The National Union of Students and transnational solidarity, 1958-1968

Abstract

In 1968 student activism and the international connections between students became a source of interest and concern throughout the world. These international connections, however, were far from new. Internationalism has always been at the core of the National Union of Students of England, Wales and Northern Ireland (NUS), the largest student organisation in the UK. The NUS represented the majority of British students, although their policies were never universally accepted but were the outcome of sometimes vociferous debate. In the years between the end of the Second World War and 1968 the NUS was deeply involved in setting up two international student organisations, the International Union of Students (IUS) and the International Student Conference (ISC), as well as developing their own bilateral connections with students around the world. The membership and leadership of the NUS were clearly interested, and concerned, about students internationally. However, the extent to which this interest and concern should be seen as solidarity or is more rightly a new manifestation of older British traditions of paternalism and liberal internationalism is questioned in this article.

Keywords: National Union of Students; international student movement; solidarity; empire; paternalism

'Many people believe there is an organized conspiracy behind student protests in different parts of the world, especially in the United States and Western Europe' reported Richard Davy in the *Times* at the end of May 1968.[1] Davy had looked for evidence of such conspiracy but had been unable to find it. Instead, he argued that students were simply concerned about similar things, influenced by the same thinkers and knew each other. 'Radical leaders', Davy found 'visit each other, exchange letters, papers and books, and organize demonstrations of mutual support'. Throughout the West in the late 1960s there was a 'moral panic' about student activism.[2] This fear manifested itself in a claim that young people were radically different from their parents, that there was a 'gap' between the generations that was impossible to overcome.[3] As Caroline Hoefferle has argued, the media representation of the 1968 protests left 'many with the impression that the protests were part of a generational revolt, something new and unique in the history of the world'.[4] This notion of the 'generation gap' had significant power at the time and continues to be drawn upon by both scholars and the public to explain and understand the 1960s, although it is not universally accepted.[5] For example, Richard Ivan Jobs points to travel throughout Europe in 1968 as creating a collective identity, an 'age-based solidarity that transcended national identity'.[6] Nick Thomas has argued that in Britain student protests should be seen as a manifestation of the changing role of young people within British society and an 'example of a common cohort experience'.[7] However, this 'generation gap' motif has more often served to obscure the real differences between groups of people, between student activists themselves and between student groups and the rest of the society, than it has helped to explain them.

Concern about the international 'contagion' of 1968 protests, underpinned by the notion that there was one unified international student generation, increased the interest of politicians and the media in the international connections between students. However, it did not increase these connections themselves. Before 1968, governments encouraged these contacts as a way of promoting unity and peace, or of spreading political messages.[8] In fact, international student networking, co-operation and activity were well established before 1968. One of the key components of student unions and student organisations around the world has been their international work. The personal relationships that this activity had established were a cornerstone of the feelings, and activities, of solidarity displayed by

western students in 1968. But they were not new.[9] As Georgina Brewis has shown, British students played an active role in fundraising and voluntary work for overseas causes and international relief efforts in the inter-war period in particular around the Spanish Civil War.[10]

The history and role of international student networks and organisations has been touched upon only lightly within the literature. There are a few works which focus on these organisations, but they tend to be preoccupied with the relationship of these organisations to wider Cold War scenarios.[11] These are important stories to tell, but they do not tend to explore the intentions and attitudes of student leaders themselves, instead looking at the ways in which students may have been manipulated for larger Cold War aims. Yet, regardless of the question of potential manipulation, student leaders from a variety of nations worked tirelessly to build international relationships throughout the post-war period. Their motivations have varied and deserve closer inspection. This article does not attempt to trace the international attitudes and ideas of European students more broadly. Instead, it focuses on the National Union of Students of England, Wales and Northern Ireland (NUS), the largest British student organisation at this time. Rather than discussing the build-up to the 1968 protests, the article examines the decade before 1968. It thus sheds light on a period which has often been overlooked in the obsession with 1968 but which, nonetheless, created the particular context on which connections during 1968 could be based or developed.

The NUS and its Contexts

The role of British student union leaders in building international organisations and international connections has often been relegated to the side-lines. But to NUS leaders, this aspect was central.[12] The NUS was created in 1922 in order to represent British students on the international stage. Its membership grew throughout the twentieth century so that by 1968 the NUS had 380,000 members in 700 universities and colleges in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.[13] While the NUS was by far the largest British student organisation in the post-war period, it did not represent the views of all students. Only a minority of students ever became sufficiently active in their local student union to attend one of the NUS's twice yearly conferences where the organisation's policies were made. Even fewer stood for election to the executive committee of the NUS. The policies enacted by the NUS did represent the views of the majority of members attending Conference, but it is often the debates during the passing of resolutions which is particularly revealing of the diversity within the NUS and the British student body more widely.

In the mid-to-late 1960s the NUS was seen and characterised by a number of student leaders as 'moderate' or even conservative in its political views. In this period, there were two 'break-away' students' organisations, the Radical Student Alliance and the Revolutionary Socialist Students Alliance, both of whom were highly critical of the NUS and its apolitical stance.[14] Throughout the period under investigation here, the NUS only discussed matters, both international and domestic, that affected students *because* they were students. Particularly by the mid-to-late 1960s, this policy came under pressure. As student activism grew in Britain and throughout the West, the NUS became internally divided and attracted increasing criticism from the outside.

Despite the fact that the NUS does not represent the views of all British students, nor even necessarily of all British students who were members and active within the NUS, the minutes of their conferences are an extremely useful, and relatively untouched, archival source. They do not simply record the resolutions agreed at conference, but are verbatim minutes of the discussion and debate which took place on a variety of topics. One thing which is evident in these minutes was the concern of NUS members with events and student

welfare around the world. It is clear that the welfare and well-being of students in all parts of the globe was a high priority for the majority of those attending NUS conferences.

What is less clear within these minutes is the activists' concern for students abroad and the extent to which this can, or should, be seen as an expression of international or transnational solidarity. As Patricia Clavin has noted, the 'transnational turn' in the 1990s stemmed from a desire to move away from histories of the nation or comparisons between nations. Instead it 'sought to stress the entanglement of peoples, ideas, technologies and economies with cultural, political and social movements'.[15] Pierre-Yves Saunier has defined transnational history as that concerned with three 'big issues' of historicising contacts and connections between countries, regions or continents, exploring the foreign content of domestic features and vice versa and analysing the 'trends, patterns, organisations and individuals' that cross territorial boundaries.[16] For Skinner and Lester, transnational history is concerned with '"movements, flows and circulations" and the processes which shaped and regulated them'. While the work of the NUS is certainly transnational in this way, it does not adhere to one of the key definitional requirements used by some American scholars, which requires the involvement of people across three or more nations.[17] Instead, it may more readily conform to more traditional views of international action in which organisations or people in one state work with those in another. National boundaries are crossed, but not questioned or undermined. In fact, the international interest and work of the NUS may conform to that of international humanitarian work based on the linkages of empire than other examples of transnational solidarity seen from the 1970s on.[18]

These definitional challenges relate to the question of what is meant by solidarity and what solidarity looked like in the 1950s and 1960s. At its most basic, perhaps, it is a feeling of connection, of shared interests and aims. Skinner and Lester argue that there have been 'various ways of interpreting the rise of concern for distant strangers' which is the foundation of solidarity. These can be quite practical accounts of the importance of solidarity for easing class tensions at home, to cultural reasons 'founded on a religious sense of obligation' to more fundamental ones 'based on the advantages of reciprocity in a more interconnected and complex world'.[19] David Featherstone argues that solidarity is a 'central practice' of the political left and means much more than a feeling of 'likeness'. Instead, solidarity is a 'transformative relation' that does not merely reflect and bind together pre-existing communities, but actively shapes political relations and spaces forging links between previously independent groups and, in the process, politicising them.[20] Richard Ivan Jobs argues that in 1968 young people 'regarded themselves as a community with mutual interests and an interconnected well-being'.[21] But what about students outside Europe or those who did not share a common European identity? For Quinn Slobodian, it is exactly these links between students in Europe and elsewhere that are important. It was from activists in the 'third world', he argues, that students in Germany 'learned insight and a sense of political authority'.[22] Over the course of the 1960s, young people increasingly made connections between the things they saw as 'wrong' in their societies: from the Vietnam War, to racism and class inequalities.[23] However, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which this sense of inter-connection, the idea that fighting a battle on one issue was part of a larger war, can be equated to feelings of solidarity between people.

The minutes of NUS conferences over the period from the late 1950s to the late 1960s show that the majority of those who attended these meetings were concerned about students around the world. They felt that they should support and assist students, but they did not necessarily think that the circumstances of these students were the same as their own. Students in Britain were internationally minded but did not exhibit 'solidarity' in the sense of believing they shared a common experience with students around the world. Instead, they showed more longstanding British feelings of 'obligation' or 'responsibility' or even

'paternalism' rather than solidarity. While they did work to support students in other places, and therefore at least to a limited extent felt a sense of shared interests or aims, this was largely a one-way relationship. The power dynamic between students in Britain and those in the developing or 'third world' was clearly unequal. British students felt that they should help and support students around the world, but did not expect these students to support them in return. Perhaps the only exception to this in the UK is found within the student members of People's Democracy, a civil rights organisation in Northern Ireland created in late 1968.[24] During the early 1970s, they sought to build connections with working-class groups in Northern Ireland as well as solidarity networks with the Black Panthers in the United States and the Palestinian liberation struggle. Unfortunately, this organisation is beyond both the scope and the time frame of this article.

By the late 1960s, students in Britain were becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the models of international work and solidarity being offered by existing organisations, including the NUS. This can be seen in both the changing of the NUS constitution to allow it to take a stand on political issues and the growth and development of the NUS supported Student Community Action programme.[25] In order to explore the dynamics of this transitional phase for the NUS, the next section of this article will consider attitudes towards internationalism within the NUS in the decade before 1968. The focus will then shift to the NUS's relationship with the two post-war international student organisations. Finally, it will look at how the NUS attempted to build direct connections with international student groups. The overarching argument in these section is that the NUS and its membership were certainly internationally minded and cared about the plight of students around the world, yet that their actions and activities were not the result of 'solidarity'. Instead, they were a modern form of British 'paternalism', more in line with 'liberal internationalist' traditions than the radical student movement that was emerging at the end of the 1960s.[26] Even in this period at the end of empire, as Anna Bocking-Welsh has shown, the 'habits of mind associated with imperial philanthropy and trusteeship' carried on both amongst those who supported empire and those, like the NUS, who were vociferously anti-imperial.[27]

Attitudes towards internationalism within the NUS

The NUS was created with international solidarity in mind. It was, at its core, an outward-looking organisation concerned with what was happening to students around the world. The reasons for this international interest arguably fit the 'liberal-internationalist' mould that was popular in the wake of the First World War.[28] The NUS was formed in the wake of the international initiative to establish the *Confédération Internationale des Etudiants* (CIE) in 1919, which sought to unite national student unions. By 1937, 42 national student unions were represented within it and it was the official international student organisation recognised by the League of Nations.[29] The non-political orientation of this organisation, which is commonly expressed in the idea that they only dealt with issues that affected 'students as such', was a cornerstone of European student unions well into the post-war period. The CIE collapsed in June 1940 when Paris was invaded by the Nazis and their offices and records were seized and destroyed.[30]

The war also caused some problems for the NUS. Some of the organisation's trustees believed that they should stay neutral and wind up operations during the war, while the NUS President at the time, Brian Simon, argued that the NUS had a significant role to play in supporting students during the conflict.[31] While this was a debate about the role of the NUS within British society, it was also a battle of personal wills and political affiliations, as Simon and a number of other members of the NUS executive at this time were Communists and were, therefore, mistrusted by several of the trustees. Simon and the NUS Council did prevail and were able to keep the NUS going during the war.[32] In 1941 they set up a new

organisation, the International Council of Students, to help maintain contact between students in allied countries. When the war seemed nearing an end in 1944, this organisation was disbanded to make room for a new, more inclusive, international student organisation to which we will return in the following section.[33]

While the war is often seen as a watershed, the case of the NUS suggests that student attitudes to internationalism and international solidarity remained remarkably constant between the late 1940s and the late 1960s.[34] Similarly, while the New Left had a significant impact on the growth and development of a 'student movement' in several Western countries, particularly the United States, their impact on students' unions and the NUS in Britain was rather limited.[35] In the late 1940s and early 1950s the NUS remained strongly international in focus. Many NUS members were deeply concerned about international affairs. But over the course of the 1950s some members and leaders of the NUS argued, with limited success, that the NUS should be more concerned about the welfare of their own membership than about students abroad. In 1958 the NUS President Roland Freeman's closing address at the end of his tenure showed his concern with the NUS's focus on internationalism. He said that he was particularly proud of his role in

> the major switch in time spent on the Union's policy from International Affairs to Grants and Welfare. When he had taken over there had been two Executive members responsible for International Affairs in addition to the President, whereas the whole field of Grants and Welfare had been in the charge of one member. The position was now reversed, with one Executive officer looking after international affairs, and three sharing the work of the Grants and Welfare Department.[36]

This reversal was the result of Freeman's hard work and determination – the extent to which it reflected the desires of the membership more generally, or even students at large, is difficult to determine. As the President of the University of London Union said that same year, the efforts of their union were bent on 'establish[ing] a world society based on international understanding'.[37] The year after Freeman left the Presidency one of the new Vice-Presidents Mr. Watson reported on the 'substantial increase in opportunities to co-operate on a personal level with a large number of foreign student leaders' over the past year.[38] In 1960 it was clear that a great deal of work was still going into the international department which, it was said, was 'undertaken in the firm belief that the NUS was part of a world-wide student community, with common interests and objectives'.[39] In 1965 the NUS President Bill Savage, reflecting on changes in the NUS during the past decade, said that 'the needs of students in other parts of the World had been increasingly recognised [by the NUS]'.[40] Despite the best efforts of people like Freeman, the NUS was becoming more rather than less concerned about students abroad. They expressed a feeling of solidarity but it was intimately tied to longstanding British feelings of 'benevolent leadership' and international responsibility that had informed British imperialism since the late eighteenth century and continued well into the mid-twentieth century.[41].

The NUS relationship with the IUS and ISC
In 1970 Richard Altbach published one of the first scholarly articles exploring the international student organisations and their relationship to the 'student movement' of 1968. Altbach argued that the international organisations were 'essentially "extra-student" in nature' and that the 'upsurge in student activism' had developed from 'the frustrations and intellectual ferment of the students themselves' rather than from these organisations.[42] Yet, he did highlight the importance of these international organisations, particularly their publications, in spreading information about the plight of students in different parts of the

world.[43] While Altbach did not feel that the international student organisations then in existence were responsible for the internationalism of the 'student movement', he was clear that national student unions throughout Western Europe, at the least, were in regular contact with one another sharing information and attempting to find ways of working together.[44]

In the wake of the Second World War student unions across Europe and around the world were united in their desire to prevent a resurgence of fascism.[45] Student groups from across the growing Cold War divide were brought together by this ethos in 1946 when a new international student organisation, the International Union of Students (IUS), was created. The NUS was intimately involved in setting up the IUS but was unable to create the kind of organisation they wanted. The IUS headquarters were established in Prague and quickly came to represent, or were perceived to represent, the interests and ideas of the Soviet-controlled Eastern bloc. Their aims were firstly to be a representative international student body, second 'to provide the means of cooperation between national representative, democratically controlled organisations of students…' and finally 'to enable the students of the world to contribute to the development of a fuller democracy, especially socially and culturally.'[46]

However, student groups from the West and East had quite different views about what the main role of an international student organisation should be. As Altbach has argued,

> Communists and other leftist elements wished to create a strongly political movement which could provide leadership and direction to student unions in member countries, act as a militant spokesman for university students, and take a prominent part in the student struggle against colonialism, and specifically against the western powers.[47]

Within the Western unions, however, there was a desire to re-create the international student organisations as they had been before the war, focusing on services for students rather than politics. This was certainly the view of the NUS who were concerned about being involved with an organisation which would require them to break the strictures of their own constitution.

Moscow's involvement in the IUS was one of the key arguments used by NUS leaders in the late 1940s and early 1950s for ending their membership of the IUS and helping to set up the rival international student organisation the International Student Conference (ISC). The other main reason was that the IUS discussed political issues beyond the scope of the NUS constitution. Already by 1948, several member organisations of the IUS were becoming uncomfortable with the degree to which the latter was discussing and creating policy on political matters. The national student organisations of the United States, Denmark and Sweden as well as the NUS made complaints along these lines to the IUS leadership and eventually left the organisation, arguing that it had strayed beyond issues that affected 'students as such'. Those student organisations which left the IUS in 1948 worked together to set up the ISC, which was much more explicitly limited, at least initially, to discussing matters only as they impacted on students and focusing on 'practical projects' rather than politics. The first meeting of the ISC took place in 1950 and its headquarters were established in Leiden, Netherlands. The ISC met annually and grew substantially in its membership throughout the 1950s: at its fifth meeting in 1955 in Birmingham there were 52 international student unions in attendance. However, over the course of the 1950s there was pressure put on the ISC too to discuss, debate and pass resolutions on 'political' matters which went beyond the NUS constitution and this increasingly became a cause of concern for the NUS.

These two competing international student organisations have been the subject of limited historical analysis and relatively little debate. It is clear, as it was at the time, that the IUS was dominated by those in sympathy with communism and, more specifically, the Soviet regime. The bulk of IUS funding came directly from Moscow. Of course, that did not mean

that the organisation was always unified.[48] After 1950, the majority of the student unions that were still members of the IUS had clear communist sympathies.[49] Joel Kotek has done extensive work tracing the role of the Soviet Union in a variety of student and youth organisations throughout the period from the 1930s into the 1960s and argues that between 1945 and 1950 'the representation of young people at the international level was a Soviet monopoly'.[50] However, it was the political affiliation and funding of the ISC that stirred the most controversy in the 1960s, and this has been the subject of more extensive historical debate. This controversy began in 1967 with the publication of articles in *Ramparts* magazine and *The New York Times* which exposed the CIA financing of the United States National Student Association and the ISC.[51] While the ISC took a more Western stance to counter-balance the Soviet domination of the IUS, it had prided itself on its objectivity and independence. By 1970 Altbach could state that 'individuals involved in international student affairs are well aware of the ideological biases of [both] the ISC and IUS'.[52] Altbach was clear that the ISC had been created to meet the needs of Western governments rather than students saying that 'as western governments saw the need for a counterweight to the IUS, the financial situation of the newly formed ISC became brighter and funds were available for its expanding programmes.'[53] More recently, Karen Paget has shed light on CIA involvement in the creation of the ISC. While she admits that the financial subsidies did not begin until after the Co-ordinating secretariat of the ISC (COSEC) was created, she argues that the CIA was intimately involved in its creation through covert actions and the selection and training of specific individuals.[54] Paget suggests that the US government sought to obscure their involvement and to this end they put others 'often Sweden or Britain in the lead'.[55] However, it is clear from the NUS archives that this was not their interpretation of the British involvement in setting up this organisation. Although it is indisputable that American government money was involved in the ISC, it is too simple to suggest that those British students who were also involved were manipulated by the Americans and did not have their own motivations and objectives for the new organisation.

The NUS did not have an easy or straightforward relationship with either international organisation, despite being involved in the creation of both. In 1951 NUS membership in the IUS was the subject of a referendum which called for the NUS to leave the IUS but remain 'fraternally associated'.[56] The desire to stay connected to the IUS despite deep concerns about the running of the organisation resulted from the NUS's belief in its importance within the international student movement. In 1958 President Freeman argued that the NUS was unique because it was 'the only Union in the world which had attended every meeting of the IUS since 1946, and every International Student Conference since its inauguration in 1950'. In so doing, they had played 'a greater part in striving for true international student co-operation than any other Union'.[57] The NUS defined its position with regard to the international student organisations as parallel to Britain's position on the world stage: activists expressed the view that Britain, and British organisation like the NUS, could mediate between two power blocks and help to facilitate peace and mutual understanding. They believed that their activities would spell either the success or the failure of both organisations, and they referred to the 'internationally important role that the student movement in this country held in the hearts and minds' of students overseas.[58]

In 1961 the NUS adopted a statement on world student unity which instructed the Executive 'to continue to negotiate and work for the uniting of the world's national student organisations in one assembly, based on principles of equality, freedom of action and mutual respect.'[59] They set out to 'do all within its [NUS's] power to consolidate and extend the present friendly student relations between Britain and the U.S.S.R.'.[60] The extent to which this truly reflected their international reputation could be debated. The dominant position within the NUS during the 1950s and 1960s was that international power and clout relied on

an involvement with both international student organisations. In 1964 Council mandated the NUS Executive to devise a plan to promote 'world student unity' which started with 'finding common ground between the ISC and the IUS'.[61] This resolve was tested the following year. In 1965 the Executive presented a report to Council on the international student organisations. The delegate from Leeds University had been on the committee that wrote the report but had been unhappy with their findings and produced his own minority report. In this minority report he argued that it was 'an insult to the students of those [82] countries [that were members of the IUS] with such varied opinions to suggest that the IUS was nothing more than the student wing of an international Communist conspiracy'.[62] He advocated that the NUS leave both the IUS and ISC, saying that their mere existence prevented student co-operation and student unity and therefore the NUS 'should keep out of both and speed the day of world student unity and co-operation'.[63] This statement was met with 'prolonged applause' from the roughly 400 delegates. It was then decided that the NUS should withdraw from both international organisations in order to work independently for world student unity. NUS policy, then, was to 'break the barriers which divided the students of the world' and this they would do alone.[64] This confidence in the ability of the NUS and British students to lead the students of the world is reflective of a long-standing confidence in the administrative ability of Britons and their role in international service, as highlighted in 1962 by Prime Minister Douglas-Home comments on the 'British genius for voluntary effort and coordination'.[65] Both the British government in the early 1960s and the majority of the NUS in 1965 agreed that British people and British organisations had both a particular right and responsibility to lead and organise internationally.

However, the Executive of the NUS had serious doubts about this position and spent the next year working to reverse this decision by touring individual Universities to convince students' unions to support the Executive position. The Executive believed that in light of the Cold War division in the international student movement 'this National Union, in close co-operation with other National Unions with similar aims, must take an initiative to overcome these tendencies in the student world and begin to provide the basis for international student co-operation'.[66] By April 1966 the Executive had managed to convince enough local students' unions of their position that conference passed a resolution stating that

> it is impractical for NUS to play a large part in international student affairs on an 'independent' basis, and that there is at present no organisation other than the ISC in which NUS could join without betraying its principles of independence of partisan politics, but aware of the barriers of integration of the IUS and the ISC shall, whilst a member of the ISC press UNESCO to set up or sponsor a wider international student movement in which committed members of the IUS and ISC might join on an equal basis.[67]

This motion clearly put forward the idea that the NUS occupied an international mediating position. They were going to bring together the two opposing groups of students and facilitate student co-operation between Cold War camps. But it also clearly positioned the NUS as working through international organisations rather than 'independently'. As the delegate from King's College, London asked 'since when had NUS followed, rather than led? Surely they had to lead international commitments? Surely NUS had stability which other unions had not got? For God's sake, why could they not grasp this opportunity and lead and not follow…?'[68]

These divisions both within the NUS and the international student movement persisted. In fact, the Cold War mentality of the international student movement worsened in the years immediately following this debate. As mentioned above, in 1967 *Ramparts* magazine revealed the financial connection between the ISC and the CIA. This sparked a

great deal of controversy throughout the student movement and within the NUS itself. At the Council meeting following this discovery the minutes referred to the 'James Bond atmosphere' of the debates about the IUS and ISC.[69] Once again, it was suggested that the NUS disaffiliate from both international organisations and 'work for genuine co-operation outside any organisation' based on 'NUS's historic role in international affairs [which] emanated from the fact that they had often been prepared to take the initiative in international involvement.'[70] The debate centred around the NUS's obligation to 'third world' student unions and their assumed historic and current role in leading those students who were, apparently, incapable of leading themselves. A delegate from Durham University argued that

> as long as they remained members of a small body like this [the ISC] which did not reflect the trend of world student opinion NUS could not take the lead in setting up a third world student organisation which any national union could join without having to salve the conscience of their members….Countries which belonged to both these unsatisfactory organisations because they could not decide which was the lesser of two evils would welcome a lead from NUS so that they could set up a student organisations which was concerned with education, not with being pawns in the cold war. National unions throughout the world [she argued] were waiting for such an invitation from NUS….[71]

In the late 1960s, therefore, the dominant position within the NUS was shifting towards those students who believed the organisation's role was one of independent international leadership. The involvement of the NUS in the IUS and ISC was partly resulted from a genuine desire for international student unity which came from a feeling of connection or solidarity among students. But this debate also reveals the intention of British students to *lead* these organisations. The NUS was not willing to simply be a member of these groups and show solidarity with other student unions, but sought to determine the actions and activities of these groups. The debates about NUS relations with these two organisations are, at their heart, debates about the role of British students on the international stage. The belief of the NUS in the right to lead reveals a mindset rooted in imperialism and paternalism.

NUS and international activity outside of organised groups

The membership and leadership of the NUS were not only interested in the organised international student movement but clearly articulated concerns about the plight of students around the world both inside and outside of the organised student groups. The NUS sought to ensure direct one-to-one relationships with student groups and unions around the world. A great deal of time at each Conference was devoted to the International Report in which status updates were given about a variety of countries. Often delegates from international student unions also attended NUS Conferences as observers and were given the opportunity to address Conference.

In April 1958 the NUS re-drafted its international policy, which defined its international concerns and set up the bases for its international activity. The new policy declared the NUS's 'desire to co-operate on a basis of equality with students in all parts of the world in practical activities' which they would endeavour to do by promoting 'friendly relations with all other National Unions of Students' or University or College bodies where no national body existed. They were clearly anti-colonial and employed a rhetoric of equality.[72] The second point of this policy set the NUS against 'any discrimination against a student on the ground of his race, religion, class or political beliefs'. The rest of the statement re-iterated NUS's commitment to scholarship schemes, particularly for students from 'under-developed or under-privileged countries'.[73] Clearly, British activists were concerned about

students around the world and committed to supporting them. What is less clear is that they felt a sense of commonality, or solidarity, with these students.

The International Section of the NUS reported to Conference on a wide range of issues relating to students overseas.[74] In 1961, they protested against the French Government's withdrawal of funding to the Union National des Étudiants Français (UNEF)[75] as well as 'Government persecution and unjustified interference in student organisations in Paraguay, Nicaragua, Mexico and Haiti'.[76] They also offered their 'full support to the African students from Portuguese colonies … in their efforts to improve the student situation both in Portugal and in their own countries'[77] and passed a resolution condemning actions against students in the Sudan, Chile, Iran and Spain.[78] Throughout the 1960s the situation of these students and many others like them around the world were frequently mentioned.[79]

The issue which most stirred students in Britain into statements of support and solidarity was discrimination based on race. The importance of this issue to the NUS reflects the legacy of the Second World War and the international drive to discredit the notion of 'race' in the immediate post-war period.[80] But it also reflects the growing racial tensions in Britain in this period and the desire of the NUS to distance itself from what it saw as increasing racial discrimination.[81] In the late 1950s and early 1960s the two most important issues related to 'race' were the civil rights campaign in the United States and apartheid in South Africa.

The NUS applauded 'the action of coloured students in the Southern States of the U.S.A. in their protests against discrimination on the grounds of colour' and expressed their 'sympathy and solidarity with those American students who are trying to obtain basic constitutional rights and freedoms for coloured students in the U.S.A.' in 1960.[82] The following year it welcomed 'the fresh attempts made by the new Kennedy administration to eliminate racial discrimination in Schools, Colleges and Universities'.[83] British activists also followed press coverage of individual incidents, for example in the case of James Meredith the first African-American student at the University of Mississippi. It is important to note, however, that their 1960 statement of solidarity was for white students in the United States working *for* black students. There was no real sense that students in the NUS believed they shared a common experience with African-American students. Instead, their concern was part of a larger attempt to come to terms with the end of the British Empire. The NUS was engaged in creating a vision of post-imperial Britain which included standing up against racial discrimination. This was coupled with a desire to 'forget' about British actions around the world and therefore it was easier to focus on racial discrimination perpetrated by Americans than to look at the racial discrimination taking place at the same time in the United Kingdom.[84]

It was South African apartheid that produced the longest, and the most troubled, conversations at NUS Conferences. These debates were intimately tied up with discussions about the limits of the NUS constitution itself rather than whether they should oppose apartheid and until 1970 they confined themselves to opposing apartheid in education only.[85] Despite the limits of their own constitution the NUS did pass a resolution in 1959 which requested that members of NUS 'carry out an individual boycott of these [South African] goods, as a practical measure to remove racial discrimination from higher education in S. Africa' in line with the request from the ANC.[86] The NUS also worked closely with the National Union of South African Students throughout the 1960s, offering them offices when they were officially banned.[87]

In a number of NUS's international activities and statements of support, including those about South Africa, there is a clear sense that their concern emanated from a feeling of guilt or responsibility. The NUS took particular interest in countries where Britain had, or continued to have, an imperial presence. While the NUS clearly and explicitly opposed

empire – saying it was a governmental system which mitigated against education – its pronouncements conformed to attitudes of 'benevolent empire'.[88] Mr Watson, one of the NUS Vice-Presidents in 1959 argued that the NUS 'could play an important part in offering help' in colonial and Commonwealth countries. He thought that his organisation 'had a unique function as far as the welfare of colonial and commonwealth students was concerned which should not be disregarded'.[89] The NUS directly supported student groups in existing and former colonies.[90] Its Executive also pressured the UK government to increase educational facilities in the colonies and protectorates in the late 1950s and early 1960s saying that this 'was the most important work NUS had done in the colonial field for a long time'. The NUS did this work because 'students in this country had a special responsibility towards students in Colonial territories, particularly in Africa'.[91]

The NUS maintained a specific concern for students in Britain's colonies during the 1960s, although decolonisation rendered NUS terminology somewhat confused. In 1953 the NUS Conference decided to divide 'overseas affairs' into two parts: Colonial Affairs and Commonwealth, and International Affairs. By 1961, delegates viewed this division as an anomaly, making this matter a subject of extensive debate. Concerns were raised that affairs in former colonial countries should not simply be treated like any other international issue. It was, however, finally decided that 'motions concerning students in Colonial and Commonwealth countries should be taken under International Affairs'.[92] Where the NUS drew the line about what was considered 'international' is also quite revealing. As well as sometimes including Scotland in its international report – as the Scottish Union of Students did not join the NUS until 1970 – there was a rather blurred line about 'race' delineating 'foreignness'. This aspect illustrates mid-century views of the interconnection between Britishness and 'whiteness'. [93] For example in 1963–1964, there was an ongoing issue with the Whiskey-a-go-go club in London which was exercising a colour bar. The NUS and London student unions were actively working to oppose this policy, but reported this action within the 'international report' at Conference.[94] In what way a club in London could be considered 'international' is unclear, but this does illuminate the way in which 'race' or 'racial problems' were constructed in the 1950s and 1960s in Britain as issues that were international rather than domestic in character.[95]

In making statements of support for the welfare of students around the world, or simply taking an interest in their plight, the NUS defined its place within the imagined British identity of altruism and liberality.[96] As a delegate to the NUS Conference noted in November 1959, 'students in this country were not cowards' and should therefore do anything to help students in South Africa.[97] NUS delegates recognised that they were in a privileged position and some argued that this gave them even more responsibility to help others. As another delegate put it the same year, 'students in the U.K. lived in an affluent society and sympathy with students in less happy circumstances must appear somewhat false unless it could be translated into some form of action'.[98] Even when this action was undertaken, the historical position of the NUS within the heart of empire meant that there was a distinct power imbalance between those giving and those receiving solidarity, which opens up the question of whether this was an expression of solidarity or simply the continuation of long-standing British ideas of benevolence or liberal internationalism.[99]

Conclusions

The NUS played a significant role in the creation and running of the two main international student organisations of the postwar period – the International Union of Students and the International Student Conference. While its relationship with both organisations was often bogged down in Cold War antagonisms and constitutional minutiae, NUS involvement in both groups stemmed from a desire to promote international student unity. The aim was to

create and promote organisations that would benefit the lives of students around the world. Even here, however, the imperial mindset remains visible as the NUS sought to be in control of these organisations or, at least, to determine their actions and activities. NUS leaders also continued to see their own involvement as essential for the proper functioning of both organisations and the health and wellbeing of the international student movement as a whole. Outside these organisations, the NUS sought to develop strong links with student unions around the world. It actively opposed racism and inequality, supporting students who were involved in these struggles. But once again, the NUS activists positioned themselves as leaders in these areas, believing themselves to be a model for others to emulate.

The leadership and membership of the NUS were clearly interested in the experiences and situation of students around the world. They worked tirelessly to promote international communication and co-operation, using a large percentage of their resources to this end throughout the 1950s and 1960s. They often expressed a sense of connection with students elsewhere, believing themselves to be part of an international student movement. However, the extent to which this can, or should, be read as solidarity is questionable. The membership and leadership of the NUS did not believe that their own situation was similar to that of students in the majority of the world. They aimed to help and support students who they perceived to be worse off than themselves. This is not a bad thing. It shows a high level of altruism. But it does not show a belief in commonality, a sense of connection or 'sameness' across international boundaries. In the period immediately before the international student action of 1968, the NUS went through a period of transition as the leadership continued to see the role of the NUS in ways that would have been familiar to 'liberal internationalists' and benevolent imperialists from the late eighteenth century on.[100] The predominant attitudes within the NUS's international activity in the late 1950s and 1960s were feelings of responsibility and paternalism, something that was being challenged from within the organisation in the late 1960s and would be radically changed from 1969.[101]

[1] Davy, 'Mutual Inspiration but No International Conspiracy', *The Times*, 30 May 1968, p. 4.

[2] For a definition of 'moral panic' and description of how it works see Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*.

[3] For the classic configuration of the 'generation gap' argument see Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution*.

[4] Hoefferle, "A Web of Interconnections', p. 131. Also see Hoefferle, *British Student Activism in the Long Sixties*. There are a number of key texts which discuss 1968 and the myth which surrounds that year. These include Fraser, *1968*; Kurlansky, *1968*; Ali and Watkins Ali, *1968*.

[5] For a questioning of the extent to which there was a 'generation gap' in 1960s Britain, see Holger Nehring, "'Generation' as a Political Argument in West European Protest Movements During the 1960s," in *Generations in Twentieth-Century Europe*, ed. Stephen Lovell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) and Pat Thane, "Generations and Intergenerational Relationships, Public and Private, in Twenteith-Century Britain," in *Generations in Twentieth-Century Europe*, ed. Stephen Lovell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[6] Jobs, 'Youth Movements', p. 401.

[7] Thomas, 'Challenging Myths of the 1960s', p. 293. Thomas, Nicholas. "The British Student Movement 1965-1972." (PhD: University of Warwick, 1996).

[8] Jobs, 'Youth Movements', p. 379.

[9] For the argument that 1968 created international connections between students and youth see Jobs, 'Youth Movements'.

[10] Georgina Brewis, "From Service to Action? Students, Volunteering and Community Action in Mid Twentieth-Century Britain," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 58, no. 4 (2010). 440.

[11] Kotek, *Students and the Cold War*; Paget, 'From Stockholm to Leiden'.

[12] The Scottish Union of Students did not join the NUS until 1970.

[13] 'Universities will take a firm line', *The Times*, 18 June 1968, p. 2.

[14] Between 1958 and 1968 the Presidents of the NUS were Dennis Grennan (University of Southampton), Gwyn Morgan (University of Wales, Aberystwyth), A.R. Hughes (University of Wales, Aberystwyth), William Savage (Queen's University, Belfast), Geoff Martin (Queen's University, Belfast) and Trevor Fisk (University of London).

[15] Patricia Clavin, "Introduction: Conceptualising Internationalism between the World Wars," in *Internationalism Reconfigured: Transnational Ideas and Movements between the World Wars*, ed. Daniel Laqua (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011). Pp. 1-2.

[16] Pierre-Yves Saunier, *Transnational History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); p. 3.

[17] Clavin, "Introduction: Conceptualising Internationalism between the World Wars." p. 2.

[18] Skinner and Lester, "Humanitarianism and Empire: New Research Agendas", p. 738.

[19] Ibid., pp. 731-2.

[20] David Featherstone, *Solidarity: Hidden Histories and Geographies of Internationalism* (London: Zed, 2012); pp. 5-7.

[21] Jobs, 'Youth Movements', p. 378.

[22] Quinn Slobodian, *Foreign Front : Third World Politics in Sixties West Germany* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); p. 5.

[23] Hoefferle, 'A Web of Interconnections', p. 140.

[24] For detailed discussions of People's Democracy see Purdie, *Politics in the Streets* and Arthur, *The People's Democracy*. For a discussion of the place of Northern Ireland in the international movements of 1968 see Prince, "The Global Revolt of 1968 and Northern Ireland." And Prince, *Northern Ireland's '68: Civil Rights, Global Revolt and the Origins of the Troubles*.

[25] Georgina Brewis, "From Service to Action? Students, Volunteering and Community Action in Mid Twentieth-Century Britain," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 58, no. 4 (2010); p. 441.

[26] Helen McCarthy, *The British People and the League of Nations : Democracy, Citizenship and Internationalism C. 1918-45* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2011); p. 8.

[27] Anna Bocking-Welch, "Imperial Legacies and Internationalist Discourses: British Involvement in the United Nations Freedom from Hunger Campaign, 1960–70," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 40, no. 5 (2012); p. 892.

[28] McCarthy, *The British People and the League of Nations*.

[29] Altbach, 'The International Student Movement'.

[30] Kotek, *Students and the Cold War*, p. 242, n.3.

[31] Day, *National Union of Students, 1922-2012,* pp. 28-31 and Simon, *A Student's View of the Universities*.

[32] Day, *National Union of Students*, pp. 29-30.

[33] Altbach, 'The International Student Movement', p. 161.

[34] Discussion of war as watershed in changing generations see Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution.*

[35] Daniel Geary, '"Becoming International Again": C. Wright Mills and the Emergence of a Global New Left, 1956-1962,' *The Journal of American History* 95, no. 3 (2008); pp. 715-6. Grant Farred, "Endgame Identity? Mapping the New Left Roots of Identity Politics," *New Literary History* 31, no. 4 (2000); pp. 628-30.

[36] NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting November 1958', p. 67.

[37] NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting April 1958', p. 1 (8?)

[38] NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting November 1959', p. 74.

[39] NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting April 1960', p. 103.

[40] NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting April 1965', p. 17.

[41] Bocking-Welch, 'Imperial Legacies and Internationalist Discourses', pp. 883-4.

[42] Altbach, 'The International Student Movement', p. 156.

[43] Ibid,p. 156.

[44] Ibid, pp. 172-3.

[45] Ibid, p. 161.

[46] NUS, 'Draft resolution: A new representative student international organisation', 1945.

[47] Altbach, 'The International Student Movement', p. 161.

[48] Ibid, p. 162.

[49] Ibid, p. 163.

[50] Kotek, *Students and the Cold War*, p. x.

[51] Warner, 'Sophisticated Spies', p. 425.

[52] Altbach, 'The International Student Movement', p. 167.

[53] Ibid, p. 164.

[54] Paget, 'From Stockholm to Leiden', p. 136. For a discussion of CIA involvement in the Congress for Cultural Freedom see Hugh Wilford, *The Cia, the British Left, and the Cold War : Calling the Tune?* (London: Frank Cass, 2003).

[55] Ibid, p. 157

[56] Day, *National Union of Students*, p. 37.

[57] NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting November 1958', p. 64.

[58] NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting November 1960', p. 65.

[59] NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting April 1961', pp. 92-3.

[60] NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting April 1961', p. 171.

[61] NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting April 1964', p. 192.

[62] NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting April 1965', p. 91

[63] NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting November 1965', p. 92.

[64] NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting April 1965', p. 32.

[65] Quoted in Bocking-Welch, 'Imperial Legacies and Internationalist Discourses', pp. 885.

[66] NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting April 1966', p. 96.

[67] NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting April 1966', p. 108.

[68] Ibid, p. 93.

[69] NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting April 1967', p. 137.

[70] Ibid, p. 138.

[71] Ibid, p. 139.

[72] This was a common attitude amongst the left. For a more detailed discussion of this attitude see Howe, *Anticolonialism in British Politics*.

[73] NUS, April 1958

[74] Day, *National Union of Students*, pp. 16, 35.

[75] NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting November 1960', p. 71.

[76] NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting April 1961', p. 97.

[77] Ibid, p. 114.

[78] Ibid, 162-3; 172.

[79] NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting November 1962', pp. 105-17. NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting April 1963', p. 152; NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting April 1964', p. 192; NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting April 1963', pp. 106-7.

[80] Schaffer, *Racial Science and British Society*.

[81] There is an extensive literature on racial attitudes in Britain in the late 1950s and 1960s. Some of the key texts include Hansen, *Citizenship and Immigration*; Spencer, *British Immigration Policy since 1939*; Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*; Paul, *Whitewashing Britain*; Waters, "Dark Strangers in Our Midst"'.

[82] NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting November 1960', p. 67.

[83] NUS, April 1961, p. 95.

[84] For a discussion of the impact of the end of empire on attitudes towards race in Britain see Schwarz, *The White Man's World*; Burkett, *Constructing Post-Imperial Britain*.

[85] NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting November 1959', pp. 53, 56.
[86] Ibid, p. 57.
[87] NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting November 1963', pp. 125-6
[88] Bocking-Welch, 'Imperial Legacies and Internationalist Discourses'.
[89] NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting November 1959', p. 71.
[90] Ibid, p. 71.
[91] Ibid, pp. 71, 72.
[92] NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting April 1961', p. 43.
[93] For a discussion of the 'Whiteneing' of British identity in this period see Paul, *Whitewashing Britain*.
[94] NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting November 1963', pp. 121-2; NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting April 1964', p. 48.
[95] These topics have been discussed by Waters, '"Dark Strangers in Our Midst"'; Paul, *Whitewashing Britain*; Schwarz, *The White Man's World*; Burkett, *Constructing Post-Imperial Britain*.
[96] Kushner and Lunn, ed. *Traditions of Intolerance*.
[97] NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting November 1959', p. 57.
[98] NUS, 'Minutes and Summary of Proceedings, Annual Council meeting November 1959', p. 56.
[99] Skinner and Lester, "Humanitarianism and Empire: New Research Agendas", p. 740
[100] Bocking-Welch, 'Imperial Legacies and Internationalist Discourses'.
[101] Brewis, "From Service to Action?'.

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