JOHN DEWEY, THE NEW LEFT, AND THE POLITICS

OF CONTINGENCY AND PLURALISM

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Most histories of the New Left emphasize that some variant of Marxism ultimately influenced activists in their pursuit of social change. Through careful examination of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), I argue that New Left thought was not always anti-liberal. Founding SDS members hardly rejected liberal political theory during the early years of the movement (1960-1963). New Left thought was profoundly indebted to John Dewey's political and philosophical method. Deweyan liberalism suggested theory should be directly applicable in the world of social action and truth should always be regarded as contingent. The connection between Dewey and SDS becomes apparent when one considers the role of Arnold S. Kaufman in the movement. Kaufman, a University of Michigan philosopher, applied Dewey's political and philosophical method in his work as an activist and academic. He coined the term "participatory democracy" for the New Left. Consequently, this key New Left concept was itself grounded in Dewey's philosophy.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION:

OF THE THEMES AND HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE NEW LEFT

The intellectual origins of New Left thought are diverse, reflecting a number of

influences ranging from Marxism to existentialism as well as the circumstances of post-

war affluence and the Cold War. Students For A Democratic Society (SDS) is indicative

of this diversity.[1] As a student organization, SDS drew on a number of ideas in and out

of the classroom. Radical professors, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Old Left all

helped shape SDS's thought and contribute to its diversity. However, the movement

begins to take more coherent form when it is considered within the historical

circumstances of the Cold War. The Cold War created a political culture that was closed

to dissent. American affluence and the nuclear bomb shaped domestic and foreign policy

at a time when the United States was engaged in an ideological battle with the Soviet

Union. Anti-communism created an environment that impoverished the Old Left while,

at the same time, suggested the American commitment to liberalism was a thin veneer

that obscured a number of inequalities in the country. Against this backdrop, SDS

developed a political theory that would steer a course between liberalism and Marxism as

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[1] There are several histories of the New Left that emphasize the different origins of SDS's thought.
Maurice Isserman draws a connection between the Old Left and the New Left through Michael Harrington,
suggesting there is more continuity between the movements than most historians acknowledge. Kirkpatrick
Sale, John Patrick Diggins, Kevin Mattson, and James Miller offer analyses that suggest SDS drew from
Marxism, existentialism, pragmatism, and liberalism at different points in its history. Doug Rossinow has
suggested the movement was also informed by Christian theology.

well as navigate other theoretical perspectives – existentialism and Christian theology for example – that individual members brought to the movement.

John Dewey was a central figure in SDS's thought, a connection that is often marginalized or missing in most historical works on the period. In its early years, between 1960 and 1963, the student organization articulated a form of radical liberalism, one that was anchored in the political theory of Dewey. However, all members of SDS were not Deweyan liberals and the organization did not consistently apply Dewey's thought to contemporary affairs. Acknowledging a Deweyan thread in SDS thought should actually highlight the intellectual diversity within the New Left. Dewey's experimental method, after all, would have been well suited to framing a theory that was flexible, providing ample room for dissent and dialogue. Emphasizing this aspect of Dewey's method and its appeal to the New Left also highlights the degree to which activists championed internal dissent. For members of SDS, dissent was a crucial aspect of any democratic process, especially within an organization that sought to directly challenge the underlying assumptions of the Cold War in the United States.

Another benefit in exploring Dewey's influence within the New Left is that it brings a less-known theorist into clear focus. Arnold Kaufman, a professor of philosophy at the University of Michigan, attended the Port Huron Convention in 1962 and directly influenced SDS's conception of participatory democracy. As a political theory, participatory democracy suggested that open dissent and discussion would not only yield the best policies, the processes of managing dissent would also enrich the lives of individual participants. Kaufman adapted Dewey's method and theory to his own

formulation of radicalism. Both Dewey and Kaufman offered unique definitions of

radicalism and liberalism that would appeal to the founding members of SDS.

History and the New Left

Suggesting that SDS subscribed to a form of liberal doctrine in its early years

does not necessarily conflict with the analyses of historians. Authors such as John

Patrick Diggins, Kevin Mattson, Robert Westbrook, and James Miller are examples of

historians who note Dewey's influence among members of SDS. However, for different

reasons each historian does not explore the connection between Dewey's liberalism and

SDS's political thought in great detail. Using Miller as an example, whose account of

SDS's intellectual background is very thorough, it is clear that this oversight is not

always a comment about the degree to which Dewey was influential.

According to Miller, there was a tension in SDS's thought between existentialism

and pragmatism. Activists sometimes believed that political action should help an

individual in a quest for moral authenticity – an existentialist ideal. At other times,

SDS's conception of participatory democracy emphasized dialogue and face-to-face

relations along with Dewey's understanding of democracy and human potential. Greater

participation would help create an active and educated public that was capable of using

reason to address social problems – a chief goal of pragmatism. As with most histories of

the New Left, Miller's analysis of SDS's Marxist turn – most clearly exemplified by the

Weatherman split in 1969 – weighs more heavily than the treatment of its liberal origins

because activists became disillusioned with the politics of reform. There are many

additional reasons for approaching the history of the New Left from a vantage point that highlights the movement's anti-liberalism.

The movement was complex, with a diverse population of activists, but it is clear that it became anti-liberal and opposed to working within the existing political system in the late sixties. Much of the emerging radicalism came at a time when SDS became a central organization for the anti-war movement. The violence in Vietnam and U.S. intensification of the conflict suggested to many activists that on-going war was an intrinsic element of capitalism and meaningful change could not be facilitated through democratic processes or peaceful demonstration and mass mobilization. Political consensus among the nation's top leaders proved that the U.S. was committed to the Cold War framework. As SDS became disillusioned with the American political process, it began to question the underlying assumptions of liberalism and the co-optive nature of democratic reform. Revolution, not liberal reform, took a more central role in SDS's political theory. Miller also suggests some members of SDS simply used the language of liberalism to conceal an underlying commitment to socialism or Marxism, a reading that has explanatory power considering the overall trajectory of the group. However, as his work shows, there is more to the story.[2]

Along similar lines as Miller, Doug Rossinow has argued that some members of SDS were attempting to navigate Christian existentialism and Christian liberalism. Personal authenticity was linked to spirituality and a commitment to improving social

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[2] James Miller's, *'Democracy is in the Streets:' From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), explores the diversity and tension in SDS's thought, highlighting the role of Camus and, in some places, Dewey. In an article on participatory democracy in *The Encyclopedia of the American Left* (Chicago: UCP, 1990), he argued that for some members of SDS, the concept of participatory democracy allowed the organization to incorporate coded language about socialism into its platform – deliberately concealing a commitment to socialism for fear of anti-communist backlash.

relationships. For Rossinow, "At this historical moment, these two intellectual and political frameworks worked well together; existentialism gave liberalism intellectual grounding, and liberalism helped to keep existentialism politically grounded."[3] However, outside of discussing the basic claims of liberalism – individual freedom of speech, thought, discussion, etc. – he does not explore the New Left's conception of liberalism as a unique historical variation of the original doctrine of classical liberalism. As with other histories of the period, the connection to Dewey is not explored, leaving the term 'liberalism' a bit ambiguous and divorced from the factors that contributed to its historical development. Departing from this trend in the historiogaphical terrain, Kevin Mattson has provided the most detailed account of the liberal origins of the New Left.

According to Mattson, the early New Left was deeply embedded in a liberal tradition. He argues that C. Wright Mills, W. A. Williams, Paul Goodman, and Arnold Kaufman provided the theoretical foundations for New Left thought. John Dewey stood in the background of each of those authors to varying degrees. However, while there are places where his analysis of Dewey's influence is stronger – particularly in reference to Kaufman – this thread is not really explored. His chapter on student publications examines the tension in SDS's thought between radicalism and liberalism, arguing that in the end the two terms were not irreconcilable. 'Radical liberalism' – a term Kaufman consistently used and Mattson adopts as a descriptor in his study – represented a juncture in New Left thought that combined the radical aims of social equality associated with Marxism with the doctrine of liberalism. Kaufman and Goodman helped construct the bridge between these opposed ideas.

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[3] Doug Rossinow, "The Break-through to New Life," taken from Daniel Pope ed., *American Radicalism* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2001) 290.

Although Mattson pushes the analysis of liberalism and the New Left further than most historians, there is little discussion of the overall impact of pragmatism on political theory in the 1960s. In many ways, his account exemplifies a broader trend in American intellectual history. As Richard Bernstein has pointed out, many philosophers and historians have argued that pragmatism all but disappears from the American intellectual landscape by the 1930s.[4] According to this interpretation, there was a "linguistic turn" in the United States due to the rising popularity of analytic philosophy in England as well as the arrival, in American universities, of logical positivists who fled Nazism in Europe. If pragmatism persisted as an influential school of philosophy at all, it was only as a precursor to positivism. Of this narrative, Bernstein remarks, "The classic American pragmatists were marginalized, relegated to the dustbin of history."[5] The linguistic turn, as an historical model, overlooks a number of ways in which pragmatism remained, and still does today, an influential philosophy in the United States.

Pragmatism did not disappear from American political thought in the mid to late 20th century. By arguing that Dewey's philosophy played an influential role in New Left thought, I am underscoring the fact that the broader tradition of pragmatism was not only alive and well in the 1960s, but it also had radical implications for the democratic theory of SDS. The pragmatist's general rejection of certainty and their willingness to subject

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[4] For Bernstein's description of this trend see his works, "The Resurgence of Pragmatism" published in *Social Research* (Winter 1992) and *The Pragmatic Turn* (2010). See also Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (2001) for an example of an historical account that suggests pragmatism was eclipsed in the United States in the mid 20th century. According to Menand, the Cold War, as an intense ideological conflict, created an atmosphere in the United States that was not receptive to pragmatism's emphasis on contingency and pluralism.

[5] Richard Bernstein, "The Resurgence of Pragmatism," *Social Research,* Vol. 59, No. 4 (Winter 1992): 816. Bernstein's larger project argues that pragmatism has remained an influential school of thought. Citing Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam among others, he illustrates the ways in which classical pragmatists have influenced important theorists throughout the 20th century and in the present day.

every conclusion to endless testing is indicative of the importance they placed on communicative space and active participation in democratic processes. Dewey's description of a social and political order best suited to meet those needs would reappear decades later when SDS developed its own method for reinvigorating American democracy.

Liberalisms, Radicalisms, and Method

Following Mattson, I will explore the non-Marxist theoretical origins of the New Left in order to contribute to the intellectual history of the period. By looking back to the early twentieth century I hope to highlight John Dewey's influence in the political theory of SDS – a connection some historians have made but have not adequately explored. The concept of radical liberalism will figure prominently in my analysis of early SDS political theory. Radical liberalism is a term most associated with Arnold Kaufman, whose work was often focused on redefining liberalism to meet the radical Marxist ends of social and economic justice. Like Dewey, Kaufman was not an advocate for revolution; he thought liberalism actually aspired to its own radical ends of individual human development.

Dewey was responding to the doctrine of classical liberalism, which had its roots in Adam Smith and John Locke. He argued that its emphasis on individual freedom and human potential was revolutionary because it supplanted centuries of political theory that centralized power in a monarch, or in the hands of a select few. For Dewey, theories of the state had a tendency to become static, only serving the interests of an entrenched elite. Although classical liberalism had challenged injustice in the 18th century, it had become a form of dogma in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Industrialization and growing

economic interdependence suggested an unyielding insistence on individual rights was not the best solution to emerging social problems such as marked class inequality. Instead of abandoning classical liberalism as Marxists had suggested, Dewey argued that the doctrine needed to be reinterpreted. He attempted to reinvigorate the tradition by incorporating experimentalism, radical epistemology, pluralism, and contingency into its basic structure.

In chapter II, I explore Dewey's method and the historical circumstances he was responding to. Using James Kloppenberg's analysis of pragmatism and social democracy, I situate Dewey within a variety of opposed political theories. Kloppenberg has argued that Dewey was a member of a group of thinkers he termed the *via media* – theorists who contested the claims of empiricism and laissez faire liberalism on one hand as well as German idealism and Marxism on the other. I argue that Dewey proposed a radical political theory that was based in liberalism. His radicalism grew out of a commitment to democracy, experimentalism, and contingency, not the rhetoric of revolution and Marxist ideology. In addition to confronting the claims of classical liberals and Marxists, Dewey took a critical look at democratic realists, especially Walter Lippmann. Growing inequality and an increasingly disengaged public posed problems for democratic theorists. Instead of relegating decisions to an elite, as Lippmann suggested, Dewey argued that greater individual participation and experimentalism would be the best means for correcting social problems. Using Dewey's thought as a foundation for understanding a radical liberalism, I argue that his ideas influenced Arnold Kaufman and SDS.

In chapter III, I describe Kaufman's work on liberalism. For Kaufman, and the New Left generally, the term liberalism denoted something different than it had for Dewey. In referring to the New Left's conception of liberalism, I will borrow from Mattson who uses the term "modern liberalism." Modern liberalism refers to the historical development of the regulatory state. The New Deal in the United States represented the culmination of efforts to reform classical liberalism, shedding its emphasis on laissez faire. Modern liberalism suggested some state regulation was necessary to protect economic as well as social interests. Some security nets were needed to maintain a stable social order under a capitalist system.

For the New Left, modern liberalism represented a co-opted revolution. It only succeeded in marrying the interests of corporate and government elites while further disempowering the average American. "Establishment liberalism" and "corporate liberalism" are terms that also appear in the New Left lexicon that refer to this narrative. The term anti-liberal refers to the New Left's Marxist turn – for many activists the democratic process in the United States was corrupt. The Democratic Party had a history of compromising and co-opting radical reform movements, a trend that was most clearly exemplified by resistance among southern Democrats to civil rights legislation. For SDS, there was too much overlap between the Democratic and Republican parties. However, the student organization did not articulate an anti-liberal political theory. Along with Dewey and Kaufman, SDS believed liberalism had radical aims.

I argue that Kaufman offered a definition of "radical liberalism" as an alternative to Marxism and modern liberalism for the New Left. The old aims of free choice and thought as well as a commitment to democracy were liberal ideals that should never be

abandoned. Similar to Dewey, Kaufman found himself defending a form of liberalism

against the Marxist left, democratic realists, and establishment liberals who resisted

change to the status quo. He developed a politics of contingency and pluralism that drew

from Dewey's radical epistemology and philosophical method.

Kaufman's liberal was radical because of the degree to which he or she stressed

contingency. While some theorists – Lippmann for example – could suggest they were

pluralists because they described a fixed model of democracy that operated as a vehicle

for organizing dissent in a civilized manner, Kaufman, like Dewey, gave new meaning to

the term by denying the validity of fixed models of the state. Kaufman rejected any

theory that suggested democracy would always and everywhere take X form. All

doctrines were subject to revision. As a result, he became the New Left's most articulate

proponent of participatory democracy – an idea that would appear consistently in SDS

thought and was central to its founding manifesto, *The Port Huron Statement*. For

Kaufman, participatory democracy was a method, not a closed political theory.   Like his

philosophical method, participatory democracy outlined a system for directing an

experimental approach to practical as well as theoretical problems.

In chapter IV, I offer a close reading of three documents associated with the

formative years of SDS. Tom Hayden's "Letter to the New (Young) Left" (1961), and

SDS's *Port Huron Statement* (1962) and *American and the New Era* (1963) all exemplify

the influence of Kaufman and Dewey. I argue that each of these documents drew heavily

from Kaufman's politics of contingency and pluralism and Dewey's understanding of

liberalism. The purpose here is to highlight the thread of liberalism that connected SDS

to Dewey and to place more weight on the other side of historical analyses that

emphasize anti-liberal tendencies within the New Left. I am narrowing the scope of my

argument to the founding elite within SDS. It is not my intent to refute authors such as

Diggins or Miller by suggesting that a small group within SDS was always staunchly

liberal. Instead, I would like to contribute to the body of literature that exists on this

period by offering my own analysis of a specific moment and group within the

movement.

Of Historical Continuity

In suggesting that there is a tangible link from SDS to John Dewey, I am also

attempting to draw attention to the similarities in the set of circumstances these theorists

were responding to – both periods offered an excellent opportunity to challenge and

revise the meaning of liberalism. Dewey was responding to theorists who were

attempting to understand the consequences of rapid industrialization and growth in the

economy. With economic expansion came greater inequality in the 19th century. For

Dewey, classical liberalism would have to be altered to compensate for changing

circumstances. Laissez faire would not always produce the greatest social good. In

addition to arguing with classical liberals, he challenged Marxists who wanted to

abandon liberalism altogether. Revolutionary thought was dogmatic and failed to

acknowledge the potential for liberalism to create a just social order. In the process of

defining a liberalism that could navigate these opposed ideals, Dewey also engaged

Walter Lippmann who proposed a conservative model of democracy and a limited theory

of the state.

Likewise, members of the New Left confronted changed economic and social circumstances and developed a political theory that could navigate the claims of conservatives as well as Marxists. Kaufman, Hayden, and SDS continued to fight Walter Lippmann's ghost in the fifties and sixties. Realism represented a direct threat to the participatory institutions that Kaufman and SDS championed. Like Dewey, they suggested liberalism had hardened, becoming an inflexible political theory – a historical development that was exemplified by the American commitment to the Cold War. Growing affluence and increased consumption were juxtaposed with racism and poverty and militarism during a period when the U.S. was defending liberal institutions in an ideological conflict with the Soviet Union. The Cold War framework was the most glaring example of the potential for any theoretical model to become dogmatic. Like Dewey, the New Left found itself confronting Marxists, liberals, and realists in an attempt to define a radical political theory.

CHAPTER II

OF DEWEY'S PHILOSOPHICAL METHOD AND POLITICAL THEORY:

EXPERIMENTALISM, THE *VIA MEDIA*, AND RADICAL DEMOCRACY

> The end of democracy is a radical end. For it is an end that has not
> been adequately realized in any country at any time.
> John Dewey (1937)

The connection between John Dewey (1859-1952), an American

pragmatist who was critical of Marxists' ideas and the politics of the New Left, a

movement of American students often remembered for its violent end in the Weatherman

bombings of the seventies, can be difficult to sketch. Dewey disagreed with influential

thinkers like Marx who suggested that certain forms of struggle and social tension are

built into the historical process and are bound to culminate in a final, complete stage of

history. He was generally skeptical of any kind of deterministic theoretical model that

was accepted as fixed and unalterable. However, it was Dewey's resistance to the

language of revolutionary politics that made him a uniquely appealing thinker. Quick to

disregard arbitrary justifications for maintaining the status quo and the existing social

order, yet willing to anticipate contemporary applications of previous social theories,

Dewey's historical perspective allowed him to observe periods of social and political

turmoil with a well-informed understanding of how ideas evolve and subsequently impact

action and the social environment. His awareness of how revolutionary ideas could

become dogmatic and the source of new oppressive political regimes contributed to his own radicalism.

As a political theorist, Dewey encouraged the formulation of radical goals and stressed the importance of social, political, and economic reform. Keenly aware of the deleterious nature of fixed beliefs and the resulting ignorance of specific historical circumstances, he did not advocate for immediate revolutionary change. While he may have agreed with Marxists that there was a felt need to radically alter existing inequality, he envisioned a program of radical reform, not revolution. Society would always be in need of reform, suggesting that revolution would not simply end all social problems making future change unnecessary. Along similar lines, New Leftists such as Arnold Kaufman and Tom Hayden confronted a liberal intellectual tradition that had become dogmatic and, in fighting this impulse, sought a means for encouraging social reform that did not draw from inflexible theoretical models. The revolutionary politics of the Old Left had ebbed, leaving behind, ironically, a strong anti-communist sentiment that would become a new support base for Cold War policies that had the potential to justify such extremes as McCarthyism. Old Left intellectuals, Michael Harrington for example, became champions of an unbending anti-communism that limited theoretical discussion. The New Left searched for a political theory that would remain outside of the fixed perspectives offered by both Old Leftists and anti-communists.

Founding members of SDS found in Dewey's thought a method for navigating a variety of theoretical perspectives. His emphasis on experimentalism, greater democratic participation, and incremental change unfolding on a radical, yet flexible, trajectory would appeal to dissenters who were uncomfortable with Old Left ideologies as well as

the pervasive cultural conformity that perpetuated social inequality and political acquiescence in an age of abundance. Dewey's philosophical method, experimentalism, emphasis on public participation in politics, and concern for social inequality, led him to formulate a political theory and framework for dissent that would appear in the work of Arnold Kaufman and SDS.

SDS would revisit the annals of American intellectual history in one of its most significant contributions to New Left political theory, *The Port Huron Statement* (1962). According to James Miller, the conference at Port Huron, Michigan, where members of the student organization met to edit their manifesto, was a recasting of an important debate that took place much earlier in the twentieth century. In the twenties and thirties, Dewey had debated Walter Lippmann on the role of democracy in an industrial age. Lippmann suggested the democratic ethos was misinformed and ignored the potential for mass irrationality to determine policy. Dewey disagreed, suggesting that greater individual participation in the decision-making process would actually counter the potential for the development of a herd mentality in a democratic state. The debate would have ramifications for New Leftists decades later. According to Miller, "That the participants at Port Huron… wished to put something like Dewey's hypothesis to the test—and thus refute Lippmann—seems clear enough." The debate with Lippmann allowed Dewey the opportunity to outline his own political theory, one that would resurface in the writings of leftists in the sixties. Arnold Kaufman and SDS made direct references to realists such as Lippmann in their efforts to refute the idea that human nature was flawed and, thus, did not permit the existence of a stable form of participatory democracy.

Democracy and Crisis: The Dewey-Lippmann Debate

In the early twentieth century John Dewey and Walter Lippmann debated the

nature of democracy in America. Dewey contested the conclusions of democratic realists

who argued that members of the American public should not participate in the policy

decisions that shaped their lives. The country had just witnessed the horrors of the First

World War, a conflict that deeply impacted American psychology and led to a loss of

faith in humanity's rational faculties. For Lippmann, a noted journalist who, even

according to his opponent, Dewey, provided, "the most effective indictment of

democracy as currently conceived,"[1] American politics was predicated on the illusive

ideal of the democratic citizen, a member of the public who was capable of making

rational and informed political decisions. Lippmann argued, "if education cannot equip

the citizen… if morality cannot direct him, first, because right or wrong in specific cases

depends upon the perception of true or false, and, second, on the assumption that there is

a universal moral code, which, in fact, does not exist, where else shall we look for the

method of making the competent citizen?"[2] The competent citizen did not exist.

American democracy should limit public action to choosing between qualified experts

who best understood the complexities of local, national, and international affairs.

By relegating individual citizens to a non-participative function in American

politics, Lippmann was essentially refuting Dewey's democratic ethos. Dewey

responded in his influential work, *The Public and its Problems* (1927), stating, "No

government by experts in which the masses do not have the chance to inform the experts

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[1] Qtd. in Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) 294.

[2] Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public*, (New York: Macmillan, 1937) 35.

as to their needs can be anything but an oligarchy managed in the interests of the few…

The world has suffered more from leaders and authorities than from the masses."[3] A

specialist may be able to manage the technical affairs of government, but the purpose of

any democratic form of political organization is to recognize and ameliorate the problems

of the public. For Dewey, the public and a government are not separate entities,

consisting of different interests and motives that are sometimes antithetical. A

democratic representative is first and foremost a member of the public, not an expert who

stands outside and above social needs. Closing the gap between government and

governed, he argued that citizenship necessarily required active involvement in politics

and the formation of a participatory democracy. Accordingly, "The essential need, in

other words, is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and

persuasion. That is *the* problem of the public."[4]

The debate between Dewey and Lippmann would have repercussions for leftists

in the sixties. As proponents of participatory democracy, Kaufman and SDS continued

the debate between the two theorists because Lippmann's claims undermined any

argument for greater participation. Dewey's response required him to articulate a

concept of the public that was both inclusive, erasing what he saw as a fictitious division

between the average citizen and the government, and capable of explaining how

historical trends could actually encourage political apathy. For the New Left, the concept

of a "lost public", which will be discussed in greater detail below, explained the

circumstances in which the dispossessed and poor would succumb to political

indifference, essentially becoming disenfranchised. What is most notable about Dewey's

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[3] John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1927) 208.

[4] Ibid.

response is that in many ways it represented a culmination of his philosophical ideas and methods. The resulting political theory would prove quite attractive to a later generation that was trying to navigate an intellectual terrain rife with dissent and tension.

Dewey's Philosophical Method: Philosophy and Social Action

As a pragmatist, social commentator, and political theorist, Dewey looked at philosophical debates through a variety of lenses. His immediate focus on social needs and resistance to abstract speculation led him to argue that Western philosophical problems were largely the result of humanity's need to find certainty in a world of varied and ever-changing appearances. For Dewey, truth was a process, one that did not have an epistemic terminus that unveiled ultimate reality. A search for truth that existed outside of human affairs – one that would be applicable regardless of historical or social context – dominated Western philosophy and led philosophers astray, preventing the tradition from focusing on relevant problems. Flexibility, contingency, historicism, and experimentalism all defined Dewey's philosophical method. Not only would these themes also appear in his works on political theory, they would also be present in the work of Arnold Kaufman, Tom Hayden, and the founding documents of SDS. Intent on making philosophy relevant to contemporary affairs, Dewey argued that philosophical inquiry needed to result in social action, a claim that had resonance for later generations of American leftists.

Dewey illustrated, in *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920), that Western philosophy had become irrelevant and was largely unable to respond to the problems that afflicted contemporary society. He argued that the great Western philosophical systems

"were used to designate something taken to be fixed, immutable, and therefore out of time; that is eternal. In being also something conceived to be universal or all-inclusive, this eternal being was taken to be above and beyond all variations in space."[5] Philosophers had focused on constructing coherent metaphysical systems that could establish a degree of certainty in a world of contingency and change. The quest for certainty tended to divorce reason from experience. Also, this type of speculation not only led to the formation of dogmatic beliefs – whether theological or metaphysical – but it also defined two types of mental labor: a higher form of speculation found in philosophy and religion which stood in opposition to the second form, the consideration of everyday practical affairs. Philosophy had been divorced from considerations of immediate social problems such as poverty.

The higher form of speculation had historical roots in the "mytho-poetic" culture of ancient civilizations.[6] Attempts to answer questions about the nature of the universe would appear in drama, stories, or theatrical portrayals of the world. These stories would have to pass through two stages before they could develop into a form of philosophical speculation. First, they would have to be "hardened into doctrines" – a form of consolidation that would often take place after political conquest.[7] Second, a society would need to justify these belief systems on the basis of reason, not custom or tradition. As a result, philosophers would employ metaphysics, the field of philosophy that focuses on ultimate reality, to provide logical arguments to support beliefs that were originally held as a matter of custom.

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[5] John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1948) xii.

[6] Ibid., 7.

[7] Ibid.

The emerging system of thought institutionalized a division between the two types of knowledge. The skill of the artisan would remain outside and below the speculative practices of philosophers who were charged with answering questions about the underlying meaning of existence. Dewey wrote, "Over against this absolute noumenal reality which could be apprehended only by the systematic discipline of philosophy itself stood the ordinary empirical, relatively real, phenomenal world of everyday experience."[8] This historical division of labor led to tension between the two fields of knowledge as a result of modern scientific discoveries.

Although modern scientific method yielded immediate benefits, especially by way of industrialization, it had yet to be applied in its entirety to philosophical inquiry. The idealism of antiquity suggested that the universe was "an embodiment of a fixed and comprehensive Mind or Reason".[9] The new science suggested that the individual mind could shape nature and resituated the role of universal reason: "Idealism ceased to be metaphysical and cosmic in order to become epistemological and personal."[10] The rise of scientific method did not fully extirpate idealism. In the past, philosophers argued that a form of reason "had once and for all shaped nature and destiny."[11] The resulting metaphysical system suggested that all actions were shaped and governed by a set of universal laws. Resisting this trend, modern scientific method granted the existence of universal reason, but suggested it was the product of the individual human mind. However, for Dewey, the needed philosophical reconstruction "esteems the individual not

[8] Ibid., 23.

[9] Ibid., 50.

[10] Ibid., 51.

[11] Ibid., 50.

as an exaggeratedly self-sufficient Ego which by some magic creates the world, but as the

agent who is responsible through initiative, inventiveness and intelligently directed labor

for re-creating the world, transforming it into an instrument and possession of

intelligence."[12] The new approach to philosophy would have to recognize that reason

was a tool for changing the world, not an epistemic anchor that unveiled an ordered

universe.

By stripping metaphysics from the definition of intelligence, Dewey emphasized

that knowledge is always a process, not a fixed point at which the disciplined philosopher

will eventually arrive. He wrote, "Essential philosophic reconstruction… will regard

intelligence not as the original shaper and final cause of things, but as the purposeful

energetic re-shaper of those phases of nature and life that obstruct social well-being."[13]

The scientific revolution initiated much of the transition between the two types of

knowledge:

> The world in which philosophers once put their trust was a closed world, a world
> consisting internally of a limited number of fixed forms, and having definite
> boundaries externally. The world of modern science is an open world, a world
> varying indefinitely without the possibility of assignable limit in its internal
> make-up, a world stretching beyond any assignable bounds externally.[14]

Reconstruction in philosophy would result in new attitudes about social action.

Philosophers should acknowledge that the world could not be defined by fixed terms.

Not only did such definitions lead inevitably to dogma, they also failed to account for the

dynamic nature of the world. Further, intelligence was a process that required an ongoing

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[12] Ibid., 51.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., 54.

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application of experimental method, especially for problems that directly impacted the social good.

In the context of political theory, philosophical reconstruction would also require theorists to critically analyze abstract definitions of the state. Many social philosophers had debated the role of the "individual" and "the state." Dewey summarized the perspectives of social theorists as: First, those that placed the individual above all; Second, those who argued the state was the final manifestation of individual meaning and will; Third, those that established an organic connection between the individual and the state. All three of these broad traditions ignored particular circumstances by drawing heavily from historically meaningless concepts of the state and the individual. Further, such speculation was difficult to ground in immediate problems: "The social philosopher, dwelling in the region of his concepts, 'solves' problems by showing the relationship of ideas, instead of helping men solve problems in the concrete by supplying them hypotheses to be tested in projects of reform."[15] At best, this approach would only succeed in relating ideas to one another, making logical connections in an historical vacuum that ignored specific circumstances.

Pushing the emphasis on the primacy of historical circumstances still further, Dewey argued that "the self" only existed as a process, not having a specific developmental destination. Similar to his discussion of truth, where he argued that the pursuit of knowledge did not end in a statement about reality that was always and everywhere applicable, he argued that a static understanding of the individual lacked any real explanatory power. The self was always changing and could never be conceived of as being complete, especially in a world of constant flux. In addition, the static

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[15] Ibid., 192.

conception of the self suggested that real reform is an individual enterprise, consisting of introspection and internal moral improvement. If society only functioned to protect the individual from external restraints, then it followed that social progress would be encouraged by individual uprightness, thus social problems were the result of individual moral defects. As a result, "social and economic passivity are encouraged… Individuals are led to concentrate in moral introspection upon their own vices and virtues, and to neglect the character of the environment."[16] By defining the self in fixed terms, theorists of all three of the above camps oversimplified the relationship between the individual and the state.

Along the lines of his treatment of truth and the self, Dewey also argued that the term "society" should be taken to denote a process. Society was made up of associations that were multitudinous and had developed for "the better realization of any form of experience which is augmented and confirmed by being shared."[17] Instead of an end in itself, society was the process by which individuals formed associations, shared goods, and communicated ideas and experiences. The interrelations necessary for these forms of social conduct actually created the individual. According to Dewey, "the theory subjects every form of organization to continual scrutiny and criticism… it inquires what is done to release specific capacities and co-ordinate them into working powers. What sort of individuals are created?"[18] A process of inquiry and experimentalism would help correct social problems by identifying the best manner in which to organize individual capacities to produce a specific set of results. Consequently, the social process created individuals

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[16] Ibid., 196.

[17] Ibid., 205

[18] Ibid., 198.

by bringing them into cooperation for a shared goal. The presence of innumerable shared goals meant that there would be an equally great number of various associations. Here Dewey hinted toward the concept of pluralism he would develop in his work on political theory.

The Via Media

As a pragmatist, Dewey's approach to philosophy and the immediate problems of the public was both radical in nature and incremental in practice – it was a method for navigating opposed ideas. As a result, his political orientation was quite complicated and hard to define, especially given the backdrop of Progressive Era reforms during the time he was most engaged as a public intellectual. According to Robert Westbrook, Dewey is exceptionally difficult to describe as a progressive because the term denotes a number of characterizations that Dewey would have rejected. [19] Although he was writing during the progressive era, his work mostly falls outside of progressive reform initiatives. Dewey rejected centralized state control, middle class moral reform movements, and technocracy as elements of a top-down model that suggested the American public was a passive medium that could be shaped or influenced by reformers. He emphasized greater democratization of scientific method and its general application to public affairs by members of the public, not experts. Experimental reform implied direct participation and incrementalism over Marxist revolution as a strategy for social change. Dewey was offering a philosophical basis and a political method that was radically different from Marxism and classical liberalism.

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[19] Op. cit., Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, 185.

James Kloppenberg has argued that many of these qualities grow out of a wider philosophical tradition he termed the *via media*. Dewey was part of a broader but less known movement of thinkers who were attempting to chart a path between socialism and laissez-faire liberalism in politics as well as between empiricism and idealism in philosophy.[20] *Reconstruction in Philosophy* exemplified this *via media*. Dewey set out to define how practical and theoretical knowledge were set apart in the realm of philosophy – consciously suggesting that each one had both strengths and weaknesses – and illustrated how reconstruction can incorporate methods from each and apply them to immediate social problems. The *via media*, as a methodological framework, could also be applied to political theory.

Along the lines of his method in *Reconstruction*, Dewey examined how historical change can outpace development in human conceptual frameworks in *Liberalism and Social Action* (1930). As a reflection of the *via media*, this work analyzed the evolution and contemporary applications of classical liberalism, a nineteenth century doctrine, which still influenced the public mind and government policy in the early twentieth century. Dewey's liberalism would be appealing to early New Left theorists because, as a method for navigating antithetical beliefs, it provided a flexible model for directing social change. Dewey wrote, "I have wanted to find out whether it is possible for a person to continue, honestly and intelligently, to be a liberal, and if the answer be in the

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[20] James Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870-1920,* (New York: OUP, 1986) 3-4. Other members of the *via media* were Wilhelm Dilthey, Thomas Hill Green, Henry Sidgwick, Alfred Fouillée, and William James. According to Kloppenberg, many scholars have traced the relationship between empiricism and liberalism as well as idealism and Marxism but most have ignored the *via media* in the history of political theory. He argues that Dilthey, Green, Sidgwick, Fouillée, James, and Dewey rejected distinctions between liberalism and socialism as well as idealism and empiricism and, as a result, defined a unique political theory.

affirmative, what kind of liberal faith should be asserted today."[21] His aim was to examine liberalism without "abandoning in panic things of enduring value."[22]

Classical liberalism was concerned with the need to protect individuals from unnecessary governmental constraints. The goal was to balance the role of government, which provided certain liberties while denying others, with the individual's right to pursue their personal interests. However, "The economic and political changes for which they strove were so largely accomplished that they had become in turn the vested interest."[23] The doctrine of laissez-faire, which was at one period radical, had become a fixed truth, a concept that resisted change and provided the "intellectual justification of the *status quo*."[24] By reifying the concept of natural rights, laissez-faire liberalism institutionalized a form of individualism that resisted social reform.

The role of historical perspective was crucial for Dewey. While he did not want to suggest that classical liberals were solely responsible for creating an element of inflexibility in society, he argued that their failure to understand "the historic relativity of their own interpretation of liberty," their doctrines were reminiscent of "political absolutism."[25] Early liberals equated economic liberty with increased productive capacities, abundance, and an overall increase in material wealth. However, for Dewey the belief that economic liberty would necessarily ensure the social good seemed to be misinformed: "The only form of enduring social organization that is now possible is one

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[21] John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*, (New York: Prometheus Books, 1935) 14.

[22] Ibid., 15.

[23] Ibid., 41

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., 42.

in which the new forces of productivity are cooperatively controlled and used in the interest of the effective liberty and the cultural development of the individuals that constitute society."[26] Liberals had succeeded in unleashing unprecedented productive capabilities by overturning mercantilism. However, the emphasis on individualism and deregulation that made that feat possible now encouraged a dogmatic view of social progress. For Dewey, it was necessary to critically reexamine individualism, trying to understand how it leads to social inequality.

Although Dewey identified problems with the conservative aspects of liberalism once it became institutionalized in government policies, he did not want to scrap the entire enterprise. He was chiefly concerned with what he identified as a tendency toward apologetics in the face of some of the detrimental effects of a liberal regime. While liberalism possessed undeniably useful concepts – for example, Dewey wrote "Grateful recognition is due early liberals for their valiant battle in behalf of freedom of thought, conscience, expression and communication."[27] – Once reified, liberalism would justify disparity of wealth as opposed to offering a strategy for social change.[28] Institutionalization, not liberalism itself, created problems in society. Laissez faire, as an entrenched economic model, made it difficult to combat corporate greed by preventing the state from exercising regulatory powers. However, as an idea that navigated a tumultuous period of industrialization in the past, liberalism could provide a model for the twentieth century, "Liberalism is committed to an end that is at once enduring and

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[26] Ibid., 59.

[27] Ibid., 49.

[28] Ibid., 45.

flexible: the liberation of individuals so that realization of their capacities may be the law of their life."[29]

For Dewey, the older liberalism of an era of scarcity had to be reformulated in an age of abundance. Industry changed considerably, "while changes in the institutions in thought and belief have taken place to the least extent."[30] In an earlier work, *Individualism Old and New* (1930), he made similar suggestions about the transition to the modern industrial age. He argued, "As far as individuality is associated with aristocracy of the historic type, the extension of the machine age will presumably be hostile to individuality in its traditional sense… The problem of constructing a new individuality consonant with the objective conditions under which we live is the deepest problem of our times."[31] The transition from a pre-industrial to an industrial based economy, which created glaring class inequality, required the formulation of new concepts.

Liberalism could make sense of a new historical period without abandoning old concepts, without an immediate revolution, whether intellectual or political. A new conceptual model would have to manage a state of affairs defined by constant flux. "Flux does not have to be created. But it does have to be directed."[32] Coming back to *Reconstruction,* where he argued that truth and knowledge are processes that do not end in the establishment of a coherent metaphysical system, but, rather, point toward the

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[29] Ibid., 61.

[30] Ibid., 63

[31] John Dewey, *Individualism Old and New*, (New York: Prometheus, 1930) 16.

[32] Op. cit., Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*, 61.

transitory qualities of the world, Dewey suggested that social change would always be a necessity.

Fixed concepts would always become outdated, creating tension in society. In the past, philosophers had developed complex metaphysical systems to abate tensions in transitional periods. For example, Dewey took issue with classical liberalism's tendency to reduce the individual to an isolated, autonomous being that existed outside of social relationships. To counter this trend, he presented a model that was neither conservative nor radical as the terms are typically defined for managing rapid change. While he advocated a form of radical change, it was incremental in form and was not terminal. However, social action could be difficult to direct or facilitate in the modern world where complex interdependencies obscured the source of a given problem. Dewey extended his method of inquiry to this issue in his response to Lippmann, who accepted Dewey's propositions about the inherent complexity of the modern world, but arrived at very different conclusions.

The Problem of a Lost Public: Human Potential and Experimentalism

In the vein of his other works, which stressed historicism and experimentalism, *The Public and its Problems* (1927) analyzed how fixed models of the state led to inflexibility and social injustice. Democratic realists such as Lippmann developed static conceptions of the state – models that would be applicable regardless of circumstantial variation – a trend that was not without historical precedent. For Dewey, "The idea that there is a model pattern which makes a state a *good* or true state has affected practice as well as theory. It, more than anything else, is responsible for the effort to form

constitutions offhand and impose them ready-made on peoples."[33] There is an implicit

critique of classical liberalism in this argument. As noted in *Liberalism and Social*

Action as well as *Individualism Old and New*, an uncompromising individualism should

not define the nation's political culture. Along similar lines, Dewey had also cast a

critical light on theories of the state that were modeled on progressive evolution.

"Growth signified an evolution through regular stages to a predetermined end because of

some intrinsic nisus or principle. This theory discouraged recourse to the only method by

which alterations of political forms might be directed: namely, the use of intelligence to

judge consequences."[34] The form of historical determinism outlined by thinkers such as

Hegel and Marx forced social action into an unbending model that was anchored to an

unalterable goal.

Both of the above conceptions of the state precluded experimentalism because

they followed predetermined models of development. "The person who holds the doctrine

of 'individualism' or 'collectivism' has his program determined for him in advance. It is

not with him a matter of finding out the particular thing which needs to be done and the

best way, under the circumstances, of doing it."[35] Similar to the fixed conceptual

frameworks Dewey rejected in philosophy, closed theoretical models of the state would

prevent social action. Further, the above use of "individualism" and "collectivism" as

examples of closed models comes back to the *via media* in the sense that they represented

artificial divisions in an inflexible theoretical framework.

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[33] Op. cit., Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 45.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid., 202.

Like members of SDS years later, Dewey was attempting to steer a course between competing models of the state and social action. On the one hand, liberalism unleashed powerful economic and democratic forces; however, the concept, as strictly defined, would fail to correct the injurious results of economic inequality. On the other hand, there was the solution offered by revolutionary socialists, but theorists in this camp adhered to a view of historical progress that was just as uncompromising as classical theories. For Dewey, a reinvigorated democratic theory would have to focus on social justice amid constantly changing and unpredictable conditions without abandoning the progressive elements of liberalism that encouraged education, freedom of expression and thought, and democratic government.

As his debate with Lippmann indicated, Dewey envisioned a democratic society where citizens were political actors, not passive observers. While liberalism successfully wrested power from an entrenched aristocracy, the doctrine never fully completed its course toward releasing the potential of every individual in society. The new social order simply replaced one set of vested interests with another, and older forms of inequality transformed but did not disappear. Dewey wrote, "The same forces which have brought about the forms of democratic government, general suffrage, executives and legislators chosen by majority vote, have also brought about conditions which halt the social and humane ideals that demand the utilization of government as the genuine instrumentality of an inclusive and fraternally associated public."[36] Individualism, as an unquestionable doctrine, narrowed the scope of permissible public involvement in matters of social

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[36] Ibid., 109.

concern.   In order to realize the promises of liberalism in an age of interdependence would require greater public involvement in politics as well as fraternal cooperation.

The problem of the public, according to Dewey, was that society in the modern industrial era had become too large and polymorphous. The public was lost amid a variety of associations, some local and some national. He wrote, "It is not that there is no public, no large body of persons having a common interest in the consequences of social transactions. There is too much public, a public too diffused and scattered and too intricate in composition."[37] In the past, a group of individuals formed a public when they were confronted with the indirect consequences of the actions of others. For example, Dewey maintained that a duel agreed on by two individuals who willingly subject themselves to the risk of death or injury would not warrant public intervention. As a private agreement where the consequences are contained between the principal actors, it would not affect others. However, a blood feud between two families, where violence would be less contained, would represent a public problem. The indirect consequences of the feud would be much harder to control, where violence might erupt chaotically, involving a large number of people, having repercussions in the economy, legal system, etc., which would prove to be quite disruptive.

The United States in the twentieth century was simply too large for indirect consequences to be perceived, allowing individuals the ability to detect their point of origin. For Dewey, "An inchoate public is capable of organization only when indirect consequences are perceived, and when it is possible to project agencies which order their occurrence. At present, many consequences are felt rather than perceived; they are

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[37] Ibid., 137.

suffered, but they cannot be said to be known".[38] The U.S. was a "great society,"

consisting of multiple publics and associations that did not necessarily have a common

denominator. Similar to his conclusions in *Individualism Old and New*, Dewey argued in

The Public and Its Problems that historical circumstances had changed drastically while

conceptual frameworks failed to keep pace: "Conditions have changed, but every aspect

of life, from religion and education to property and trade, shows that nothing approaching

a transformation has taken place in ideas and ideals."[39] The great society did not foster a

sense of shared goals or community among citizens of the United States.

The problem of too many publics could only be resolved by the formation of a

"great community." Dewey argued, "Unless communal life can be restored, the public

cannot adequately resolve its most urgent problem: to find and identify itself. But if it be

reestablished, it will manifest a fullness, variety and freedom of possession and

enjoyment of meanings and goods unknown in the contiguous associations of the past."[40]

Dewey's debate with Lippmann encouraged him to articulate exactly how and why the

majority of Americans had become detached from the political process. He agreed with

Lippmann that propaganda and disinformation, the distractions of everyday life, and the

existence of an overwhelming number of technical problems that affected the nation

made it difficult for a public to exercise any political agency. Departing from

Lippmann's logic, he argued that the above circumstances made it more important than

ever to encourage active public participation in governmental affairs.

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[38] Ibid., 131.

[39] Ibid., 142.

[40] Ibid., 216.

Only active participation could counter the problem of an uninformed, detached public. Of methods Dewey wrote, "They will be experimental in the sense that they will be entertained subject to constant and well-equipped observation of the consequences they entail when acted upon, and subject to ready and flexible revision in the light of observed consequences."[41] As with Kaufman and SDS later, the role of experimentalism, close observation of results, and truth testing would play a central role in defining problems and their solutions. The great community would consist of conscious, critical individuals who shared in a collective responsibility to always analyze, discuss, and modify policy. Participatory democracy would be a prerequisite for the formation of such a critical public.

Conclusion: Radical Democracy as a Way of Life

The theory of democracy that emerged out of Dewey's political philosophy stressed social interaction and individual potential alongside contingency and constantly changing conditions. A democratic state required the interaction of publics that constantly analyzed social, political, and economic problems. Political theorists should never construct fixed models of the state that disregarded immediate experiences and results. Dewey's model democracy was radical because it emphasized social action, debate, individual participation, and experimentalism. Further, democracy was more than a theory of social and political organization; it was *a way of life*, a process that unfolded as individuals subjected claims about the world to constant scrutiny. In "Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us" (1939), Dewey argued that democracy was itself a process:

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[41] Ibid., 202.

> Democracy as compared with other ways of life is the sole way of living which believes wholeheartedly in the process of experience as end and as means; as that which is capable of generating the science which is the sole dependable authority for the direction of further experience and which releases emotions, needs and desires so as to call into being the things that have not existed in the past.[42]

Dewey's radicalism grew out of his commitment to social action and open discourse. He argued that immediate experience, not closed theoretical models, should direct action. A pluralist society would encourage individual initiative, thus releasing individual potential in social action.

The pluralism he affirmed would appear decades later in the work of Arnold Kaufman, a philosopher who taught at the University of Michigan during the years Tom Hayden and SDS would frame *The Port Huron Statement.* His work was an early indicator of the emerging New Left thought that criticized the Cold War, establishment liberalism, and fixed theoretical models. For Kaufman, political theory only served a directive purpose; it should never define the state in fixed terms. Like Dewey he argued that increased participation in the political process would help educate individuals as well discourage apathy. Participatory democracy, a term he coined and would appear frequently in New Left thought, would function as a method – not a closed theory – that would direct experimental reform efforts. As the next chapter will suggest, Kaufman's relationship with SDS would become tense, but in the early sixties many of his ideas were adopted by the student organization.

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[42] John Dewey, "Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us" taken from J. Boydston ed., *John Dewey: The later works, 1925-1953*, volume 14 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press) 224-230. Originally published 1939.

CHAPTER III

OF ARNOLD KAUFMAN: RADICAL LIBERALISM, PARTICIPATORY

DEMOCRACY, AND A PHILOSOPHY FOR THE NEW LEFT

*[T]he liberal tradition possesses moral and intellectual resources richer than those
of any competing tradition. The Right fails to acknowledge this because it rejects or
distorts that tradition; the Left fails because, in its passion for a new revolutionary
rhetoric, it blinds itself to the radical implications of liberalism's
very old aims and principles.*

*The central claim of John Dewey's philosophy was that the democratic process could
enrich the lives of men not only by what it does for them but by what it does to them.*

Arnold Saul Kaufman (1968)

Arnold Saul Kaufman's philosophy had a direct impact on the framers of *The

Port Huron Statement*. His thought served as a bridge between John Dewey and the

founding members of SDS. Unfortunately, Kaufman appears infrequently and usually

commands little attention in most historical accounts of the New Left.   Too often his

thought is overshadowed by the work of writers such as Marcuse and Mills, whose

revolutionary rhetoric captured the attention of young radicals in the sixties. However, as

an indication of Kaufman's influence and the degree to which he was involved with SDS

and the New Left generally, it is necessary to recognize his hand in formulating and

giving definite shape to the concept of "participatory democracy," a phrase that has

become synonymous with SDS. Like Dewey, who argued that theory should function as

a method for solving specific social problems, Kaufman's understanding of participatory institutions reflected his commitment to experience and method over theory as well as contingency and pluralism over dogma.

Participatory democracy should not be included in the history of the New Left as an example of the empty phraseology and ambiguous theoretical perspectives that were associated with the movement.[1] Kaufman applied Dewey's radical epistemology, experimentalism, and democratic theory to his own ideas about greater participation. The concept of participatory democracy grows out of a rich and radical liberal tradition that had its earliest advocate in Dewey. Kaufman revisited Dewey's work in the fifties and sixties as he formulated his own political theory – one that would emphasize human potential for rational thought and action. He was concerned with radically reconstructing a political culture that had become bankrupt when Cold War consensus and anti-communism obstructed open debate and political dialogue.

An analysis of Kaufman's thought and influence among early SDS members has a number of advantages. First, it can clearly establish a link between John Dewey's liberalism and the New Left's political thought. Second, and directly related to the first, it lends credibility to the argument that New Left thought was indebted to a form of radical liberalism, a point that is neglected in histories of the period that emphasize the movement's radical turn. SDS members found in the work of Dewey and Kaufman a theoretical model and philosophical method that could navigate extremes, while still offering radical goals and denying dogmatic appeals to fixed theoretical perspectives in

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[1] The complaint that SDS relied heavily on vacuous or unclear demands in its pursuit of political change has roots in the criticism of the New Left by intellectuals such as Irving Howe, Paul Goodman, Michael Harrington, and Arnold Kaufman himself. This analysis has influenced historical work as well. John Patrick Diggins and Christopher Lasch are both examples of historians who arrive at these conclusions in their work.

pursuit of political and social change. Last, and possibly most important, such an analysis brings the concept of participatory democracy into a brighter light.

Kaufman drew four important elements from Dewey's liberalism in defining participatory democracy.   The concept was embedded with an emphasis on experimentalism, open dialogue, truth-testing, and the power of social and political action to encourage human development. An examination of these characteristics can bring deeper meaning to one of SDS's most important contributions to American political thought, the concept of participatory democracy. While Dewey and Kaufman gave definition to the idea, it was SDS that is most remembered for attempting to put it into practice. In order to establish the connection between Dewey, Kaufman, and SDS it is necessary to develop and analyze Kaufman's broad philosophical and political method, as well as provide a detailed account of his definitions of radical liberalism and participatory democracy. As a method, Kaufman's political and philosophical thought closely mirrors that of Dewey, whose unique historical perspective provided a model for rejecting dogmatically opposed extremes while exploring a reinvigorated form of liberalism.

Kaufman's political theory is marked by an emphasis on instrumentalism, or the idea that theory should serve a practical function, and experimentalism, which suggested that all conclusions are tentative and subject to change based on experience. Moving beyond method generally, it is also evident that his work on participatory democracy and radical liberalism was influenced by Dewey, and, in turn, are reflected in SDS's political theory.

For Kaufman, radicalism meant acknowledging pluralism and contingency when attempting to solve deep-rooted social problems. He shared similar goals – distributive

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justice for example – with other radicals, but it was his method that distinguished him. Participatory democracy was the political manifestation of his philosophical method. Participatory institutions would augment the traditional representative state by incorporating the voices of average Americans. The emphasis on individual participation then shaped his definition of radical liberalism. Kaufman agreed with Dewey, and suggested liberalism was in need of a new definition of freedom – freedom from restraint was no longer a sufficient liberal goal in the modern capitalist world.

Political and Philosophical Method: Experimentalism and Instrumentalism

Along the lines of Dewey in the early twentieth century, Kaufman's intellectual work was motivated by a desire to navigate opposed political theories in an attempt to develop a body of thought that would be useful for understanding the historical nature of contemporary problems. Dewey was critical of the New Deal, American Communists, and the right in their respective responses to the Great Depression. He sought to reinvigorate the liberal tradition in a way that stressed interdependence, personal growth, social and economic equality, and democratic participation – all of which he felt were ignored or overlooked by other theorists. Instead of abandoning classical liberalism in its entirety as Marxists had done, he formulated a unique and radical liberalism that did not celebrate individualism to such extremes that ignored social calamity.

Similarly, Kaufman confronted an intellectual terrain that was defined by extremes. His work focused on the shortcomings of the Welfare State, criticized corporate liberalism[2], and found little value in Marxism. He also rejected the fervent

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[2] The terms corporate and establishment liberalism refer, in a critical fashion, to the ways in which the Welfare State was perceived by American leftists. Classical liberalism, with its emphasis on laissez-faire

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anti-communism that had come to define American political culture during the Cold War. Each of these elements indicated the existence of unquestioned beliefs in the United States. Marxism was too dogmatic in its reading of history and its prescription for revolutionary social change. Likewise, the Welfare State, corporate liberalism, and anti-communism were uncompromising concepts – founded upon an unflinching commitment to the basic assumptions of laissez-faire economic and political theory.

For Kaufman, corporate liberalism and the Welfare State were thinly veiled variations of classical liberal doctrine. The regulatory measures and safety nets that existed as a result of the New Deal were piecemeal reforms that did not radically challenge existing ideas about social and economic justice – in fact, they symbolized the degree to which classical liberalism had become an unquestioned creed in the United States. Marxism, on the other hand, was too inflexible in its repudiation of liberalism. As a result of the incompatibility of these traditions, Kaufman's philosophical method tended to resist dogmatic models and inflexible beliefs or conclusions. Like Dewey, he regarded all truths as subject to change in response to the test of social experience.

Kaufman accepted contingency and pluralism during a period in U.S. history when most intellectuals were choosing sides in the battle of ideas that underpinned the Cold War. His philosophical method closely resembled the *via media* as Kloppenberg described it in his analysis of the American pragmatists. Whereas Dewey was attempting to give shape to ideas that fell outside or in between German idealism and British

economics, had been overturned by New Deal liberalism, which stressed the role of the state in regulating the economy. For the New Left, programs such as the Great Society, which grew out of New Deal liberalism, were evidence of the co-optive nature of the Welfare State. Piecemeal concessions were made to the working poor without actually including them in the processes for determining policy. This form of liberalism protected corporate interests by building a political establishment that resisted fundamental change. Accordingly, the New Deal was considered a failed attempt to create a truly radical liberalism. In the sixties, this critique carried over to include Johnson era reforms. See Kevin Mattson's *Intellectuals In Action* (2002) for a discussion of these terms.

empiricism as well as Marxism and classical liberalism, Kaufman was concerned with the New Left's growing reliance on Marxist thought as well as the cold war consensus that seemed to unite the Democratic Party with conservative elements in American politics.[3] As a *via media*, his thought confronted the claims of radicals, liberals, and conservatives. Both liberal and conservative forms of anti-communism as well as the growing militancy among leftists posed challenges to an open-ended and experimental method for social change.

The essay, "The Nature and Function of Political Theory" (1954), which appeared in *The Journal of Philosophy*, is a useful example of Kaufman's experimentalism and pluralism. By examining and defending the underlying ideas about the utility of liberal reform, this work is also a helpful place to start in tracing Dewey's influence among early sixties radicals. Further, the general model for directing political change he outlined appeared as an underlying framework in both Hayden's "Letter to the New (Young) Left" and *The Port Huron Statement.* For Kaufman, incremental steps, with directive purpose, would lead to radical change. By providing a working model for change, "The Nature and Function of Political Theory" can be viewed as a prototypical New Left strategy for approaching the problems that would later be outlined by SDS.

For Kaufman, a political theory should function as a method for understanding social change. It should not propose final solutions to philosophical questions about the good state. Rather than serving as "rhetoric," or justifying an "existing power structure," Kaufman began by asserting, "Political theory should be a guide to action."[4] The

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[3] Kaufman's concern that the movement had become too radical and violent toward the end of the sixties appears most forcibly in his work, *The Radical Liberal* (1968), which is discussed in greater detail below.

political philosopher should help policy makers develop strategies for correcting specific problems. Political theory should not be a realm of philosophical debate that is detached from the needs of society. Like Dewey, who suggested that fixed models of the state perpetuated inflexible political regimes because they failed to take account of the historical nature of a problem, Kaufman emphasized the importance of contingency – all conclusions should be treated as provisional. Theory, Kaufman stated, should be developed to serve an "instrumental function."[5]

Although he emphasized the direct application of political philosophy, Kaufman also argued that "ultimate ideals" could serve a rhetorical role in political theorizing. "They are the keystone of an indispensable rhetoric; they serve a directive function; they constitute an ultimate evaluative principle."[6] By serving as a theoretical final goal, an ideal such as economic equality could provide a strategic and practical framework for understanding how and if a particular policy was making progress. Even more importantly:

> For most men who are impelled to action by appeals made in terms of ultimate ideals, the expressions are, in their primary political contexts, vague and ambiguous; but, because there is an accretion of private, personally significant meanings in the case of each individual, they play an indispensable rhetorical role. Indispensable because political theorizing is sterile word-play unless there is some way of arousing and rearousing adherents.[7]

Here Kaufman offered a glimpse of what would become a problem for the New Left in the following decade. Ultimate ideals were useful for determining and evaluating policy,

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[4] Arnold S. Kaufman, "The Nature and Function of Political Theory," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 5I, No. 1 (January, 1954): 5.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid., 6.

and they were also necessary for garnering support for a particular cause. However, as he would later lament,[8] an ultimate ideal could also "be perverted by demagogic ranting."[9] However, these ideals were to be closely understood in relation to their resulting social effects. "It is precisely this attention to consequences that lies at the heart of instrumentalism."[10] Similar to Dewey, Kaufman articulated a need to develop a conceptual model that focused on directing change without devolving into a form of absolutism. Incremental steps would eventually lead to radical change without the social tumult of revolution. Along these lines, he formulated additional evaluative principles.

Another important method for assessing policy required the theorist to establish more immediate goals, or what Kaufman called "intermediate ideals."[11] While an ultimate goal could be understood in terms of statistical evidence—for example, economic equality could be measured by statistical analyses of American incomes— intermediate ideals would require somewhat exhausting empirical testing.[12] By highlighting the operational aspects of goals and definitions, Kaufman employed an experimental approach that stressed the importance of revisability and the need to justify theories on the basis of observed results. He suggested of intermediate ideals, "Despite

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[8] In *The Radical Liberal* (1968) and "Participatory Democracy Ten Years Later" (1969) Kaufman viewed the increasing radicalism in SDS and the student movement critically, regarding their demands for "participatory democracy" somewhat misguided and contradictory given their growing propensity toward violence. This will be discussed below in connection to the relationship between Kaufman and SDS.

[9] Op. cit, Arnold S. Kaufman, *The Nature and Function of Political Theory*, 6.

[10] Ibid., 6.

[11] Ibid., 11.

[12] Ibid.

the tentativeness with which they should be held, they must be employed as policy guides

because the alternative is haphazard reliance on hunch, hope, and harangue."[13]

Intermediate ideals had a directive purpose. They should be revisable to

accommodate unanticipated outcomes or changing circumstances. Dewey outlined a

similar program in *Individualism Old and New* (1930), where he wrote:

> To accept them [current conditions] intellectually is to perceive that they are in
> flux. Their movement is not destined to a single end. Many outcomes may be
> projected, and the movement may be directed by many courses to many chosen
> goals… By becoming conscious of their movements and by active participation in
> their currents, we may guide them to some preferred possibility.[14]

Dewey was specifically concerned with directing the development of a new way to

conceptualize individualism. The method he outlined surfaced in Kaufman's essay on

the function of political theory. Dewey argued, "The scientific attitude is experimental as

well as intrinsically communicative. If it were generally applied, it would liberate us

from the heavy burden imposed by dogmas and external standards."[15] Kaufman argued

that such a method was necessary for guiding political theory.

The focus on both ultimate and intermediate ideals allowed Kaufman to present a

model for social and political change that was pragmatic, historically focused, and yet

capable of envisioning policy beyond immediate social realities. Also, by focusing on

consequences and empirical testing, he echoed Dewey's call for a "general adoption of

the scientific attitude in human affairs".[16] Theory should address immediate concerns

that are relative to the given historical period as well as provide an ambitious goal that

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[13] Ibid.

[14] John Dewey, *Individualism Old and New*, (New York: Prometheus, 1930) 72.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid., 75.

could be reached, through a practice of rigorous testing, in the somewhat far removed future. For Kaufman, the process of radical change would take time and was not necessarily terminal. Reminiscent of Dewey, he wrote, "Reform and reconstruction are probably permanent needs of any society."[17]

"The Nature and Function of Political Theory" served as a skeletal model for Kaufman's beliefs about radical change. It is in the background of Hayden's "Letter to the New (Young) Left" (1961) as well as *The Port Huron Statement* (1962). By acknowledging contingency and the resulting importance of pluralism, the essay also hinted at Kaufman's brand of radical liberalism, a tradition that endorsed permanent political and social change but resisted violent revolution. His work would continue to evolve as his relationship with the New Left began to turn sour. As SDS became increasingly resistant to working within established political avenues, Kaufman responded critically by outlining the merits of a sincere radical liberalism. Like Dewey, the tradition Kaufman had in mind served as a *via media*. His brand of radicalism would dismiss militarism in foreign policy, racism and plutocracy at home, and the form of corporate liberalism that perpetuated it—all the while offering a critique of the dogmatic leftist ideology that challenged it all. As a result, his work during the sixties began to focus less on the function of political theory and more on providing a detailed portrait of the radical liberal.

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[17] Op. cit., Arnold Kaufman, 10.

A Strained Relationship with Radicalisms

As Kaufman's thought evolved he gave more exact shape to his definition of radicalism. Like Dewey before him, and Hayden and SDS after, the term "radicalism" was meant to suggest a method and perspective that was compatible with liberalism. Early SDS thought would invoke Kaufman's liberalism, one that was fundamentally rooted in a *via media*. Dewey had rejected Marx as well as classical liberalism just as Kaufman would reject the radicalism of the Weathermen as well as corporate liberalism – the latter being a term that suggested the New Deal had only succeeded in creating a regulatory state that catered to corporate interests, not those of average Americans. For Kaufman, radicalism meant acknowledging uncertainty in an effort to look for the root cause of problems. As was evident in "The Nature and Function of Political Theory," he accepted Dewey's epistemology, and argued that truth was contingent and a theorist should adopt an experimental approach to problem solving. Radicalism, as Hayden would echo later, was a style and manner of viewing the world. As a *via media*, Kaufman's radicalism challenged what he termed "the politics of pseudo realism," a perspective that was rooted in Lippmann's work, and "the politics of self-indulgence," which was largely exemplified by members of the student and civil rights movements who turned toward blind political action in a search for authenticity.[18]

His relationship to SDS became strained in the years following his attendance at the Port Huron conference in 1962, where Hayden and other members of the student organization edited their founding manifesto. The increasing rhetoric of violent revolution and talk of co-optation among New Leftists directly challenged Kaufman's

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[18] Arnold S. Kaufman, *The Radical Liberal: New Man in American Politics* (New York: Atherton Press, 1968) 3. The politics of self-indulgence and pseudo-realism will be addressed below.

analysis of liberal reform. By 1968 he produced a work that was meant to confront two opposing trends in American political culture: realism and Marxism. *The Radical Liberal: New Man in American Politics* (1968) suggested of the two trends: "The former is rooted in the belief that political action in pursuit of goals that are not 'possible' or 'practical' is irrational. The latter, in the belief that political action that does not express to the full a person's 'authentic' moral feelings is insincere and immoral."[19]

While *The Radical Liberal* served as book-length description of these two sentiments, Kaufman had actually hinted at them earlier. In an article entitled "Radicalism and Conventional Politics" (1967), he addressed a common trajectory for one-time radicals turned establishment liberals. Activists who sought to change the system because they viewed existing circumstances as "catastrophically evil" often chose to work outside of electoral politics because it was deemed invariably as corrupt. Instead of working against common enemies, radicals and radical movements multiplied as they deemed their respective causes as unique and morally authentic. As a result, "Opposition to the catastrophic evil is thus fragmented, becomes even less effective than before, and intensifies the radicalizing processes. Those newly estranged from conventional politics in turn comfort themselves with the thought that they are the only men of true conscience in the country."[20] For Kaufman, these radicals were dogmatic in their commitment to unconventional political action, developing a fixed model of social change that obscured possible alternatives. However, once it appeared that governing institutions were

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[19] Ibid.

[20] Arnold S. Kaufman, "Radicalism and Conventional Politics" (Dissent vol. 15, no. 4, July 1967) 433-435. Other than mentioning Irving Howe, Kaufman's discussion of the radicalizing process remained mostly abstract. He did, however, use anti-war and civil rights activism as brief examples of this trend.

attempting to respond to public demands and alleviate specific problems, some activists would be absorbed back into the system.

In some cases, those who were absorbed back into the system felt betrayed by their original commitment to radical causes. "[T]hey feel like they were duped into dropping out in the first place and, as a result, become an advocate for the American system – critical of those who want to change it radically." For Kaufman, these developments essentially defined the relationship between the Old and New Lefts. Writers like Irving Howe were no longer willing to challenge the status quo as the New Left was. However, the New Left drifted too far outside of existing political channels, a path that would lead to factionalism and ineffectuality.[21] In order to prevent a lapse back into this cycle, he suggested that leftists not cast political problems in catastrophic terms, which only perpetuated dogmatic appeals to closed theories. "There is an enormous amount to be done, and it is foolish to suppose that any particular strategic perspective chart the one true way."[22]

A radical left had to understand problems in a way that led to finding constructive solutions. For Kaufman, as with Dewey earlier, the tendency for theorists to break into conservative and radical camps – wherein radicals advocated scrapping liberalism altogether – suggested that a form of liberalism itself might be radical simply because it posed a solution that fell outside of the debate between classical liberals and Marxists. In an article entitled, "A Philosophy for the American Left" (1963), he stated: "As I understand radicalism, and my conception is rooted in a great classical tradition, it essentially involves three things: a temper of mind, a conviction about the existence of

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[21] Ibid., 436.

[22] Ibid., 439.

great social evils, and a firm commitment to the methods of reason."[23] The temper of

mind, firm commitment, and use of reason are all elements that appeared in Dewey's

political theory and would later appear in Hayden's writing. Additionally, the radical

style presumed a willingness to enter discourse and an appreciation of dissent. "It is just

such appreciation which makes a stable yet dynamically changing democratic order

possible."[24]

Kaufman's vision of radicalism fell outside a Marxist conception of a

revolutionary social order where a violent lower class would seize the power of the elite.

However, he did not deny that inequality existed to an alarming degree. He argued, "If

justice does not demand absolute equality, it surely demands something different from

the incredible inequalities which presently exist."[25] While he did not articulate a need for

a form of economic leveling or a communist revolution, he was a champion for a

radically different democratic order. He argued:

> Taken altogether we have here a massive, and extraordinarily complex, problem.
> It behooves the genuine radical to be deeply concerned about these developments,
> because he, as mush as any, has a deep commitment to a stake in the building of a
> social system in which the relations between persons are marked by respect for
> each person's dignity and capacity for deliberation. [26]

As it was for Dewey, democracy was a radical ideal, one that had not yet been realized in

practice. A radical was a champion of deliberation and participation as components of a

more humane political system that curbed the power of moneyed interests. While

radicalism admitted of no terminus in the process of change, it did suggest a method that

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[23] Arnold S. Kaufman, "A Philosophy for the American Left" (*Socialist Commentary*, November 1963), 13.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., 14.

[26] Ibid., 14-15.

was directive, experimental, and communicative. Kaufman had these elements in mind when he sought to recast the terms of democracy for the New Left.

A Democracy of Participation: An Ultimate Ideal

Kaufman argued that political theory should serve an experimental function, allowing the theorist to explore social and political problems free of a dogmatic lens. Radicalism meant committing to such a method completely and acknowledging the potential of the liberal tradition to correct social problems even in the face of its obvious defects. The majority of his writing in the sixties and early seventies was devoted to applying these ideas to American politics. Not only did Kaufman offer written analyses of the movements for racial equality, economic justice, and strengthening organized labor, he also worked as an activists for organizations such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the New Democratic Coalitions (NDC), the Poor People's Campaign (PPC), and was committed to the teach-in movement.   As mentioned earlier, his thoughts on political theory became clearer in the latter half of the sixties as he became critical of the New Left's anti-liberal turn. However, the programs he outlined early in the decade had influenced Hayden and SDS – especially during their formative years. Chief among Kaufman's ideas that appeared in *The Port Huron Statement* were his analysis of the Welfare State and his prescription for a participatory democracy.

In a review entitled "The Affluent Underdog: British Labor in Crisis" (1960), Kaufman explored the history of the Welfare State in an effort to provide a critical analysis of essays written by Anthony Crosland and Richard Crossman. Both authors held that the successes of the Welfare State required the left to reconstruct its strategies in

order to remain relevant in an age where the state guaranteed basic necessities to the

laboring classes.   Crosland emphasized the importance of maintaining a focus on the

practical over the theoretical while Crossman suggested just the opposite.   Although

Kaufman tended to agree more with Crossman, arguing that there must be a strong

understanding of theory, or ultimate ideals, he suggested that both authors had missed the

mark on application of theory to practice.

Instead of focusing solely on a fixed theoretical goal, Kaufman wanted to blend

an appreciation for theory with an understanding of the value of immediate, practical

programs for the left.   His analysis comes back to the method he established in his work

on the function of political theory. He argued that theory needed to serve an instrumental

function and progress should be evaluated with reference to intermediate and ultimate

ideals. The Welfare State had undermined the rhetoric of the left. Organized labor could

be co-opted – becoming an affluent underdog in society – if the left did not define new

ideals. Using the economist Gunnar Myrdal's work on modern democracy as a

foundation, Kaufman argued:

> The Welfare State may be satisfactory, but it is not richly satisfying; a third state
> is required. To transform the shallow Welfare State into a truly good society the
> creation of a genuine democracy of participation is necessary. Like John Dewey,
> Myrdal believes that it is necessary to reconstruct the social order so that
> individual human beings come to play an effective role in the creation of policies,
> institutions, of the very values that shape their lives. This devolution of power
> must be achieved without dismantling that structure of laws and institutions which
> enables coherent planning.[27]

The history of the Welfare State passed through two stages: limited state intervention in

the economy defined the first stage while greater state planning and regulation marked

the second. For the New Left, the New Deal represented that second stage in the United

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[27] Arnold S. Kaufman, "The Affluent Underdog: British Labor in Crisis" (*The Nation* November 1960)
350.

States. However, FDR's reforms failed to produce a social arrangement that was satisfying for the public as Hayden and SDS would later indicate in *The Port Huron Statement*. For Kaufman, who applied this analytical model to the Great Society, top-down planning divorced individuals from the government, not allowing them to help determine the policies that would shape their lives. The Welfare State would have to pass into a third stage of development – one that did not require an immediate revolution that dismantled existing institutions.

Kaufman agreed with Dewey that participatory democracy was a necessary component for creating a just social order. Like Dewey, he felt compelled to defend such a proposition against the claims of realists who argued that most humans were inherently irrational, making greater participation a disastrous idea. In "Participatory Democracy and Human Nature" (1960), he argued that opponents of participatory democracy fall into two camps: those who believe human deficiencies are redeemable and those who believe they are irredeemable.   Of the former, he used Walter Lippmann's critique of democracy as an example. According to Lippmann, the industrial age had instilled in Americans an insatiable and self-centered acquisitive desire, a trait that made them incapable of considering problems in a broader, complicated social context. For Kaufman, most liberals who arrived at these conclusions either suggested educational institutions would have to train citizens or government would have to be facilitated by experts.

Lippmann had opted for a form of oligarchy – or rule by an elite. In order to redeem the average American or a select few, educational institutions would have to be overhauled and designed to train responsible citizens. Kaufman found both solutions inadequate. "In fact, performance of an educational task the size of that required is bound

to reflect the defects of the surrounding community. Education cannot escape being corrupted by what is evil in its social context. The alternative, education for an elite, is not just nor can it serve the function Lippmann would require of it."[28] Participatory democracy was not strictly a moral imperative – it served a crucial educational function in addition to helping create a more democratic society, a conclusion that impacted the thought of SDS. While some realists had considered human nature redeemable, there were also those who disagreed.

Citing Niebuhr and Freud, Kaufman argued that those who suggested human nature was irredeemable typically offered religious or psychological justifications for their beliefs. However, Niebuhr's claim that God intended human nature to be deeply flawed was essentially a psychological argument. Man's inability to function as a reasonable political being, while possibly originating in God's will, actually resided in the irrational motives of the human psyche. Realists of this camp typically defined democracy as a system to regulate countervailing power arrangements. Like Dewey, Kaufman thought such a definition stripped democracy of all its radical and humane implications. Participatory democracy was valuable not for "the extent to which it protects or stabilizes a community, but the contribution it can make to the development of human powers of thought, feeling, and action. In this respect it differs, and differs quite fundamentally, from a representative system incorporating all sorts of institutional features designed to safeguard human rights and ensure social order."[29] The critique that

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[28] Arnold S. Kaufman, "Participatory Democracy and Human Nature," taken from William E. Connolly ed. *The Bias of Pluralism* (New York: Atherton, 1969) 180.

[29] Ibid., 184.

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realists confused the meaning and purpose of democracy was rooted in Dewey's work and would also appear in the writing of Hayden and SDS.

Of the realist conception of politics in general, Kaufman concluded that it was built on a presumptuous dismissal of human potential. Of the participatory and realist conceptions of democracy he wrote: "The first has more to do with what can be done *to* men, with the development of distinctively human powers; the second with what can be done *for* men, with protection against tyranny and establishment of social order."[30] Resembling the historicism of Dewey, he argued that increased interdependence and complexity of the state and the economy made classical liberalism inapplicable in the modern age. In a passage that could have been written by Dewey, he argued:

> In modern industrial societies men can successfully assume responsibility for the direction of many affairs which today they regard as largely irrelevant to their lives because these affairs seem so remote. Moreover, in the case of those types of decision which it is best, for other reasons, to put into the hands of delegated agents, the best agents will be selected when those who make the selection have direct responsibility for decisions which are similar to those with which the agent will be entrusted.[31]

Similarly, Dewey had suggested that modern industry changed the political landscape of the country and that liberal ideas failed to keep pace with these changes.

The public was lost, unable to identify itself as a unique political entity, as well as bear influence on policy decisions. Here Kaufman arrived at similar conclusions: the gap between government and governed had to be closed by ensuring that representative agents were chosen by a public that understood the responsibilities and problems associated with policy-making. Greater individual participation in local government or reform movements such as SDS could create a citizenry capable of rising to that

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[30] Ibid., 188.

[31] Ibid., 189-190.

occasion. Also implicit here was a comment about individualism: liberalism was misconceived in the modern age if it only purported to protect the individual from the power and interference of government. Kaufman's radical liberalism would build on a new definition of freedom.

On Radical Liberalism

The challenges for constructing a liberal theory that was relevant to contemporary problems were significant. One of the most notable obstacles was the New Left itself. Kaufman believed students had succumbed to excessive moralizing in politics. As noted earlier, he was attempting to construct a radical liberalism that could meet the demands of the New Left, save what he thought were the redeeming elements of a classical tradition, and refute realists as well as Marx. At first glance, *The Radical Liberal: New Man in American Politics* (1968) is a defense of moderate political strategies written during a time when New Leftists were challenging the previous generation of radical American thinkers. While this is certainly true, the book also served a more subtle purpose. As with his other works, *The Radical Liberal* outlined a politics of contingency and pluralism. As a *via media*, the book situates Kaufman's political theory in between and far outside the tenets of Marxism, realism, and corporate liberalism.

Agreeing with Dewey, Kaufman argued that liberals could find little value in Marxist thought. The Marxist lens limited the scope of historical development by suggesting humanity could reach a utopian state where injustice and alienated labor would no longer exist. Liberals, however, rejected the belief that all social ills would be remedied once alienated labor disappeared. Kaufman wrote, "In particular, liberals are

convinced that political democracy… is independent of alienation of labor, and just as basic to the realization of a good society."[32] Liberals were skeptics in regard to a final stage of history – there would always be a need for a system to formally organize dissent. They did not reject Marxist claims about the need for distributive justice and the necessity of ending alienated labor, but they did not accept that these prescriptions would bring an end to all social problems. For Kaufman, the basic elements of liberalism were not at odds with Marxist claims about social justice. However, democracy denoted an on-going process of reform, one that did not terminate in a fixed historical destination.

Kaufman followed Dewey when he defined a liberalism that was markedly different from the classical doctrine that stressed laissez-faire economics and unfettered individualism. Accordingly, "In a brief sentence, liberals believe that a *good society is one in which each person possesses the resources of materials, mind, and spirit, as well as the opportunities, to carve out a career in conformity to that person's own nature and reasoned choice.*"[33] Liberalism's original aims of individual freedom actually had radical implications for the meaning of social justice. Reasoned choice and reflective commitment were attributes that could only be acquired through greater participation in public affairs. Further, the question of distributive justice implied that the nation's materials and resources were being withheld from a significant portion of the population. Contrary to classical liberal doctrine, freedom of opportunity and greater individual access to material resources were concepts that could be not be evaluated independently of each other. The distinction between positive and negative liberty was misleading. Equal opportunity was inherently linked to distributive justice.

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[32] Op. cit., Arnold S. Kaufman, *The Radical Liberal: New Man in American Politics* , 5.

[33] Ibid., 6, his italics.

For Kaufman, the New Left failed to understand the radical implications of liberalism. However, as he pointed out with little surprise, "We seem to have entered a political era in which the rhetoric of liberalism is unrestrainedly used either to defend programs of liberal reform that are minimal in magnitude and scope, or to rationalize programs that are illiberal in spirit and intent."[34] The New Left was understandably suspicious of the liberal tradition. Kaufman was no stranger to claims about the co-optive nature of American politics. He admitted, "Parliamentary institutions have been used by vested power to shape the form of policy in manipulatively appealing ways, without affecting its substance. And even when political democracy functions constructively, it is far from providing the panacea for social evils that many like to think it does."[35] Political and economic manipulation were products of a narrowly defined liberalism where "entrenched power of moneyed elites who, either out of habit or acquisitiveness, insist on interpreting the rhetoric of American freedom in the least human way possible."[36]

Radical liberalism would simultaneously challenge co-optation, realism, and the New Left's rhetoric of revolution. As a work of political theory and an exposition of method, *The Radical Liberal* framed Kaufman's own theory in reference to the two perspectives mentioned earlier: the politics of pseudo-realism and the politics of self-indulgence. Both of these positions jeopardized liberal claims. The former exaggerated the accomplishments of the Welfare State, suggesting capitalism had been humanized and significant reform was no longer necessary. The latter suggested that politics should

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[34] Ibid., 13.

[35] Ibid., 7.

[36] Ibid., 16.

express an individual's moral sentiments – political action should help the individual

achieve "personal authenticity"[37] – an idea that framed the Welfare State in the language

of co-optation.

Kaufman was critical of the Welfare State. However, he largely saw it as a half-

finished revolution, not necessarily an attempt to co-opt leftist movements. Liberalism

certainly had manifest flaws. He wrote, "No other tradition has been as steady and

relentless in its *theoretical* repudiation of tyrannical power. But, for that very reason, the

gap between liberal theory and liberal practice is a special disaster."[38] As Dewey had

argued, the liberal obsession with individual freedom against tyranny allowed the

tradition to petrify, becoming inflexible in the face of changing circumstances. For

Kaufman, a radical liberalism would not ignore historical circumstances. It would have

to navigate the flaws of the Welfare State as well as acknowledge the ways in which

human liberty was actually impeded by the realist conception of politics. As a result, he

formulated a system that met the concerns of realists and still managed to incorporate a

greater level of public participation in the political process. A chapter in *The Radical

Liberal* outlines an imaginary debate between a Madisonian and a Rousseaun political

theorist, summarizing what Kaufman believed to be the competing claims of realists and

participatory democrats.

The liberalism he envisioned combined James Madison's conception of

countervailing power politics as well as Rousseau's emphasis on greater participation. A

Madisonian system had certain benefits. For example, it could be viewed as more stable

and less chaotic than a participatory democracy. Organized factions within formal

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[37] Ibid., 47.

[38] Ibid., 58.

political parties could debate policy and develop broad organizational platforms as a result of the discourse. But, as noted elsewhere, Kaufman thought the concern for stability blinded theorists to the existence of social inequality. Countervailing power politics created channels in American political culture – intellectual ruts that would be difficult to challenge. Debates would become predictable and would often revolve around a consensus that rejected radical thinking – a fear that was realized during the Cold War.[39]

The only way to prevent discourse from growing sterile was to incorporate the perspectives of those who were often left out of the political system. Participatory democracy would serve as an additional check in a Madisonian system. Participatory institutions would encourage dialogue to an extent that had been absent in American politics. While he advocated some combination of the two conceptions of democracy, Kaufman refused to provide a certain formula: "There is, from this point of view, simply no general case to be made for adherence to one preferred tactic or another. For there is no substitute for coldly reflective calculation based on knowledge of the concrete situation and comprehensive grasp of the entire range of liberal values we should seek to move toward."[40] Radical liberalism was open-ended, anti-dogmatic, and wedded to Deweyan experimentalism. Participatory democracy would be paired with a politics of radical pressure, where leftists would attempt to pull the Democratic Party away from the political center.

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[39] Ibid., 63-70. Kaufman defined radical liberalism in reference to Rousseau and Madison.

[40] Ibid., 74.

Conclusion: A Philosophy for the New Left?

SDS was working within Kaufman's political and philosophical model when it articulated a desire to create a participatory democracy. Although Kaufman would later become critical of the movement, his influence and direct participation in the Port Huron conference is evidence of the degree to which he supported the organization and its initial goals. *The Port Huron Statement* (1962) grapples with the same theoretical and practical problems that both Dewey and Kaufman outlined. As a philosopher for the New Left, Kaufman consistently emphasized the value of a radical liberal tradition over Marxist and realist theories.

As a radical, he suggested pluralism and contingency would always be fundamental traits in a democracy. Closed theories or definitions would lead to a tyranny of the mind and inflexibility in method. He took pluralism and contingency to heart when he challenged dogma in the liberal tradition. Like Dewey, he sought to disassociate the concept of negative freedom from liberalism. Freedom from restraint was an outmoded doctrine. Radicalism meant acknowledging that negative freedom had no value if the individual's ability to act was limited by a dearth of material resources. His method was experimental, only relying on political theory insofar as it served an instrumental function. Strategies and conclusion would always be subject to change as historical circumstances altered the landscape for social action.

Kaufman never abandoned his commitment to radical liberalism, even as the New Left became increasingly anti-liberal. In an essay entitled, "Participatory Democracy: Ten Years Later" (1969), he argued that the New Left's "mindless" application of participatory democracy had devalued its meaning but the concept was still useful if

correctly understood. He still maintained that participatory institutions could curb

corporate power, racism, and economic injustice as long as they were employed

alongside a strategy of coalition politics. While he admitted that the New Left was prone

to moralizing, he did understand the need for a moral foundation for radical thought. In

The Radical Liberal he hinted that he wanted to write a book that would outline the moral

foundations of his political theory. However, he died before he could complete such a

work. On June 6th, 1971, an air force pilot flew off course and ejected from his plane

before it collided with a passenger jet on which Arnold Kaufman was aboard.[41]

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[41] Kevin Mattson, *Intellectuals In Action: The Origins of the New Left and Radical Liberalism, 1945-1970*
(University Park, Pennsylvania: PSU Press, 2002) 225. Mattson also notes that Kaufman was working on a
history of the New Left. My remarks about Kaufman's intent to write an account of his moral philosophy
are derived from his preface to *The Radical Liberal.*

CHAPTER IV

OF SDS AND A POLITICAL THEORY FOR THE NEW LEFT

The radical style… takes as its presupposition Dewey's claim that we are free to
the extent that we know what we are about. Radicalism as a style involves
penetration of a social problem to its roots, to its real causes. Radicalism
presumes a willingness to continually press forward the query: Why?
Radicalism finds no rest in conclusions; answers are seen as provisional,
to be discarded in the face of new evidence or changed conditions.
Tom Hayden (1961)

The search for truly democratic alternatives to the present, and a commitment
to social experimentation with them, is a worthy and fulfilling human
enterprise, one which moves us and, we hope, others today.
SDS (1962)

Dewey provided a framework for thinking about a radical liberalism, one that

turned the classical doctrine of laissez-faire on its head. The political process should not

be divorced from individual action – greater participation would encourage human

development and cast a critical light on the concept of American individualism. In the

process of constructing a flexible political theory, he provided new meaning to the term

'radical.' Radical epistemology stripped closed political theories of currency by

suggesting that truth could never be definite. All ideas, beliefs, and conclusions were

subject to change based on experience, reasoned analysis, and the outcomes of an

experimental approach to social problems. Likewise, Kaufman's method emphasized

pluralism and contingency – democracy was defined by dialogue, truth-testing, and

experimentalism. For him, radicalism implied that political theory should serve an instrumental function. The process of change would be ongoing – there was no utopian final stage of history where reform would no longer be necessary – and theory should only serve a directive purpose. Hayden and SDS would recycle a number of these themes as well as a few of the details that appeared in the work of Kaufman and Dewey.

Hayden and SDS drew from the liberalism of Dewey and Kaufman in the early sixties. Their definition of radicalism incorporated Dewey's epistemology and experimentalism as well as Kaufman's political theory and his defense of participatory democracy. Like Kaufman's radical liberal, SDS was committed to a politics of contingency and pluralism. If all conclusions were tentative, then all perspectives must be explored through reasoned and thoughtful discussion – greater participation in policy-making would be crucial to such a political arrangement. Once again, critiques of the New Deal and Walter Lippmann would surface as a generation of young intellectuals and activists challenged the assumptions of the Cold War.

Hayden's "A Letter to the New (Young) Left" (1961), and SDS's *Port Huron Statement* (1962) and *America and the New Era* (1963) raised questions about the Cold War liberal consensus. For SDS, liberalism had become a form of dogma in the United States – a doctrine that simultaneously justified inequality and oppression and, yet, upheld the ideals of individual freedom and individual thought in an ideological battle against communism. Instead of abandoning the liberal tradition, Hayden and SDS wanted to reinvigorate its emphasis on freedom and equality in an age where racism, poverty, militarism, and the existence of corporate elites made most activists apathetic about social change.

Navigating Isms: Hayden's Model for a Radical New Left

The convention that began on June 12, 1962 in Port Huron, Michigan marked one

of the earliest collective memories for the founding members of SDS. Lasting from a

Tuesday to early Saturday morning, the convention provided members of the still

fledgling student organization the opportunity to pore over and amend Tom Hayden's

draft of *The Port Huron Statement*. Consisting of 59 formally registered participants, the

conference would be a venue for debating and editing the group's founding manifesto,

activities that would form lasting impressions about the role of face-to-face politics on

the activists' minds.[1] However, while the convention would help redraft the document, it

was clear that Hayden was its chief "architect." According to Bob Ross, "Tom was The

Writer. Everyone knew that he was The Writer. That was something in between being a

recorder of people's ideas and saying to people, 'This is what you *really* mean.' Tom

was a genuine leader. He led because he really did express what people wanted… he was

the architect."[2]   The document itself represented a culmination of Hayden's political and

social thought as well as the political theory of early SDS.   Many of the themes present

in the piece, a tension between an existentialist revolutionary politics and radical

liberalism as well as between thought and action, had actually appeared a year earlier in

Hayden's "A Letter to the New (Young) Left."

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[1] James Miller, *Democracy Is In the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987) 106.

[2] Ibid., 108.

Published in *The Activist* in 1961 for the purpose of recruiting members to the new student organization,[3] Hayden's response to C. Wright Mills' "Letter to the New Left" explored and evaluated different theoretical perspectives that were open to young activists. In a new introduction to the document, written in 2008, Hayden remarked, "The tone is one of idealism, an awakening of feelings that were growing among an increasing number of activist circles on campuses around the country… What I find interesting, beneath the apocalyptic tone, is the persistent emphasis on testing and learning from experience itself, not ideologies or paradigms."[4] Hayden's essay consistently emphasized an experimental approach to problem solving. Much like Dewey and Kaufman, Hayden was confronted with what he viewed as competing conceptual models for understanding a static social order, one that resisted real democratic change. For Dewey, the problem resided in the inability of politically conscious citizens to recognize an always-present set of changing circumstances. Kaufman had arrived at similar conclusions, and, following Dewey's thought, suggested that political theory should serve an experimental purpose. The possibility of navigating transitional periods would require openness to learning from experience.

The dilemma for Hayden was shaped by a need to maneuver between different approaches to social justice. On the one hand there was the theoretical approach of American Marxists—especially those of the Old Left of the previous generation—whom most SDS members regarded in a critical light. Hayden suggested, "Marx, especially Marx the humanist, has much to tell us but his conceptual tools are outmoded and his

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[3] Tom Hayden, *Writings For A Democratic Society: The Tom Hayden Reader*, (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2008) 19. Originally published in *The Activist*, a student publication at Oberlin College.

[4] Ibid., 19. Hayden's italics.

final vision implausible."[5] Fixed ideas or conceptual models of the historical process

could lead to inflexibility, a result that would seriously inhibit a social movement that

sought change in a dynamic world. Disillusionment with the ideas of traditional leftists

also presented challenges by encouraging an apathetic attitude. "The American

intellectuals? C. Wright Mills is appealing and dynamic in his expression of theory in the

grand manner, but his pessimism yields us no formulas, no path out of the dark, and his

polemicism sometimes offends the critical sense."[6]

On the other hand, there was the body of political thought proposed by

conservatives and democratic realists. Hayden wrote, "Their themes purport to be

different but always the same impressions emerge: Man is inherently incapable of

building a good society; man's passionate causes are nothing more than dangerous

psychic sprees… ideals have little place in politics."[7] The reference to psychic sprees

comes back to Kaufman's defense of participatory democracy. Responding to the same

realist trend in American political theory, he had argued that realists confused the

function of democracy – considering it an arrangement meant to protect the public from

irrational individuals or groups and not a system that was designed to promote individual

powers of thought and action – because they tended to reduce human motives to irrational

psychological desires. Conservatives and realists suggested greater participation was an

untenable ideal.

As a backlash to the ideology of the left, the resistance to ideals in politics

concealed a number of theoretical assumptions that were held by both conservatives and

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[5] Ibid., 21.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

some moderates. The vision of society that developed from this perspective was one of autonomous, self-interested individuals whose wellbeing was best served by limited government interference. The form of negative freedom that emerged out of this picture of society did not account for a broader understanding of the social good. It rejected any alternative to a narrow definition of individualism out of principle, regardless of changing circumstances or experiences. Along with some ideologies of the left, this theoretical perspective was rigid and closed to dialogue.

Resembling Dewey's method of proposing solutions, Hayden set out to refute two approaches—one conservative, the other considered radical, and both fixed by a firmly held ideology—and, in the process, provide a third option that navigated and managed to avoid the theoretical problems associated with the first two. Following in the vein of Dewey and Kaufman, Hayden called for a redefinition of radicalism:

> The radical style… takes as its presupposition Dewey's claim that we are free to the extent that we know what we are about. Radicalism as a style involves penetration of a social problem to its roots, to its real causes. Radicalism presumes a willingness to continually press forward the query: Why? Radicalism finds no rest in conclusions; answers are seen as provisional, to be discarded in the face of new evidence or changed conditions. This is, in one sense, a difficult mental task and, in a more profound moral sense, it represents a serious personal decision to be introspective, to be exposed always to the stinging glare of change, to be willing always to reconstruct our social views.[8]

Radicalism was not defined by a blind adherence to dogma, not matter how revolutionary an outcome it predicted. Following Kaufman, who argued radicalism was a temper of mind that emphasized reason, contingency, and unyielding commitment, Hayden emphasized devotion in the face of uncertainty. Further, ideologies thought to be radical always had the potential to become sterile depending on historical circumstances. Channeling Dewey, who once argued that the revolutionary notion of individualism

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[8] Ibid., 23.

presented by classical liberals had become a torpid ideology that prevented society from adapting to changing conditions, Hayden suggested that the potency of Marxist doctrine had dissolved as a result of the ideology's inability to readily adapt to an ever-changing world.

In the background of Hayden's comment about radicalism were Dewey's epistemology and democratic theory. The pluralism of the pragmatists, which suggested that "truth" was always subject to revision, required constant attention to the outcomes of policy among an educated citizenry. In the realm of politics, such vigilance could only be realized in a radical conception of democracy. In the 1937 essay, *Democracy is Radical*, Dewey explained that older concepts of liberalism needed to be reevaluated in terms of an increasingly necessary concern for the social good over an unbending conception of individual rights. Dewey wrote, "There is no opposition in standing for liberal democratic means combined with ends that are socially radical. There is not only no contradiction, but neither history nor human nature gives any reason for supposing that socially radical ends can be attained by any other than liberal democratic means."[9] Under such circumstances, progress would be varied, radical in nature, and incremental in development. Hayden remarked, "Our gains will be modest, not sensational. It will be slow and exhaustingly complex, lasting at the very least for our lifetimes."[10]

Along those lines, Hayden's letter to the student left also suggested the importance of not confusing the goals of the student movement with those of more conservative politicians who made moderate attempts to treat symptoms, but not social problems. "That is problem-mitigating, not problem-solving. That is useful… but not

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[9] Jo Ann Bydston ed., *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953 (Volume II: 1935-1937)* 298.

[10] Op. cit., Tom Hayden, *Writings for a Democratic Society*, 26.

radical for it in no sense identifies and deals with the underlying political-economic-

historic-psychological bases of the problem."[11] These statements, which are echoed in

The Port Huron Statement, harked back to Kaufman's analysis of the function of ultimate

ideals and immediate goals in political theory. Immediate goals should provide a

standard for determining to what degree activists were making progress toward reaching

a clearly defined ideal. As Hayden remarked, progress would be slow and complicated,

but as long as the overall trajectory was toward a revolutionary ideal, activists would be

less likely to treat only symptoms of larger problems. Further, "Radicalism, it seems to

me, does not exclude morality; it invites and is given spirit by the quality of *reflective*

commitment, the combining of our passion and our critical talents into a provisional

position. To remove an idea from the plane of abstraction, it should be added, means to

inject its meaning into our total life".[12]

To inject an idea's meaning into everyday life required a radical commitment on

the part of the activist who sought to redefine a nation's political ideals. In many ways

these ideas would be put into practice at the conference in Port Huron. Dewey's claim

that "democracy is a *personal* way of individual life; that it signifies the possession and

continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character and determining desire and

purpose in all the relations of life" captured the broader project and implications of the

Port Huron conference.

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[11] Ibid., 24.

[12] Ibid, his italics.

A Living Document: The Port Huron Statement and Participatory Democracy

The group of students who participated in the conference came from diverse

political backgrounds including liberals, socialists, and Marxists as well as delegations

from groups such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and the National

Student Christian Federation to name a few.[13] The felt difficulty of managing divergent

perspectives in editing Hayden's lengthy draft, which would become a foundational

statement for SDS, was evident in a preconvention meeting. According to Hayden, "I

remember people sitting around a room feeling really hopeless… To somehow transform

it [the original draft] in three days, seemed impossible."[14] To accomplish the task, the

active[15] members of the convention were broken into eight groups, each of which would

discuss and edit sections of the statement. In these separate sessions, members would

unpack and debate several points and themes in the document.

The face-to-face deliberations required to craft the finished draft of the manifesto

were essentially an expression of participatory democracy in action. Not only did the

convention include an overtly educative component, consisting of an "educational

conference" where speakers addressed topics from civil rights to philosophy[16], the

activity of debating the rough draft was a form of political education. Richard Flacks

later recalled, "I felt like I had been reborn, in the political sense… I thought we had done

something important."[17] *The Port Huron Statement*, which was produced by a close

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[13] Op. cit., James Miller, *Democracy Is In the Streets*, 107.

[14] Ibid., 109. Hayden qtd. in Miller.

[15] Some attendees were present as observers, not active participants.

[16] Ibid., 125.

[17] Ibid.

community of young activists, was presented as a first step towards establishing a more general dialogue with American society, one that was to remain open to different perspectives and not restricted by ideology.

Presented as a "living document,"[18] *The Port Huron Statement* would always be subject to change. Hayden remarked, with regard to the concern expressed by members of the convention that the document might require extensive revisions, "One of the things that got people committed was an agreement that whatever we came out with would not be final, but that it would be offered as a discussion paper to our generation."[19] As an introductory note in the statement suggested, "It is a beginning: In our own debate and education, in our dialogue with society."[20] The document was immediately presented as non-ideological. Education and new experiences would always present new perspectives and conclusions, from which the founding principles of SDS would be scrutinized. Accordingly, as a founding manifesto, it served as a flexible foundation that required no ideological commitment, only a willingness to reconsider American democracy in open dialogue with a broader community. With an emphasis on experimentalism and pluralism, these introductory notes outlined Dewey and Kaufman's methods for approaching social change.

Similar to Hayden's "Letter to the New (Young) Left", *The Port Huron Statement* was also reminiscent of Dewey's method for organizing arguments. The formal introduction, entitled "Agenda For a Generation," outlined the broader goals of SDS as

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[18] Tom Hayden and SDS, *The Port Huron Statement*, taken from http://coursesa.matrix.edu/~hst306/documents/huron.html, (originally published in 1962) 1.

[19] Op. cit., James Miller, *Democracy Is In the Streets*, 109.

[20] Op. cit., *The Port Huron Statement*, 1.

well as the problems that had faced their generation. "Although mankind desperately needs revolutionary leadership, America rests in national stalemate, its goals ambiguous and tradition-bound instead of informed and clear, its democratic system apathetic and manipulated rather than 'of, by, and for the people.'"[21] For Dewey, political and social problems resulted from static conceptual frameworks, an unwillingness to reconsider old ideas in light of new experiences. Most of his work on political theory started with this supposition and then proceeded to explicate how new concepts become static and prevent creative responses to emerging problems.

The Port Huron Statement suggested that the original promises of democracy have been subverted in the United States. In many cases the will of the people was not a consideration in decisions regarding economic or foreign policy. "The American political system is not the democratic model of which its glorifiers speak. In actuality it frustrates democracy by confusing the individual citizen, paralyzing policy discussion, and consolidating the irresponsible power of military and business interests."[22] As most intellectual historians of the period have noted, this argument reaches back to Mills and his work on the "power elite." The picture that emerged was one of a nation whose political, economic, and social systems were largely controlled by an oligarchy consisting of leaders from the military, top corporations, and Washington D.C. However, by stepping back and looking at the broader theoretical context, it becomes clear that these arguments extended beyond Mills. While activists did believe elites had corrupted democracy in America, another, larger conceptual problem was exemplified by the Cold War. Ideological rigidity seemed to define American politics in the post-war world.

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[21] Ibid., 3.

[22] Ibid., 15.

Not only did the Cold War lead to the excesses of McCarthyism, but it also represented a more general American resistance to considering "truth" through a pluralistic lens, thus denying contingency. In response to the political stalemate and tradition bound culture of the United States, SDS proposed, "Our goal is guided by the sense that we may be the last generation in the experiment with living. But we are a minority -- the vast majority of our people regard the temporary equilibriums of our society and world as eternally-functional parts."[23] The majority of Americans were not able to envision political change as result of being unable to think beyond the Cold War definition of democracy and its role in an ideological conflict with the Soviet Union. "They fear change itself, since change might smash whatever invisible framework seems to hold back chaos for them now."[24] However, the Cold War was not solely responsible for the existence of a corrupted, inflexible political theory.

According to Hayden there was a broader historical trend at work in the United States that encouraged the persistence of a collapsed theory of democracy. In the original draft of *The Port Huron Statement* he wrote, "American politics are built on a desire to deploy and neutralize the 'evil drives' of men… Politics today are organized for policy paralysis and minority domination, not for fluid change and mass participation."[25] The reference to the evil drives of men is drawn from Kaufman's criticism of realist theories that had their basis in pseudo psychology. As a response to democratic realists such as Walter Lippmann, who, writing decades earlier, once suggested that an election on the

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[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., 4.

[25] Taken from: http://www.sds-1960s.org/PortHuronStatement-draft.htm
-- SDS-1960s.org

basis of majority-rule is "a sublimated and denatured civil war,"[26] Hayden argued that a

government of elites would resist any kind of radical policy change, regardless of the will

of the people. The sense that politics should be left to qualified professionals, who are

not necessarily held accountable to the public for every decision made on their behalf,

represented a larger historical trend in the United States. "Calcification (under the name

of "responsible progress with stability") dominates flexibility as the principle of

parliamentary organization."[27] American democracy had a propensity to become static,

unable to account for the changing nature of the public as well as the dynamic

circumstances that defined each citizen's life. A model of democracy that did not take

seriously the role of the public in decision-making would create a society that resisted

social change. Democratic theory in the United States was in need of a radical

reorientation.

On the one hand, SDS was acutely aware of what they considered to be the

mistakes of the ideologues of the Old Left. In many ways they espoused a theory of

social change that was divorced from historical experience and the reality of social

conditions. On the other hand, the classical liberal and democratic realist models of

democracy also had a tendency to divorce theory from experience. To protect individual

rights in a system of countervailing power politics regardless of considerations of a

broader social context was to fail to understand the historical nature of a given problem.

In short, these early activists were searching for a model that navigated historically

opposed ideas, could establish tentative theoretical suppositions, and never calcify as did

past ideologies. "Perhaps matured by the past, we have no sure formulas, no closed

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[26] Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public*, (New York: Macmillan, 1937) 58.

[27] Op. cit., Hayden, original draft PHS, 9.

theories -- but that does not mean values are beyond discussion and tentative

determination."[28] SDS needed to formulate a political theory that was at once radical,

challenging both mainstream liberals – or establishment liberals, so-called for their

resistance to social or economic change – and conservatives, as well as capable of

accounting for unique historical conditions irrespective of any ideological lens. The

concept of "participatory democracy," which is synonymous with SDS, provided the

theoretical framework that could navigate extremes, avoid foundationalism, and, yet, still

offer the working bases of assumptions necessary for a coherent political philosophy.

Participatory democracy originated out of a need to rethink ideological debates

in the United States. In many ways it was the New Left's own *via media,*[29] a method of

historical change and a view of human relationships that fell between revolutionary

socialism and the more conservative tenets of liberalism. As Miller has noted,

participatory democracy was never clearly defined in *The Port Huron Statement*, a fact

that led to confusion over the concept among members of SDS. He writes, "Participatory

democracy was a catchword. It became a cliché. It masked a theoretical muddle."[30]

While the idea was never fully defined in the statement that does not mean it did not exist

as a conceptual framework. As a solution to a generation's problems, a democracy of full

participation could be defined in three ways. First, as a concept that was intended to

navigate tumultuous ideological debates it was deliberately ambiguous, leaving its exact

definition to be determined in action and in reference to other theories. Second, as a

working concept, its chief presuppositions could be determined by comparing it to the

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[28] Op. cit., *The Port Huron Statement*, 6.

[29] As noted earlier, this term comes from James Kloppenberg.

[30] Op. cit., Miller, 152.

problem it was intended to solve—collapsed democracy. Finally, the concept comes into

sharper focus when one recognizes Dewey and Kaufman's influence on the political

theory of SDS.

Participatory democracy was not a narrowly conceived political theory— as

Kaufman argued it was a method for organizing and directing social relationships and

action as well as human potential. The idea that "Men have unrealized potential for self-

cultivation, self-direction, self-understanding, and creativity"[31] also suggested, similar to

Dewey's belief, that only by learning from experience in social interaction were humans

able to realize their full potential. Individual participation would discourage apathy

among citizens as well as the lack of transparency found in a government organized to

perpetuate the power of an elite. Along these lines *The Port Huron Statement* suggested,

"that decision-making of basic social consequences be carried on by public groupings."[32]

Accordingly:

> [T]he political order should serve to clarify problems in a way instrumental to
> their solutions; it should provide outlets for the expression of personal grievance
> and aspiration; opposing views should be organized so as to illuminate choices
> and facilities [sic] the attainment of goals; channels should be commonly
> available to relate men to knowledge and to power so that private problems... are
> formulated as general issues.[33]

By encouraging action and mobilization on behalf of individuals, this radical theory of

democracy would help bring lost publics back into the political fold. As Dewey had once

claimed, a critical community of citizens would represent a general will only present in a

participatory democracy—one where majority rule is not simply defined as the political

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[31] Op. cit., *The Port Huron Statement*, 7.

[32] Ibid., 8-9.

[33] Ibid., 9.

power of a group of isolated individuals, but represents a collective, shared public sentiment. Only through open communication, active engagement, and experimentalism would a critical public be able to affect change and, in the process, create participatory institutions.

As a *via media,* participatory democracy can also be defined in reference to the different political theories early SDS was attempting to navigate. While maintaining the revolutionary aims of radical democracy, the method for historical change that SDS adopted was a direct refutation of both Marxism and establishment liberalism.[34] The existence of racism and fervent anti-communism in both the Democratic and Republican parties drew criticism from SDS, which argued that party overlap in the United States undermined the promise of American democracy. While they articulated a need for pluralism and radical social progress, the organization did not advocate abrupt revolutionary change. "The ideals of political democracy, then, the imperative need for flexible decision-making apparatus makes a real two-party system an immediate social necessity. What is desirable is sufficient party disagreement to dramatize major issues, yet sufficient party overlap to guarantee stable transitions from administration to administration."[35] Along the lines of Dewey, who emphasized the necessity of continuity in periods of historical change, and Kaufman, who established the importance of

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[34] Like Kaufman, SDS viewed the Welfare State with suspicion. Classical liberalism had evolved during the Great Depression when the New Deal introduced state regulation and security nets for the working class. However, instead of creating a political arrangement that benefited the United States' poor, New Deal liberalism made minimal changes to classical liberal doctrine. During the fifties and sixties the terms establishment liberalism and corporate liberalism referred to this developmental process. The state and the business elite – corporations – developed a symbiotic relationship that protected entrenched moneyed interests at the cost of the social good.

[35] Ibid., 62.

maintaining flexible ultimate ideals, SDS argued that while democracy had been

corrupted in America, it simply needed to be reoriented and to focus on social needs.

Reorientation not only meant a form of incrementalism over revolutionary

politics, it also implied a rejection of the elements of classical liberalism that still resided

in modern American political culture. Following the line of argument Dewey had chosen

in *Liberalism and Social Action* (1930), SDS argued that the persistence of old ideas

amid new circumstances created a political culture that was unable to respond to new

needs. "We can no longer rely on competition of the many to insure that business

enterprise is responsive to social needs. The many have become the few. Nor can we

trust the corporate bureaucracy to be socially responsible or to develop 'corporate

conscience' that is democratic."[36] Further, SDS offered a redefinition of American

individualism.

Like Dewey, who sought to recast individualism in an age of increasing

interdependency, SDS challenged the social vs. individual binary that pervaded American

politics. "As the individualism we affirm is not egoism, the selflessness we affirm is not

self-elimination. On the contrary, we believe in generosity of a kind that imprints one's

unique individual qualities in the relation to other men, and to all human activity."[37]

Participatory democracy would contribute to a sense of community among a citizenry

engaged in acts of collective problem solving. The division between government and

citizen would be erased as active publics filled auxiliary political roles.

Participatory democracy would challenge the excesses of Cold War politics and in

the process define a political ideal in contrast to collapsed democracy. Anti-communism

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[36] Ibid., 64.

[37] Ibid., 8.

created a closed political and social atmosphere in the United States. On a less abstract level, SDS raised questions about the role of pluralism in an age of consensus, where the absence of dissent helped to perpetuate a dangerous ideological conflict among nuclear powers. "Not only does it [anti-communism] lead to the perversion of democracy and to the political stagnation of a warfare society, but it also has the unintended consequence of preventing an honest and effective approach to the issues. Such an approach would require public analysis and debate of world politics."[38] The Cold War was not the making of average Americans, nor was it in the nation's interest to pursue aggressive policies in the international system.

A stifling, inflexible anti-communism prevented dissent and, by extension, experimentalism. As with Dewey and Kaufman, SDS suggested pluralism indicated more than accepting dissent as a part of the democratic process. Avoiding Lippmann's trap, where dissent served a limited function in a countervailing power model, SDS followed Kaufman and argued that pluralism meant accepting Dewey's radical epistemology. "Democracy, we are convinced, requires every effort to set in peaceful opposition the basic viewpoints of the day; only by conscious, determined, though difficult, efforts in this direction will the issue of communism be met appropriately."[39] Basic viewpoints should never be taken as complete truths. Without open dialogue the assumptions of the Cold War framework, and its implications for American democracy, would be accepted as a final truth without any kind of critical analysis. Slowly moving from abstraction to practice, SDS identified participatory institutions and groups that remained critical in an age of consensus.

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[38] Ibid., 40.

[39] Ibid., 41.

The Port Huron Statement included an analysis of several social movements that had potential to challenge the assumptions of the Cold War as well as collapsed democracy. In a section entitled "Alternatives to Helplessness," the statement suggested that there was overlap between movements as disparate as the Peace Movement, organized labor, and Civil Rights. Each movement was in need of a Democratic Party that actually represented their interests. However, as SDS remarked in an earlier passage, "Political parties, even if realigned, would not provide adequate outlets for popular involvement."[40] Channeling Kaufman, who argued that participatory institutions should supplement the Democratic Party, SDS argued only through such movements as those listed above could "Mechanisms of voluntary association… be created through which political information can be imparted and political participation encouraged."[41] Even organized labor, which SDS argued was co-opted and ceased to be radical, still had the potential, as a participatory institution and bridge between movements, to challenge collapsed democracy.[42] "[I]ts numbers and potential political strength, its natural interest in the abolition of exploitation, its reach to the grass roots of American society, combine to make it the best candidate for the synthesis of the civil rights, peace, and economic reform movements."[43] The need to unite various movements was crucial for SDS. While organized labor had potential in this regard, student activists placed their faith in another institution.

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[40] Ibid., 62.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid., 77.

[43] Ibid., 78.

While independent publics challenged collapsed democracy, it would take a more inclusive, national response among the citizenry to create a participatory democracy. The role of independent publics, which consisted of individuals realizing their potential through efforts in various types of social reform, was crucial because it served an educational and experimental function in society. However, it would require the formation of what Dewey had termed a "great community" in order to correct the conceptual rift between government and governed, as well as the gap between active and inactive members of various publics. Much as Dewey had argued in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), SDS envisioned a society that challenged the traditional interpretation of the individual and the social, tearing down dualisms that created dogmatic views of individualism and social progress. For the student activists, the university was the institution best poised to help create a great community.

By emphasizing the university as a center of social reform, SDS acknowledged the role of education in creating a great community. The university's purpose of instilling critical thought in the minds of its students would be an invaluable resource in a culture closed to dissent. "Its educational function makes it indispensable and automatically makes it a crucial institution in the formation of social attitudes… in an unbelievably complicated world, it is the central institution for organizing, evaluating, and transmitting knowledge."[44]

The locations of various colleges and universities would allow students to cast a wide net across the United States, developing a number of equally distributed centers for

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[44] Ibid., 82.

social change. Also, as a "community of controversy"[45] the university encouraged the

political life to supplement formal learning, allowing "action to be informed by reason."[46]

Most important:

> The bridge to political power… will be built through genuine cooperation, locally, nationally, and internationally, between a new left of young people, and an awakening community of allies. In each community we must look within the university and act with confidence that we can be powerful, but we must look outwards to the less exotic but more lasting struggles for justice.[47]

The university could provide a series of bridges, allowing the New Left to stitch together

a larger, coherent community that would transcend and include a variety of critical

publics. The discussion of agency and social action would continue a year later in a

sequel to *The Port Huron Statement* entitled *America and the New Era*.

Conclusion: A New Era

America and the New Era (1963) was a collaborative effort between Tom Hayden

and Richard Flacks. Much like *The Port Huron Statement,* the document was revised at a

convention that was organized into small groups of editors. Originally entitled

"American Scene Document,"[48] Hayden and Flacks hoped to use the article as a medium

for analyzing "establishment liberalism" and a "new insurgency." According to Flacks,

"The *fundamental* debate of the coming years… ought, then, to be between establishment

liberalism and a new radicalism. The defining characteristic of the latter positions will be

the demand that immediate attention and full energy and resources be devoted to the

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[45] Ibid., 84.

[46] Ibid., 83.

[47] Ibid., 84-85.

[48] Op. cit., Miller, *Democracy Is In the Streets*, 175.

problems of this society."[49] The dismantling of the Cold War framework and the

emergence of more vocal publics marked the beginning of a new era. While a

conservative-liberal politics sought to manage social conflict while avoiding real change,

domestic as well as global disruptions weakened this position. Coming back to

Kaufman's politics of radical pressure, SDS wrote, "As new constituencies are brought

into political motion, as new voices are heard in the arena, as new centers of power are

generated, existing institutions will begin to feel the pressures of change, and a new

dynamic in national social and political life could come into being."[50]

Many of the problems that defined the new era are familiar. The majority of them

appeared in *The Port Huron Statement*. Unemployment, tensions with labor, racism,

poverty, misdistribution of power and resources, as well as an arms race and revolutions

in the third world all helped create a climate where establishment liberalism could be

challenged. Each set of problems helped create vocal publics, a new insurgency, at the

grassroots that would challenge national policy. Following the statement, SDS's second

manifesto never mentioned abrupt or violent revolution. The method for bringing about

change is similar:

> The question is not whether radical changes will be needed, but how and by
> whom they will be carried out, and to whom the new society will be responsible.
> The overall strategic goal is not merely the solution of problems by making
> incremental changes in the present structure, but the development of a
> revolutionary trajectory which starts with tactical demands built on the most
> elementary felt human needs, and advances to a thorough change in social and
> economic structure.[51]

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[49] Ibid., 174.

[50] SDS, *America and the New Era* (1963), taken from http://www.sds-1960s.org/documents.htm, 15.

[51] Ibid., 20.

Once again, Kaufman's influence is apparent. The immediate needs on the local level

created movements for change. Instead of allowing a form of establishment liberalism to

co-opt a movement for reform, a revolutionary trajectory would serve as an ultimate

ideal—and motivating goal—that would provide a standard of measure for tracking the

progress of tactical gains.

The various social movements would culminate in an "insurgent politics."[52] The

new insurgency challenged the Establishment through mass demonstrations, voter

registration drives, and reform movements on a local and national level. Taken as a form

of coalition politics, the insurgency was a concept that originally appeared in *The Port*

Huron Statement. In the SDS schematic for social change, local publics would contribute

to a common sentiment, one that resided outside the values associated with collapsed

democracy, which would lead to the creation of participatory institutions that would

augment any national decision-making process. *America and the New Era* followed this

line of argument:

> The agenda, then, is progressive, each step leading, hopefully, toward the society
> which is responsive to men's vision, rather than men's vision being limited by the
> conservative nature of society. The key is that not merely a 'list' of liberal's
> demands are pursued, but that all demands find their basis in human problems and
> human hopes, in dissatisfaction with the present state of human life and its socio-
> economic institutions.[53]

The existence of a great community and a democracy guided by participatory institutions

would ensure that government was responsive to local and individual needs. The process

was not revolutionary in the Marxist sense of the term. Absent is the language of class

struggle. According to Flacks, "we were talking about social movements, coalitions and

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[52] Ibid., 14.

[53] Ibid., 20.

alignments, not classes. The 'labor metaphysic,' that phrase, was constantly

reverberating for us. We didn't want to be guilty of it."[54] Change would be gradual but

defined by a trajectory that pointed toward a radical outcome—participatory democracy.

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[54] Op. cit., Miller, *Democracy Is In the Streets*, 177.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: OF THEORETICAL TENSIONS IN THE MOVEMENT

According to James Miller the philosophical influences within SDS were

diverse. The emphasis on face-to-face politics could be attributed to a range of

influences including Mills and, as a lesser-known example, Quaker communities that

encouraged rule by consensus.[1] Certain aspects of participatory democracy seem to have

a nostalgic tinge, especially the vision of a local politics that is reminiscent of the town

hall style meeting. However, references to existentialism, Marxism, liberalism, Christian

theology, and pragmatism are undeniable. Miller argues that there is a pervading tension

in much of Hayden's as well as early activists' thought between existentialist and Marxist

ideas on the one hand, and those of the American pragmatists and civic-republicans on

the other.   Of Hayden he writes, "[W]hen he follows Mills and his own teacher Arnold

Kaufman, he depicts a world of orderly face-to-face discussion among responsible

citizens; when he follows Camus and his own enthusiasm for the daring politics of direct

action, he depicts a world of clashing wills and romantic heroes."[2] Among these

competing ideas there seems to be little hope of reconciliation. For Miller, these

theoretical problems are never fully resolved.

Although both *The Port Huron Statement* and *America and the New Era*

employed language that was steeped in existentialism as well as pragmatism, this does

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[1] James Miller, *'Democracy Is In the Streets:' From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987) 147.

[2] Ibid., 146.

not necessarily indicate the existence of an unresolved tension in the thought of SDS. It would be hard to deny the relevance of Camus, especially in the various references to "authenticity" in these documents, but in many ways an existential politics of clashing wills does not contradict the tenets of participatory democracy. The tension in these works was the result of a need to navigate the politics of a Marxist left as well as the liberal center in the United States.

Along these lines, Dewey's political theory functioned as a *via media* for Kaufman and early SDS members. Participatory democracy denoted a method that would allow clashing wills, through shared experience, to form a great community. The language of authenticity is not dissimilar to that of realized potential. In both cases, an individual is able to creatively express desires and interests that are only realized in the collective action of a social reform movement. The idea that activists would remain in an ongoing state of revolt comes back to Dewey and Kaufman, who argued that society could never be perfected to a point beyond reform. The romantic hero, who challenged an oppressor on his or her own, did not appear in Hayden's "Letter to the New (Young) Left," *The Port Huron Statement,* or *America and the New Era*. What emerges out of the concept of participatory democracy is a vision of a pluralist society where individuals share in the decisions that affect their lives and collectively question final conclusions. The always present need to reconsider old ideas in light of new experiences would not create centrifugal forces that destroyed society. Like Dewey, these activists stressed continuity as well as the importance of establishing tentative truths—ideas that are generally accepted among a "great community." Not only did the *via media* allow SDS-

ers to navigate tension, it also provided a third and original option in regard to competing political theories.

Participatory democracy and radical liberalism were ideas that fell outside of liberal and Marxist political traditions. Considered in that light, Dewey's political philosophy should not be taken as a compromise between liberalism and Marxism, one that combined the best elements of each to produce a remarkable hybrid. While Dewey championed the liberal ideal of democracy as well as greater equality, an aspect of Marxism, he was generally suspicious of any closed political theory. As with the New Left later, the *via media* yielded a unique and original *method* for understanding political theory.

Radical liberalism and participatory democracy were both outcomes of the application of Dewey's philosophical method to the realm of political and social theory. Radical epistemology, contingency, pluralism, and experimentalism are all unique elements that served as the foundation for Dewey's brand of radical liberalism. The resulting tradition was original in the sense that it stressed method over theory, contingency over truth, and pluralism over any kind of teleology or fixed model of the state and its relationship to the individual. Ideas and historical circumstances would always change, meaning a political theory could never purport to always provide the best model for social organization. As a *via media* for Dewey, and the New Left later, radical liberalism and participatory democracy developed as methods that directly challenged both liberalism and Marxism.

In pointing toward a *via media* for Dewey and the New Left, it is also important to recognize how the conditions that marked the period in which Dewey was working

were very similar to those of Kaufman and SDS in the early sixties. Dewey was a critic

of Progressive Era reforms, Marxism, and the Welfare State because each of those

traditions, according to him, denied the relevance of participatory institutions and greater

social experimentation in establishing a just social order. As New Leftists would later

argue, he suggested the New Deal turned average Americans into consumers of

government aid, not producers of policies that would improve their lives. Not only did

Kaufman and SDS draw from this critique, they applied similar language to their

respective analyses of the War On Poverty and political realism. The Welfare State

would never be satisfying for these activists because it resisted direct action among the

general population and established a bond between the federal government and business

elites – a concern that Dewey had expressed decades earlier.

Although Dewey's thought appeared relevant to Kaufman and SDS as they found

themselves addressing similar political and social problems in the early sixties, it is

necessary to acknowledge the New Left's turn toward violence and rejection of radical

liberalism. As discussed above[3] in relation to Kaufman's criticism of SDS, the

movement became increasingly suspicious of democratic reform. For SDS-ers, the

democratic process had the potential to co-opt radical movements, a charge the New Left

would level against the reforms of Johnson's Great Society. Further, the escalation of

violence in Vietnam despite the work of the peace movement seemed to indicate that a

combination of coalition politics and grass-roots organizing could not seriously challenge

the Cold War consensus that defined foreign policy. As Kaufman commented, SDS

detached the concept of participatory democracy from its roots in radical liberalism.

Many members of SDS believed politicians simply sacrificed ideals for immediate,

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[3] See chapter III.

piecemeal legislative gains – limited reforms that did not seriously challenge the status

quo. These activists championed a vision of participatory democracy that immediately

placed political power in the hands of the masses. According to this perspective,

contingency and pluralism would have been elements of a corruptible political theory.

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