

DISSENTING AMERICANS OR DISLOYAL DEVIANTS?: NEW LEFT “ANTI-AMERICANISM” IN AMERICA (1962-1975)

by Lindsey Churchill

The current state of US post-9/11 politics, along with the mainstream American media, has conflated the notion of anti-Americanism as a recent, worldwide phenomenon that can be defined as everything from a disavowal of McDonald’s restaurants to a critique of US foreign policy.¹ Current analysis of anti-Americanism seems stuck in a paradigm of binaries, supported by public figures such as Fox News analysts or George W. Bush who lament, “Why do *they* hate us?” These sources usually answer this question themselves, as they believe it is a relatively simple one to answer—*they* hate American “freedoms.” Thus, any critique of American politics, culture or economics is discounted because it is said to come from foreign, irrational, freedom-hating radicals.² But if anti-Americanism, according to popular conservative sentiment, is primarily about foreigners who hate “American freedoms,” what of “anti-Americanism” perpetrated by Americans?³ Many Americans who dare speak out against aspects of American culture or foreign policy are often silenced by threats of being labelled “anti-American.”

Considering the nature of the conservative definition of anti-Americanism in the post 9/11 world, I believe it is imperative to look back at previous critiques of America by Leftist Americans, their ideologies and actions, and how the government reacted to these critiques. In this essay, I analyze the white American New Left, particularly the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) between the years 1968-1975. Though the New Left movement and the SDS as an organization should not be interchanged fluidly, the SDS papers I examine contain materials from many other New Left organizations with similar goals. These papers offer important insight into the belief systems of activists within the New Left. As arguably the most influential left wing student organization of the 1960s, the FBI believed that the group supported “anti-American” activities. Yet, SDS was not the only New Left organization that caught the attention of the US government; the activities of other New Left organizations mentioned in this essay and featured in the SDS papers and FBI files also garnered attention from the US government. By exploring the New Left through the lens and framework provided by the SDS papers, I attempt to complicate the current dialogue concerning “anti-Americanism” and illustrate the often convoluted and always complicated nature of “dissent” and what it means to be an American.

¹ For more on the domestic impact of 9/11 see William Crotty, ed., *The Politics of Terror: The U.S. Response to 9/11* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004); Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-war America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007).

² Scholarship on foreign Anti-Americanism is far more abundant than scholarship concerning Anti-Americanism in America. Some good examples include: Dan Diner, *America in the Eyes of the Germans: An Essay on Anti-Americanism* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1996); Alan McPherson, *Yankee No! Anti-Americanism in U.S.-Latin American Foreign Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Philippe Roger, *The American Enemy: The History of French Anti-Americanism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

³ Work on the history of Anti-Americanism in the US is sparse. Domestic anti-Americanism has rarely been analyzed in an academic space, and when it is, it frequently falls into the trap of conservative “analysis.” See Paul Hollander, *Anti-Americanism: Critiques at Home and Abroad, 1965-1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) and Part II of Paul Hollander, ed., *Understanding Anti-Americanism: Its Origins and Impact at Home and Abroad* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Press, 2004). For a more nuanced analysis see Part V of Andrew Ross and Kristin Ross, ed., *Anti-Americanism* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

In order to understand the ideological trajectory of activism in the SDS and the Left during the late 1960s and 1970s, it is important to briefly define the New Left. By the early 1960s, the Old Left, which had played a large part in contesting war and "imperialism" for decades, was experiencing changes of its own. Though parts of the Old Left remained active during the 1960s, a new vision for the American Left began to take shape. These "New Leftists" adhered to an innovative agenda primarily concerned with and concentrated amongst politically active youth and university students. This "New Left", as it came to be called, viewed their predecessors as stodgy, intellectual, impersonal and inactive.⁴ Longing to reassert the political as "personal" and "passionate," young New Leftists organized the first SDS convention in 1962.⁵

It will become clearer throughout this essay that although the New Left (particularly Students for a Democratic Society and later the Weather Underground) distanced themselves from what they eventually called "Amerika" and aligned with radical socialists to "overthrow the system," they were still operating from an ideological base entrenched in American ideals of "freedom." Furthermore, as the government continued to repress the Left's *democratic* dissent, they became more devoted to internationalism and more radical conceptions of revolutionary violence. Thus, even as SDS espoused democratic ideas and used democratic means to express their activism, the FBI believed that the organization constituted a genuine "threat" to the "American way of life." The FBI's label of SDS as "anti-American" stayed consistent despite ideological and tactical changes within the organization. But what was this "American way of life" that the Left was contesting? What did their critique encompass? Left wing activism between the years 1968-1975 focused largely on US policy—anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism (which the Left believed were empirically linked) and often, ironically, reinforced binary political, social and cultural paradigms similar to the discourse of American conservatism. Those in SDS frequently had a complex and ambiguous relationship with US ideology, law, culture and politics and cannot be categorized into a simple dichotomy of pro or anti-Americanism.

This essay analyzes two categories of Left wing "anti-Americanism" in the United States. First, it explores the ways in which the New Left positioned its activism within the American system. Secondly, this essay explores the New Left's domestic critiques of the US, which intensified after 1968. This essay will not concretely define what anti-Americanism is, because in trying to do so there would have to be a cohesive definition of what "Americanism" and "American" are. Furthermore, who should be included as an "American" has been historically contested terrain. Technically, those who are US citizens are American, but classist, racist and sexist policies have not extended such rights to every "citizen" (this was a huge point of contention for the Left during the 1960s and 70s). At the founding of the nation, the ideals of Americanism—progress, opportunity, freedom—were only extended to elite, white men. In exploring this contradiction, Gary Gerstle has written about what he calls the phenomenon of American

⁴ Alice Echols, *Daring to be BAD: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-75* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 24.

⁵ The New Left should not be conflated with the 1960s counter culture, who demonstrated their disapproval of mainstream "American" politics and culture through art and lifestyle. While the New Left had roots in the Old Left, the counter culture found inspiration from the beat poets of the 1950s. These poets expressed political solidarity through their lifestyle and not political activism. Though towards the end of the 1960s some New Leftists had appropriated certain elements of the cultural counter culture (free love and drug use, e.g.), they generally focused on political activism as their primary means of critiquing America. For more on the cultural counter culture see Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968); Timothy Miller, *The 60s Communes: Hippies and Beyond* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999).

civic nationalism and the conflicting ideological inheritance of a racial nationalism. Gerstle contends that because of the ideal of “white republic,” “Africans, Asians, nonwhite Latin Americans, and, in the 1920s southern and eastern Europeans did not belong in the republic and could never be accepted as full fledged members.”⁶

In the aftermath of the Civil War, issues concerning gender, race, religion, class and a growing immigrant population pushed the question, “Who is an American?” to the forefront.⁷ As the US became an imperial power, the fear that “disloyal” immigrant groups or dissent might weaken the nation prevailed in US political and popular discourse. By the 1920s, defensive Americanism and the call for cultural homogeneity helped to create restrictive immigration laws and a reinvigorated rationale for racial segregation.⁸ However, the question of who could carry the title of being “American” remained hotly contested ground and largely hinged on ones ability to pursue and claim a place in the nation’s cherished democratic project. Between 1890 and 1920 intellectuals poignantly attacked American capitalism, sexism and racism by arguing that these beliefs were corrupting the purity of a national fabric that social democrats and left leaning liberals sought to reinvigorate. Driven by the desire to reform the country and to revitalize the promise of American freedom and democracy, prominent domestic figures have used the very ideals embodied in an abstract concept of “Americanism” to launch critiques of perceived injustices built into the nation’s social and political system.⁹ Sacvan Bercovitch argued as much in *The Rites of Assent*, when he proposed that radical political activism simultaneously entailed both “cooptation and dissent.” As such, even dissenters accept, albeit often implicitly, that there is a fundamental Americanism or “American ideals” that embody the true nature of the nation and are both worth laying claim to and fighting for.¹⁰ This cooptation becomes especially clear in much of the literature produced by the New Left movement, which regularly employed the rhetoric and ideas of Americanism to support their own activist agendas.

Because the label of “American” lies in such disputed terrain, the history of anti-Americanism in the US is difficult to define without reinforcing many of our current and often simplistic definitions. For the SDS, its criticisms of American foreign policy opened it up to early accusations of un-American behaviour. Yet, the group of politically minded students often viewed themselves as Americans attempting to salvage the country’s flawed, but ultimately redeemable historical and political project. This changed however, in 1969, when the more radical Weather Underground “overtook” the organization and adopted a distinctly pro-communist stance. Suddenly the group found itself in familiar yet dangerous Cold-War Era territory from which it was difficult to refute accusations that the group was anti-American. However, since the term has been used so often to describe those on the Left who simply disagreed with US government policy, I want to emphasize that I am using it throughout the essay to analyze perceptions of dissent from

⁶ Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), 5.

⁷ Michael Kazin and Joseph A. McCartin, ed., *Americanism: New Perspectives on the History of an Ideal* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 4.

⁸ Kazin and McCartin, 5.

⁹ Jonathan M. Hansen, *The Lost Promise of Patriotism: Debating American Identity, 1890-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), xv.

¹⁰ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 20.

both the US government and the New Left. Thus the term "anti-American" is primarily employed here to explain the *perception* that any dissent against US policy means that one is unambiguously opposed to the United States. This follows the logic of how the term was employed not only by the US government, but sometimes by members of the New Left themselves as they tried to define their relationship as citizens of the United States.

In 1962, SDS held its first conference in Port Huron, Michigan where its members released the "Port Huron Statement," which proposed that its members were, "looking uncomfortably to the world they inherit." In response to this discomfort, at first SDS organized sit-ins, marches and peacefully protested, primarily against what they perceived as an "oppressive" university system. The organization's statement also called for "participatory democracy," and a more humane capitalism, or democratic socialism through:

The establishment of a democracy of individual participation, governed by two central aims: that the individual share in those social decisions determining the quality and direction of his life; [and] that society be organized to encourage independence in men and provide the media for their common participation.¹¹

While the organization advocated change, it was without a doubt proposing to work within an individualistic liberal democratic "system" to inspire change in the country. In its early years (1962-1965), national SDS membership remained below 2,000 and was strongest in the Northeast and the Midwest. By 1967, after the dramatic escalation of the Vietnam War, membership numbered over 30,000.¹²

Most members of SDS were long-time activists before the events of 1962 and believed in the ability to work within the system for change. Many of the white students that were calling for political reform in 1962 had learned their methods of civil disobedience by supporting the civil rights movement in the south where they participated in sit-ins, marches, and voter registration drives.¹³ Nick Egleson, president of the SDS in 1967, argued that the civil rights movement had shown students in the white Left that, "the idea, the possibility of protest in the south as well as the experience of it, was an important part in sparking protests. Dissent in one place created the possibility for dissent elsewhere, and dissent materialized on campus."¹⁴ Initiated by their travels south to help SNCC (Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee) registration campaigns and spurred on by an increasing body of writing by activist intellectuals like sociologist C. Wright Mills, by 1962-63 SDS members had become a significant force in challenging the status-quo on what it meant to be American and to adhere to the ideals of "Americanism".¹⁵

Besides its commitment to racial justice and participatory democracy, SDS's "Port Huron Statement" also criticized the "unreasoning" anti-communist crusade within the US, and proposed that

¹¹ Tom Hayden, "Port Huron Statement", 1962, *SDS Papers, 1958-1970* (New Jersey: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1977), Microfilm (Hereafter cited as *SDS Papers*).

¹² G. Louis Heath, ed., *Vandals in the Bomb Factory: The History and Literature of the Students for a Democratic Society* (New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1976), x.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁵ C. Wright Mills, "Letter to the New Left", in Priscilla Long, ed., *The New Left: A Collection of Essays* (Boston: Extending Horizon Books, 1969), 25.

America and Americans ought to allow for a multiplicity of political views. They argued that America's Cold-War environment and the general fear of communism had led to a "perversion of democracy" and a dangerous "political stagnation."¹⁶ This did not mean, however, that the official stance of the SDS in 1962 was in favour of a communist system. In fact, "The Port Huron Statement" explicitly renounced communism, particularly in the Soviet Union, because of its "undemocratic" nature and excision of what the SDS considered "basic liberties." Human emancipation, the statement contended, had not been accomplished by communist movements throughout the world and never would. While some of the SDS's members disagreed with the stance, the stated consensus was unequivocally conciliatory and reform oriented, rejecting radical solutions to the question of American political reform.

Despite the organization's strong stance against communism, the FBI considered the SDS an "anti-American" or "un-American" group from its inception. Internal FBI documents from 1962 illustrate that the FBI monitored the organization because of its supposed sensitivity to "communist infiltration."¹⁷ However, after some investigation between 1962 and 1964, the FBI consistently reported that no sufficient evidence existed to point to communist infiltration within the organization. But it was not only government bureaus that feared the political influences and leanings of the SDS in this period. American citizens wrote to the FBI voicing their concerns about SDS, wondering if the group was anti-American. In 1963, an employee at the University of Oklahoma wrote a letter to J. Edgar Hoover asking for "information" on the SDS or any "information on other subversive groups trying to penetrate college campuses, and all related groups."¹⁸ Citing the history of the organization, the University of Oklahoma employee did not want the campus to recognize the SDS as a legitimate student organization.¹⁹ Another letter written by a "concerned" citizens at the University of Oklahoma to Hoover in 1964 read, "My friends and I are students at the University of Oklahoma, and we have been disgusted and angered by the distinctly un-American ideas expressed by the SDS in their weekly publications. We appreciate any information you can give us."²⁰ Clearly the social and political motivations of SDS opened the organization to accusations of "anti-American" behaviour.

What were the alleged "un-American" or "anti-American" ideas of the SDS that so many Americans were concerned about? At the time, the SDS was visibly supporting democratic reform rather than radical change. However, the organization was openly attacking US government policy, especially on matters of foreign policy in areas considered prone to communist infiltration. Thus, the US government and some "concerned" citizens supported the familiar and frighteningly simplistic paradigm which assumed any critique from the Left was anti-American. Despite its apparently liberal-democratic charter and principles, the SDS was blanketed as un-American and monitored for possible "subversive" activities and infiltration by more radical elements during the years 1962–1964. Ironically, in the atmosphere of the Cold-War it

¹⁶ Tom Hayden, "Port Huron Statement," *SDS Papers*.

¹⁷ "Internal Document: August 13th, 1962," *FBI File on the Students for a Democratic Society and the Weathermen Underground Organization* (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1991), Microfilm (Hereafter cited as *FBI File on SDS and WUO*).

¹⁸ "Letter to J Edgar Hoover, Dec. 9, 1963," *FBI File on SDS and WUO*.

¹⁹ SDS was inspired by a socialist educational organization known as the League for Industrial Democracy (LID) which descended from the Intercollegiate Socialist Society, started in 1905. For more see Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS* (New York: Random House, 1973).

²⁰ "Letter to J Edgar Hoover, Feb, 15, 1964," *FBI File on SDS and WUO*.

was this very idealism that exposed the organization to accusations of anti-Americanism. In short, the SDS proposed a plan to change the anti-democratic tendencies nurtured by a hyperbolic and polarized socio-political environment by co-opting and building on the ideal of American freedom through traditional means while also reaffirming the notion that American ideals were worth fighting for. Despite the fears that the organization was "sensitive" to communist infiltration, the SDS still leaned towards non-violence in the early 1960s and maintained a liberal and non-radical position that utilized pacifism to resist racial injustice and the corporatization of the American university system.

However, as the Vietnam War became more militant between the years 1965–1967, so did SDS's tactics, which transformed into something very different from what they had been in earlier years. As the US's involvement in Vietnam intensified, the New Left questioned the integrity of the nation. Furthermore, pigeonholing SDS's actions as "anti-American" drove the organization and their pleas for democracy increasingly away from moderate action and beliefs.²¹ As the movements and individuals that constituted the "action-faction" of the New Left became "heroes", many members of the SDS and New Left at large began to espouse and support open hostility towards the American political system. New Leftists looked abroad for inspiration to leaders in China, Cuba, Vietnam and third world guerrilla movements. The passion of Mao Tse-tung, Franz Fanon, Che Guevara and Regis Debray caused American New Leftists to doubt their own tactics and begin advocating more radical means.²² Sociologist and former SDS president Todd Gitlin portrayed the internationalization of the American Left as an inevitable reaction to the rejection of more moderate methods:

America had betrayed us; the war, Carl Oglesby movingly said in 1965, "broke my American heart." Only true-blue believers in the promise of America could have felt so anti-American. Ours was the fury of a lover spurned. But a fury, left to itself, would have consumed us. So we turned where romantics have traditionally turned: to the hot blooded peoples of the subtropics and the mysterious East.²³

The FBI responded to SDS's frustration and their ideological shift towards a stance against the US system by intensifying their investigation of the organization. One 1965 internal document claimed that the Communist Party had not infiltrated SDS, but that it was taking every opportunity to "exploit" the organization in the furtherance of what the document called "the communist conspiracy." This assessment was met with a very terse and telling hand written response that, after underlining "exploit" claimed "This is merely an exercise in semantics between infiltrated and exploit."²⁴ The SDS, however, did not seem to shy away from the growing attention about its new more radical ideology and in 1965, even removed its "anti-communist" provision from its constitution, further inspiring the FBI to intensify its infiltration and "coverage" of the group's conventions.

Though the FBI insisted that the SDS was a subversive, communist-influenced group, documents from the SDS show that despite the turn towards Third World internationalism and revolutionary

²¹ See *FBI File on SDS and WUO*.

²² Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York, Bantam Books, 1987), 263.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ "Internal Document. 1965." *FBI File on SDS and WUO*.

violence, the organization continued to co-opt American ideals. By 1965, hope for change within American democracy was often replaced by the plea for “humanity” or abstract ideas of “freedom.” A 1966 SDS poster for “International Days of Protest Against the War in Vietnam” claimed “America kills too easy,” but “Humanity sees the logic of destruction” and “The pain is Humanity’s. The bombs are American.” The poster concluded, “And Man at least, and if necessary alone, must stop the logic of destruction before it stops Man.” Despite the gendered language, the appeal to a universal citizen, man as a capitalized noun, deserving of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness implicitly echoed the rhetoric and ideals stated in the US constitution. However, the SDS never made this connection explicit. Although the creators of the poster were American students, they distanced themselves from their country and the war in Vietnam by arguing that their protests were not anti-American but against the “bombs” and military action that was committed in the nation’s name.²⁵ This poster offers an example of how the SDS’s primary focus was on US foreign policy and that at least segments of the organization still felt that there were American ideals worth fighting for.

Another mid-sixties document from SDS, a handout addressed to parents of high school graduates, encouraged parents to help their sons apply for conscientious objector status. It argued that, “To send a young man to die for a cause as corrupt as this in a country where we have no right to be, is an unbearable sacrifice. It is too much to ask of any American.”²⁶ Notably, the pamphlet still invoked the familiar discourse of traditional American ideals by claiming that the Vietnam War was not fought in the name of true democracy. Also, the pamphlet still alluded to the liberal notion that choosing one’s own destiny and fulfilling the true promise of American democracy is possible and a natural right. One could easily argue that this sentiment was not anti-American, but was a dissenting voice that attached itself to a growing liberal consensus by arguing that a true democracy would not draft young people to fight in a war.

By the late 1960s, as I have illustrated, many in the Left had a strained and strange relationship with democracy and an acute awareness of the accusation that they were being co-opted into a political spectrum that most felt was itself ineffective. While many contended that trying to work within the American electoral and legal system seemed as hopeless as the mass protests of the antiwar movement, the 1968 election forced many Leftists into a quandary as to how they would include or not include themselves in the American political system. Further exacerbating the situation was President Lyndon Johnson’s message to Congress in 1968 requesting a constitutional amendment to change the voting age to 18. Though Johnson said that “the ballot box was the anvil of American democracy,” most in SDS remained unconvinced.²⁷ Bill Steinham, an eighteen year old member of SDS responded to Johnson’s message to Congress arguing:

What Johnson would love is for all of us to be co-opted by this amendment: bribed by the right to vote. Why vote when all you do is renew the society you are trying to get rid of? I just don’t see that it will make any difference: the power will still be in the hands of the elite.²⁸

²⁵ Poster, “International Days of Protest Against the War in Vietnam,” 1966, *SDS Papers*.

²⁶ Pamphlet, *Students for a Democratic Society*, Union Square West, NYC 196, *SDS Papers*.

²⁷ Stephen Davis, “Youth Won’t Swallow Vote Panacea” *The Guardian*, July 1968, *SDS Papers*.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Another New Leftist, Willa Collingwood, showed an equal distaste for the "option" provided by the American electoral system when she argued:

Johnson leaves us a choice. He'll either let us vote for Humphrey or Nixon or for one of the Peace and Freedom candidates that don't have a chance. I think I'd rather not vote and just continue working against the system instead."²⁹

Many in the New Left, the SDS and even the Peace and Freedom Party (PFP)—which shared many of the objectives proposed by the SDS—viewed voting as hopeless because the system that enabled American "democracy" made it impossible for such a party to ever have an electoral voice.³⁰ Though half of Americans in 1968 disapproved of the war and over half believed it would end in "compromise," the Peace and Freedom Party was viewed by many in the New Left as too "radical" to ever be elected by the general population into office.³¹

The PFP, like the SDS, co-opted American ideals of freedom, while at the same time critiquing elements of American politics. The PFP serves as an excellent example of the New Left's ambiguous relationship with "America" as the group did not abandon all of the instruments of the system. Thus, some members of the New Left argued that it was still possible to use the American political system to further their revolutionary goals. As was previously mentioned, the Peace and Freedom Party saw themselves as a dissenting option to what they felt were the war hawk candidates of both the Republican and Democratic parties. Thus, the PFP, like SDS, was against the government's policies but wanted to create a new, radical order in American society. While some in SDS advocated a student strike on Election Day, others campaigned for the PFP candidate for president—Eldridge Cleaver.³² By nominating Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver, even though he had been in prison and was too young to be president, the PFP sought to shake up what they viewed as a corrupt system. A pamphlet found in SDS papers, "Why Peace and Freedom Should Elect Eldridge Cleaver for President" claims that as president of the United States, Cleaver could squelch the American Empire through disarmament and withdrawal of US troops in Vietnam and throughout the world. Cleaver's "National Program" also included the goal of political and economic determination of people of color, and promised to change the US economy by dismantling the war machine and creating decent housing, quality schools and universal health care—as long as federal money was in the hands of grassroots organizations.³³ Thus, top down bureaucracies should be replaced by local demands of "ordinary," organized people. Cleaver's program also called for the tax load to be alleviated from "ordinary" people and put on corporations and for people to organize to defend the Second Amendment guaranteeing citizens the right to bear arms. Beyond the fact that having a candidate

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ The PFP is a Left wing political party founded in 1967 in opposition to the Vietnam War. The party, consolidated in California, promotes gay and lesbian rights, environmental protection, feminism, and racial equality. In 1974, the PFP declared themselves a socialist party. The PFP is still active today, and in 2006 received over 2% of the vote in two statewide partisan office elections in California. This insured that the party could remain on the ballot for the next four years.

³¹ "Johnson's Rating on Vietnam Drops," *New York Times*, February 14 1968, 4.

³² Gitlin, 338.

³³ Pamphlet, "Why Peace and Freedom Should Nominate Eldridge Cleaver for President," 1968, 2, *SDS Papers*.

run for president demonstrates approval of a political system, the PFP, like SDS, still believed there were redeemable aspects of American politics, particularly within the Bill of Rights.

When examining the goals of PFP and SDS it is difficult to discern what is particularly anti-American about them. Despite this, in May 1968, J. Edgar Hoover deemed SDS and its cohorts as “trying to do all that it can to infect the rising generation with its *anti-American* prattle.”³⁴ Of the New Left, however, “militant” Black Nationalist organizations seemed to be most threatening to the ever vague “American way of life.” Hoover defined black nationalists as, “Some so-called civil rights groups preaching hatred of the white race, demanding immunity from laws and advocating violence constitute a serious threat to our country’s internal security.”³⁵ The Black Nationalist challenge to the racial order was most frightening to the US government, which had from the beginning envisioned a “white republic.”

Though Hoover defined exactly what the government deemed the New Left’s relationship to America (the critique had essentially stayed the same), it appears that, similar to SDS, Cleaver and the PFP could not decide how their relationship with American politics would be articulated. The paradox of how to work within the American system and at the same time destroy it is evident in Cleaver’s plan—he claimed that the aforementioned changes could never be achieved through electoral means, but rather through a mass people’s movement. In fact, argument four of his plan states, “Fundamental social change will not come through the electoral process.”³⁶ Nevertheless PFP utilized Cleaver’s run for president in the American political system as a platform to build mass protest and even claimed, “He shows how the movement can and must grow...by daring to *win*.”³⁷ By running a candidate for president the PFP and its New Left supporters acknowledged that there was something redeemable about the American political system. Cleaver’s platform offers an excellent example of the New Left’s cooptation of American ideals into their activism.

Though the contradictions concerning the role of American politics within the New Left soon became less muddled due to increased dichotomous thinking about the US and communism, American ideals continued to be co-opted by a radicalized New Left. The disruptive SDS convention in 1969 saw a shift in power within the organization as the pro-communist, pro-violence faction known as the Weathermen took over and essentially disbanded SDS claiming it was not “action” oriented or “radical” enough. This new SDS, now controlled by the Weathermen, was very different from the “uncomfortable” SDS of 1962, who wanted to peacefully achieve a more conscientious capitalism and equitable America.³⁸ Many of the Weathermen were attractive young stars from the Columbia University student uprising of 1968 and had the charisma to woo students and monopolize the media. Much to the chagrin of the expelled members of SDS, the Weathermen’s visibility also encouraged media claims that the group was “representative” of the entire anti-war movement and New Left which were now “out of control.”³⁹ Part of the shift in the

³⁴ Associated Press, “Hoover Finds Peril in New Left Action,” *New York Times*, May 19 1968, 1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Pamphlet, “Why Peace and Freedom Should Nominate Eldridge Cleaver for President,” 1968, 6, *SDS Papers*.

³⁷ Emphasis Added.

³⁸ For more on the Weathermen see Dan Berger, *Outlaws of America: The Weather Underground and the Politics of Solidarity* (California: AK Press, 2006); Jeremy Varon, *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, The Red Army Faction and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies* (California: University of California Press, 2004); Ron Jacobs, *The Way the Wind Blew: A History of the Weather Underground* (New York: Verso Press, 1997).

³⁹ Gitlin, 385-390.

organization's ideology also meant that the Weathermen felt that students were no longer important to the anti-war movement. Instead, people of color and Third World radical guerrilla movements were seen as implementing true insurrections throughout the world as they did not strive to work within the "system." Gary Gerstle has argued that two premises shaped the "new politics and culture" in the New Left after 1968; that America was a repressive society and that mainstream America was "soul denying."⁴⁰ Both of these premises are apparent within the papers of SDS, and in the emergence of the more radical ideology of the Weathermen. Moving outside the "system" The Weathermen's primary goal became "the achievement of a classless world" through revolutionary violence. Their commitment to violence as the only means to change American society was reaffirmed on May 21, 1970 when "Weatherwoman" Bernadine Dohrn sent a "Declaration of a State of War" which claimed:

All over the world, people fighting Amerikan imperialism look to Amerika's youth to use our strategic position behind enemy lines to join forces in the destruction of the empire... Revolutionary violence is the only way...We will never live peaceably under this system. [We are developing] the classic guerrilla strategy of the Vietcong and the urban guerrilla strategy of the Tupamaros [in Uruguay] to our own situation here in the most technically advanced country in the world.⁴¹

The Weathermen also declared that within the next fourteen days they would attack "a symbol or institution of Amerikan justice." Spelling America with a "K" was a semantic method for reinforcing the Weathermen's solidarity with people of color as the "K" was a purposeful critique of America's racist past and present. It indicted American society for the Klan, and conjured up images of Nazi Germany and the swastika and skinheads associated with it. For the Weathermen and the Black Panther Party, this "K" disavowed the nation for its current policy as well as its past ills.⁴²

However, despite these growing radical criticisms of America there remained an "American nation" the New Left believed was worth fighting for. Admiration and desire for solidarity with Black liberation movements had always been integral to the activism of SDS, many of whom thought of African Americans in the US as an internal colony or a separate nation. Because African Americans had never truly been included in the project of the American nation, radical activists often argued that there existed two nations within the United States. Noel Ignatin's 1969 article, "SDS: Which Side Are You On?," which claimed to put "U.S. history in perspective," contended that the US was made up of a dominant white supremacist nation and an oppressed black colony within the US.⁴³ This claim is intriguing when analyzed in the context of anti-Americanism, especially considering that by the end of the 1960s, the US was said to exist as two separate nations, which were separated by racially hegemonic categories tracing back to the imperialist history of slavery. One of the nations within the boundaries of the US, the so-called "black colony," was acceptable to white New Leftists. In fact, many in SDS and other organizations argued that

⁴⁰ Gerstle, 328-329.

⁴¹ Heath, 193.

⁴² Linda Gordon "Hating America" in Ross and Ross, 284.

⁴³ Noel Ignatin, "Which Side Are You On? U.S. History in Perspective" (Chicago: Students for a Democratic Society, 1969), *SDS Papers*.

their cause had a deeper affinity with the “nation” of the oppressed black colony in that it shared in a common fight against US imperialism, which they contended was being perpetrated as much inside the United States as it was through foreign relations. Were the members of the oppressed black colony viewed as “Americans” by the New Left? According to the rhetoric of the radical New Left, the colonized black nation shared more in common with the Third World. However, when New Left radicals envisioned the possibility of freedom within the “other” black nation, traditional American ideals were still invoked, though radicals in the New Left would never admit to their co-optation.

An excellent example of the racial foundations in “anti-American” critiques of the radical New Left is found in the pamphlet entitled “Confessions of a White Revolutionary.” Chairman of the Left wing, pro-Panthers “John Brown Party,” Pat Conaway claimed that the white man was the “arch villain” and “arch hypocrite” of world history. White American society, equated with mass psychosis, is deemed as the “most miserably sick collective human animal on the face of the planet.”⁴⁴ For the New Left of the late 1960s, the dominant America and concept of Americanism that anchored white America was no longer worth fighting for. Because of its status as a colony within the US, it was the black liberation movement that was seen as the truly American nation. For it intended on “Bringing the flames of anti-colonial revolution into the living room of the imperialist bourgeoisie.”⁴⁵ Black America survived as a viable alternative to White America by fixing itself to the anti-colonial ideals that many across the New Left believed made America what it was.

The ideological divide that the New Left perceived between the Americanism of white imperialist America and that of Black America was further agitated by continual allusions in both the SDS and Black Panther literature to the Third Reich and the implication that White America was a fascist “Amerika.” One advertisement from the Black Panthers’ Free Breakfast Program, found in the SDS’s papers, reinterprets the popular remark attributed to Pastor Martin Niemoeller about the inactivity of German thinkers after the Nazi rise to power:

First they came for the Panthers, but I was not a Panther so I did not defend them; Then they came for the student activists, but I was not a student activist so I did not defend them. Then they came for the black people, but I was not black so I did not defend them; Then they came for the trade unions, but I was not a trade unionist so I did not defend them; Then they came for the teachers, but I was not a teacher so I did not defend them. And when they came for me there was no one left to defend me.⁴⁶

A member of SDS, apparently moved by the poem wrote on the advertisement, “I scream! And was herded off to the concentration camp.” Newspaper articles in the SDS files from the late 1960s reveal that much of the equating of America with Nazism stemmed from the New Left’s preoccupation with the US becoming a police state. An article titled “Concentration Camps for U.S.” detailed the suggestion by some US government officials that Black militant guerilla revolutionaries should be put in “detention centers.” Using quotes from government officials such as Edwin E. Willis who claimed, “Most civil

⁴⁴ Pat Conway, “Confessions of a White Revolutionary,” 7, *SDS Papers*.

⁴⁵ Ignatin, 8.

⁴⁶ “Ad for Free Breakfast Program,” 196, *SDS Papers*.

liberties would have to be suspended" for Black militants and that they would have to "forfeit their rights as in wartime" reinforced the notion that "imperialist" America would eventually overtake the vocal and radical minorities in the second nation.⁴⁷ In "Confessions of a White Revolutionary" Conaway also makes the allusion to Nazism by saying that pacifism is never the answer, because being a well meaning pacifist in America has been about as successful as "some nice, young respectable German appealing to the conscience of the Third Reich."⁴⁸ An SDS pamphlet concerning the "Bring the War Home" protest on October 8-11, 1969, contended that, "we refuse to be the good Nazis, to 'follow orders.'"

Despite the often overly dramatic rhetoric, anxieties concerning subterfuge by the US government were understandable, especially considering that Leftist groups such as the Black Panthers and SDS were infiltrated by FBI agents under the program COINTELPRO which aimed to "expose, disrupt and otherwise neutralize" its targets.⁴⁹ A great deal of paranoia about the repressive nature of the US government was known at the time and therefore warranted. However, some of the semantics within the Left towards the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s became riddled with the same dichotomous thinking employed by the "imperialist" conservative nation. Equating the imperialist US with Nazism was a simplistic expression that increasingly moved to the forefront of Leftist activism towards the end of the 1960s.

Even with their virulent criticism of the United States, radical New Left members continued to invoke rhetoric that can be seen as co-opting or building out of particular and fundamental American ideals, particularly the notion of "freedom" as integral to the national fabric. But this does not mean that the ideals of the New Left did not transform in this period. Seen as a place capable of changing by early SDS members who penned the "Port Huron Statement," the US increasingly became a "vast wasteland of the white American middle class."⁵⁰ Pat Conaway of the John Brown Party summarized much of the radical Left's position on white middle class America, "But alas! Amidst all this lunacy, amidst the decadence, gazing through the façade, the prosperity, the automobiles, the color TV's, the farce, are some black villagers who sense, who know what matters."⁵¹ In the manifesto of the John Brown Party (1969) Conaway also attacked white middle-class America for being "fat ass, materialistic, selfish, and insensitive," and argued that to align with the Black Panther party was the only way that white revolutionaries could attain true "freedom." Interestingly, freedom here remained the ultimate goal of the radical New Left, but they sought to realign it with an "other" America, where change was still possible.

The MC5, a Leftist rock and roll band from Michigan that aligned with the White Panther Party, touted "freedom" but simultaneously engaged in critiques of mainstream US culture. The group argued that their band would rebel against mainstream American culture by acting as a "high energy source that will drive us wild into the streets of America, yelling and screaming and tearing down everything that

⁴⁷ Source not given, reprinted in flyer for *SDS Papers*.

⁴⁸ Conaway, 4.

⁴⁹ David Cunningham, "The Patterning of Repression: FBI Counterintelligence and the New Left" in *Social Forces* 81, 1 (September 2003), 212. For more on what COINTELPRO did to disrupt the New Left see James Kirkpatrick Davis, *Spying on America: The FBI's Domestic Counterintelligence Program* (New York: Praeger, 1992); David Cunningham, *There's Something Happening Here: The New Left, the Klan, and FBI Counterintelligence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

⁵⁰ Conaway, 1.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

would keep people slaves.”⁵² To rebel against what they saw as the stifling white middle class culture of America, during shows the MC5 often removed all of their clothes on stage and burned the American flag. The White Panthers saw their program not only as protest against US policy or imperialism, but as a fundamental challenge to US culture. The White Panthers’ mission statement championed that, “Our program is cultural revolution through a total assault on the culture.” To protest against what they argued was a droll, sanitized mainstream American capitalist culture, the MC5, through their music and “eating together, fucking together and getting high together” would help the lonely, desperate people of America. Like the SDS, the MC5 were quickly deemed un-American by concerned citizens who wanted the government to squelch “subversive” ideas. A letter to the FBI from the parent of a university student condemns the “anti-Americanism” and amoral tone of the MC5 who played their music in the Student Union at the University of Michigan. The letter laments, “If this is part of the educational experience for our children...then God help this country” and “As a concerned citizen of this country, I respectfully request that the White Panther group be barred from the campus.”⁵³ Therefore, while the critique and action against American policy and culture intensified within the New Left throughout the 1960s, the label of anti-Americanism from the US government and “concerned” citizens stayed consistent from the early 1960s to the 1970s. To their critics, it did not matter if SDS and others in the New Left peacefully protested for a more conscientious capitalism or bombed buildings in support of a violent communist revolution, the label of “anti-American” remained, demonstrating that the assessment of who is considered “anti-American” is often simplistic and broad.

Thus whether SDS and others in the New Left advocated participatory democracy or wanted to destroy the system through violence, the assumption was always the same—the New Left was a threat to the nebulous concept of an “American way of life.” Whatever the threatened America was, SDS claimed to be part of the “other” America, a place where the counterculture and people of colour presided. Although the American New Left (particularly Students for a Democratic Society and later, the Weather Underground) distanced themselves from what they called “Amerika,” they still operated from an ideological base entrenched in American ideals of “freedom.” Furthermore, as the various levels of government continued to repress the New Left’s democratic dissent, they became more devoted to internationalism and revolutionary violence. Both current and past debates concerning who is an American illustrate the complicated nature of “dissent,” and reveals the ambiguous relationship between the SDS and their vision of an ideal US; a relationship that and cannot simply be categorized as pro or anti-Americanism.

⁵² “FBI Internal Document, Feb. 25, 1969,” *FBI File on the SDS and WUO*.

⁵³ “FBI Internal Document, March 20, 1969,” *FBI File on Motor City Five*.

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