode of alienation-therapy. Finally, those justifying political violence did so at times for the sake of free speech, as witnessed by many campus disruptions during the New Left movement. These respondents felt violence justified not to restrict freedom of expression but rather to prevent its suppression.

CONCLUSION

American New Leftists became increasingly disenchanted with dominant political institutions during their protest activities. According to Brown (1973:431), "Clearly, the difference that participating at all in the protests...made in changing a person's attitude is great." Private property, rule of law, elections, and to some extent majority rule, suffered serious erosion during the New Left movement. "Participation in student protest," as Fendrich (1976:82) noted, "is a powerful socialization experience."

Particularly those with instrumental, Marxian, and violent attitudes toward protest became increasingly alienated. Similarly those who protested in behalf of the working class grew especially estranged. Seemingly, Marx's prediction that capitalism's failure to resolve class conflict is the seed of its own destruction has some validity. The findings also suggest that Marx's theory of labor alienation represents a serious threat to bourgeois political institutions. Those New Leftists with a high level of class-consciousness were those most likely to reject the system's political mechanisms.

However, political protest was found to enhance the institution of free speech. The First Amendment guarantees were significantly strengthened in the minds of movement activists. Surprisingly, those New Leftists with class-consciousness were even more likely to value free speech than those without. Participation in class-conflict appears not to threaten but rather to bolster freedom of expression. Free speech came to be viewed as both an end and a means of improving the lot of the working class.

All political systems attempt to attain stability by socializing youth into prevailing political institutions. Yet when these same young citizens begin to discern that the system's performance fails to match its promise, the potential for protest behavior correspondingly increases (Brightman and Levinson, 1971: 120; Soares, 1966; Rogers and Thurber, 1973:247; Yang, 1973: 59). As a result of these unconventional political activities, significant desocialization from dominant political institutions occurs. When these mechanisms fail to redress citizen grievances, particularly when they are abused so as to cause and perpetuate grievances and prevent their redress, they show increasing fragility. In short, socialization into the system is successful to the degree that the system has the ability and willingness to match its deeds with its creed.

NOTES

- 1. I wish to thank Professor Paul Schumaker for his assistance at the beginning stages of the study and those who facilitated initial contacts with the respondents.
- 2. My thanks go to Professor Howard Baumgartel for his assistance in obtaining the final report on the survey, "Student Attitudes at Kansas University: April 1969."
- 3. For a general treatment of these techniques, see Babbie (1973:347-58). For a specific application to protester-respondents, see Glazer (1966).

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