

GREEN DREAMS

The Unanticipated Rebirth of SDS

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Comic by Ed Piskor

An almost unbelievable development but true, in various curious ways, to our curious times. So many radical thinkers and classroom lecturers of 1960s' vintage or later have been experiencing a thrill at student response in the last few years. So much has the crisis of empire reminded us of the depth of perceived crisis 40 years ago. Yet who would have expected that a new student movement would come roaring back into existence, no longer at the famous liberal arts campuses but shading to where the contradictions are bearing down upon the young—toward the community colleges, the schools of the Old South, and the little religious campuses—and drawing in members ranging from the white middle class to Latinos.

A year ago I had been thinking of a comic-art history of Students for a Democratic Society when the announcement that a new Students for a Democratic Society was about to form came to me unheralded onto the Web. It was quite a surprise.

Pat Korte, a seventeen-year-old high schooler in Connecticut had, a few months earlier, begun corresponding with Alan Haber, the 70-year-old founder of Students for a Democratic Society, about the possibility of the organization making a comeback. They found Tom Good, a veteran activist of the War Resisters League in New York and editor of the online IWW newsletter. Within weeks, a new website, Nextleftnotes.net, was formed, comprised mostly of photos and stories of local activities.

Herein hangs a tale for the 21st century Left and its ecological partners. For no office, no paid staff and no outside funding could have generated such a surge of contacts as arrived through the Web. Students interested in the Sixties—mainly, I should think, because the subject suggests youth political rebellion—heard rumors of its revival and found SDS in Wikipedia, or from their friends on FaceBook, or even YouTube. They registered themselves as members, found others in the same school or vicinity (here the old-fashioned “Activities Board” seems to have been an important tool to build radicalism into a social club), looked on the Web for what other SDSers were doing, and went to work.

By the autumn of 2006, the new SDS had registered 250 chapters and several thousand members. Alongside this, ex-SDSers—former Columbia University occupation leader Mark Rudd being the most prominent—have formed themselves into the Movement for Democratic Society (MDS), partly to create a movement in their own name, partly to support the youngsters, and partly to find their own way back to the moment in history that had meant the most to their lives. Noam Chomsky, Manning Marable, Angela Davis, Howard Zinn, Studs Terkel, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Elizabeth Sutherland Martinez, Jerry Tucker and Judith Malina, among others, have signed on as board members of MDS. It was—not to make the point too strongly—the most diverse, most youthful and most distinguished group in the Left for decades to begin work. And, like the November

elections, it expressed the spirit of 2006, an awakening from the first five years of the new century.

Parts of this sounds eerily familiar. Students for a Democratic Society—an organization or movement so amorphous that a majority of its “members” never actually bothered to join officially—remains at the heart of the mystique and mystery of the 1960s. It was unique among the movements of that time for being *the* organization of Student Power on the campus, pinpointed by the FBI as the epicenter of trouble among the children of the white middle class. It skyrocketed to a following of perhaps 200,000. But what went up came suddenly down—very much like the Sixties themselves.

The memory of SDS and the antiwar protest of the 1960s in general has returned for the best of reasons, awakened to life by an immensely corrupt war and the vicious repression that accompanies it. From this standpoint, Iraq readily substitutes for Vietnam, and the Patriot Act for the FBI. That the current movement has not yet ignited the elite and mainstream campuses is partly explained by the absence of forced military conscription.

However, it is a misperception that only middle-class liberals (or their radical fringe) opposed the earlier war. Actually, blue collar opposition was greater by 1970 than opposition by the college educated as a group; the two groups most strongly opposed were African-Americans and Jews. So-called “isolationism,” a heartland suspicion of global military overreach, encompassed Republicans as well as Democrats, though many self-avowed liberal Democratic politicians, like Henry “Scoop” Jackson and Hubert Humphrey, firmly and unalterably supported the war. Notwithstanding what would later be titled Red/Blue State divisions, the demographic character of the antiwar opposition was never what liberals or conservatives (or, for the most part, leftwingers, either) declared it to be. And we see this again today. Numerous Democrats can be counted upon to hanker for a “victory”—somehow—to be accomplished in Iraq, or an all-out war to be waged on Iran. At the same time, there are large numbers of self-declared conservatives who feel in their souls disheartened and isolationist.

There is a deeper stratum of unease tending to radicalize generational unrest: The Generation of 9/11, having come of age in the wake of the World Trade Center attack, the Afghanistan invasion and occupation, the mass detentions without charges, and so on, is also the generation facing the literal, undeniable effects of the ecological crisis and its leading manifestation of Global Warming. The world of secure consumerism, circa 2000, is gone, yet politicians still manage to keep a straight face while issuing denials of the crisis of empire. The profound disconnect between the looming reality of our time and the utter inadequacy of the established channels breeds radical discontent.

College courses on the Sixties never lacked for a certain appeal. Free Love, Communes, LSD and other reputed mass phenomena of the young naturally appealed to another generation of the young, especially as higher rents and rampant venereal diseases closed off the carefree low-income bohemia of earlier days. As the boom in those courses increased immeasurably, not every professor grasped that many students were seeking a deeper engagement than vicarious thrills of history or the chance to listen to music rather than reading textbooks. The generation of young scholars just ten or twenty years behind the Sixties radicals seemed to have anticipated the shift best of all. No wonder so many

responses to the question, “How did you hear of us?” in the online application blanks for SDS answer, “my history class,” “my textbook” or “my teacher,” followed in number of entries by “my parents.”

In the last decade, as the former members of SDS entered middle age, some of them, fearing that a real radical student movement could cost the country a Democratic White House, have made it clear that they do not want to see the organization come back into existence. These hostile critics dismiss the recent upsurge in new SDS members at non-elite campuses throughout the country, claiming that the new movement lacks the legitimacy of its predecessor, because there are few young “intellectuals” and essayists involved—as if that were the key test of virility or fecundity. It would, however, be more useful to decry the paucity of local historical studies, because SDS was, above all, a local movement—arguably the most local movement in the history of American radicalism. But perhaps one problem has been overlooked: that a phenomenon so deeply set within popular culture would need an approach shaped by the techniques of popular cultural production.

If so, then we may want to look there again. I’ve pointed in past columns to the creation of the art-comic as a means for connecting indubitably popular culture with important insights into, and forceful views about, the crisis of ecological breakdown. If cave paintings are our oldest comic strips, then the epic poem, the effort to sum up and summon up the spirit of the age, may be the taproot of popular culture in words. Three years ago, as the war began, I twice heard teenagers remix Bob Dylan’s “Masters of War,” for Poetry Slam audiences. In my remaining space, and for young readers in particular, let me try and revivify the SDS story in my own version of epic fashion. Here goes:

A New Song for SDS
A Song of Ourselves

We know perfectly well our own egotism,
And know our omnivorous words, and cannot say any less,
And would fetch you whoever you are, flush with ourselves...
Missing us one place, search another
We stop somewhere waiting for *you*.
(Apologies to W. Whitman)

1968. Blessed year of uprisings and downfallings
Such a short span from 1960
Span less to 1970
Our own uprising—and downfall.

We weren’t the first rebels downcast
Not by a long shot
Generations came and went
Hopes launched like rockets
Crashed, crushed or both.

Look back, back to the beginning

Before SDS, to the Student League for Industrial Democracy
Campus walkouts against war, 1934, first time ever in the U.S.
And the Intercollegiate Socialists of the 1910s, Jack London, Upton Sinclair, orators to the
hot-blooded bluebloods of the Ivy League.

Back further to the Wobblies (we'll see them again),
Who, if anyone, ever, had the DNA of SDS
Still further back to Eugene Victor Debs, railroad man
Named after Eugene Sue and Victor Hugo
And the glorious campaign (his first)
New Century, new socialist dream: 1900

“An’ there’s ‘Gene Debs
a man at’ stans’
An’ jist holds out
In his two hands
The kindest heart that ever beat
Betwixt here an’ the Judgment Seat.”

That was the Hoosier Poet, James Whitcomb Riley
Jim and Gene boozed together through the Red Light District
Of Terra Haute, that railroad town in Indiana (Hoosier talk: Injiany)
More than one night.
Gene said they were the realest women he ever met.

A thousand years ahead of his time,
The townsfolk said about Gene.
Imprisoned (for being against War and Empire,
Unforgivably: An American War, an American Empire)
Almost a million votes for Prisoner Number 9653, in 1920.
Broken, a dead man released six years later.

Working people cried in the streets
(Not the ones with Fords, bought on time)
That was three years before the Crash
(Then they lost their Fords).

Then Depression, Fascists in Europe
And the KKK in the USA
All too soon, World War
The dark mood broken by sit-downs,
Citywide strikes, new unions
Blind faith in Red Russia,
And in FDR's Democratic Party.

Nazi Terror, Holocaust, Hiroshima
But Warsaw Ghetto Uprising
Stalingrad, the Partisans

And then: Bring the Boys Home!

Good Times (for a little while)
Boom Times, more strikes, wild hipsters
Dizzy G and Bebop
But suddenly: Redscare, FBI, Loyalty Oaths
Happy to pronounce them: Loyal Intellectuals,
Fat with self-satisfaction, "paytriots"
Operators Irving Kristol, Junior Arthur Schlesinger
Critic Leslie Fleacure (Nelson Algren named him)
All on the make and on the take.
New Leader, Partisan Review, Encounter
Self-righteous liberals
With CIA money hidden in their designer clothes.
The Jet Set Liberals SDSers would rebel against.

Saint Allen Ginsberg, we remember
And his friend Jack, tho drunk and confused
Looking for Satori on Hank Williams' Lost Highways
Listening (sometimes) to philosopher Gary Snyder
Berated, scandalized by Lady LT
Herself without a talent in sight
So like the smarmy Podhorrible
Craving revenge against the inspirers of the young rebels
And craving the spotlight for themselves.

1959! The literary vampires went after the Beats
As they would go after SDSers, a few years later
We wanted to be the vindication of those rebels,
And we were. For a while. Until the new century.
When our own generation of changelings
(D. Horowitz the dumbest and least of them
and War Democrats worse than hack Republicans)
Lobbied, listed for photo-ops,
And awaited appointments
And praised dead Empire-protectors, Empire expanders
Woodrow Wilson, Harry Truman
Hated in the end by ordinary folks.
As beacons of wisdom
Martyrs for Global Might.

Not for them, C. Wright Mills, early martyred
Random radicals, their books not quite banned
Their work not quite halted, just condemned.
W.E.B. DuBois, in his 'nineties, eyes on Mother Africa
C.L.R. James, exiled, unbroken
Television writers, movie writers
Scribbling under phony names

Shows about Robin Hood, and about crime understood
As Sin, not as Evil, and social sin at that.
Films of happy whores, inflamed black men (not monsters)
Antifascists, strikers, thieves
Strong women, weak men
All the unacceptable.
And *Mad Comics!*
Diane DiPrima, anarchist's granddaughter,
With her own Beat rhythm in the Village.
Lenny Bruce shooting up on the toilet seat,
None to be forgotten.

That handsome brown man known as Martin
J. Edgar conspired, the ADL sent spies into his office
To get something to use against him.
Meanwhile a guy named Zinn, WWII bombardier, young and earnest
From Jewish parents poorer than MLK's
Willed immigrants, not descendents of captured Africans
Teaching at Tuskegee, Atlanta black girl's school
Alice Walker, his student
Ground troops for the sit-ins.

Building up to something
Calling us into existence.

Verse 2

And Clark Kerr said:
"The university has become a prime instrument of public purpose."
Kerr, a former SLIDer (back in the 30s)!
Now Kommandant of the multiversity
Readying the young for the warfare state.
He also said (1959) "The employers will love this generation.
There aren't going to be any riots."
The joke was on Kerr and Packer and Kirk and all the others
Gutless liberals who wanted the War to go away,
But would never endanger their own careers,
And who always bowed to power,
While saving their heavy foot for our necks.

A better philosopher (24 and already bearded)
Alan Haber, University of Michigan, Soc Grad Student
"The groundwork for a radical student movement"
would be found by looking where...
Clark Kerr would never look (but neither would an Old Red):
In the heart of a student, any student.

"We have spoken at last, with vigor, idealism and urgency,

supporting our words with picket lines, demonstration,
money and even our own bodies.
We have taken the initiative away from the adult spokesmen...
As our actions evolve their own dynamic.
Pessimism and cynicism have given way to:
Direct Action.”
And it was only June, 1960!

There was an office (in New York)
Small and paint peeling
Haber slept under the mimeo machine
That was otherwise kept busy.

Tom Hayden, pockmarked Irishman
Red-faced, full of bluff
But bigger than his weakness,
For women
And his body hunger
For personal glory.

The others a small army
An anti-army!
Fighting together, over ideas, principles
To live by
And organize by.
But not quite what Mom and Dad LID wanted
SDS leaders called on the carpet
Hearing date, July 6, 1963, New York
Young Michael Harrington for the Prosecution
Old Norman Thomas sheepishly for the Defense.
Locked out of the office, next day
(Al Haber, remembering high school Industrial Arts, picked the lock.)

Peace restored. For the moment. and
Walter Reuther wrote a check.

In Port Huron, Michigan
A union camp with furniture built
By union wives of UAW regulars.
Fifty-nine met, in June, 1962

The mighty Lake was too cold for skinny dipping.
Mosquitoes too thick for lovers camping out.
The professors (one S. Kauffman) rambling and dull.
The social democrats (wives and mortgages back home)
Worried that Something Dangerous might be going on.
“All this was settled ten or twenty years ago” (M. Harrington)
America was innocent, if not yet perfect.

Russians were guilty. JFK a savior come to earth.
Tho he needed Better Advisors.

Undaunted, Hayden wrote what all on hand rewrote
Together during the day, during the night
Mountains of paper
Mounds of cigarette butts
The Something Dangerous
(I got my copy in September, 1965)
The Port Huron Statement!

About Americans afraid of shadows
“They fear change itself, since change might smash
whatever invisible framework seems to hold back chaos.”

“Loneliness, estrangement, isolation describe
the vast distance” between humans in the
richest nations the world had ever known.
Something to be overcome “only when a love of man
Overcomes the idolatrous worship of things.”

Heresy!

And on campus, Yesterday’s “fraternity president
Is seen at the junior management levels;
The prom queen has gone to Gross Pointe.
The once-serious and never-serious poets work
At the advertising agencies.”

“The world is in transformation,
but America is not.”

“America must abolish its political stalemate.
Corporations must be made publicly responsible.
The allocations of resources must be based on social needs.
America should concentrate on its genuine social priorities:
Abolish squalor
Terminate neglect
Establish an environment for people to live in
With dignity and creativeness.”

Heresy!!

“We seek the establishment of a
democracy of individual participation.”
That is, Participatory Democracy.
A new phrase
A new phase.

But no easy trek.

[To be Continued]

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