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Social Movement Participation and Life Course:

A Study of the Sixties Generation in the U. S.

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Introduction

What has happened to former student activists in various social movements in the 1960s in the U. S.? Have they grown up and settled down in mainstream American society as they have matured ? Or have they continued to commit themselves to the basic values they proposed in their youth ? What are the current situations of the former student activists ? These are questions this paper attempts to answer.

Leaders of social movements are visible in the mass media. For example, Tom Hayden (1988), the first president of SDS (Students for a Democratic Society, a national organization for student activists in the 1960s in the U. S.), wrote a memoir and reflected on his experiences as a student activist. He has been politically active and has become the councilman for the State of California. It is interesting to focus on a leader of the social movement and discuss the Sixties generation from his viewpoint (Tsukada, 1991). However, Tom Hayden as a leader of the national organization of student activists is different from activists in the rank and file. He may not represent hundreds of activists who ran mimeograph machines, made phone calls, painted placards and collected donations (Kessler, 1990: 71).

This paper traces the fate of former student activists in various social movements. The paper will discuss the relationship between social movement participation and its later influence on student activists' life course. Second, the paper attempts to describe common patterns of persistence and change, and dilemma of former student activists' personal choice and their resolution. This description draws upon recent in-depth interview studies of former student activists. In the end, the paper will discuss the legacy of the Sixties generation in the light of the contemporary American society.

Image of the Former Student Activists

The prevailing popular image of Sixties activists is that they "sold out," "gave up" or "settled down". Such an image has become a key element in the pervasive

cynicism, depoliticization, and privatism of the contemporary American society (Whalen and Flack, 1989: 3). By referring to Jerry Rubin, the fun-loving anarchist of the Sixties who became the money grubbing stock broker of the eighties, the conventional wisdom says that privileged young people will "……sow their wild oats but ultimately settle down to become pillars of the established order" (Kessler, 1990: 1). It happened to ex-*Rampart* editors Peter Collier and David Horowitz, the authors of *Destructive Generation* (1989), now unabashed right-wing apologists. The media also tells us it has happened to almost everyone. A 1978 *U. S. News and World Report* states, "Many former radicals or dropouts have become entrepreneurs. A popular T. V. program 60 Minutes also reported that there seemed to be little counterculture at Berkeley any longer (Kessler, 1990: 2).

The above image fits the oft-heard maxim, "He who is not a radical at twenty has no heart; he who is still radical at forty has no head," which nicely expresses the prevailing folk wisdom concerning the inevitable fate of youthful idealism and activism. There are three distinct hypotheses implied in this expression: maturation, disillusionment and co-optation:

> First, while youthful activism is made possible by the relative freedom youth have in their daily lives, once the constraints of abult life are experienced such activism must necessarily give way to the demands of livelihood, family and household. Second, the naive romantic hopes of social tranformation to which youth are prone lead to disillusionment, and that such disillusionment is the inevitable outcome of commitment to changing the world. Finally, co-optation is inescapable: while youth naively believe that life can be led in terms of purity and self-sacrifice and deny that they can be tempted by opportunities for fame, status, power, and comfort sooner or later they will succumb to these temptations. (Whalen and Flacks, 1984: 61)

Continuity among Former Student Activists

Recently several systematic follow-up studies regarding former student activists have been conducted. Findings in these studies indicate continuity of the former student activists as a distinct group.

Two steps of follow-up studies of the 1960s on civil rights activists and two control groups (Fendrich and Tarleau, 1973; Fendrich 1974; Fendrich 1977; and Fendrich and Lovoy, 1988) were conducted. This research builds Mannheim's theory of political generations. The data support Mannheim's theory of distinctive intragenerational units who are agents of social change. Mannheim argues that generational differences are not a direct function of age or biology but of major

political and social events occurring during young adulthood (ages 18-25). He contends that there can be different intragenerational units within the same age cohort. Subgroups within the same age cohort cultivate the materials of their common experiences in different yet specific ways, constituting separate intragener ational units. Generational replacement becomes one of the major engines of social and political change as distinctive intragenerational units mature (Mannheim, 1952 and Fendrich and Lovoy, 1988: 780).

The first study reported on long-range consequences of student political activism. Three groups were selected: (1) former civil rights activists, (2) student government members, and (3) apoliticcal undergraduates. Former civil rights activists showed different characteristics from the other two groups.

Occupationally, the former activists were heavily concentrated in the knowledge and human service occupation, while members of the former government group and the apolitical group were concentrated in the private sector of the economy. The limited ranges of occupation pursued by activists showed their political commitments as well as a preference for the type of work activity.

Politically, activists participated in institutional and non-institutional politics, with a distinctive orientation setting them apart from the other two groups. The activists identified themselves almost exclusively as radicals and liberals while the other groups were moderates and conservatives in early 1970s (Fendrich and Tarleau, 1973).

The second follow-up study of the same group at twenty-five years after leaving college was conducted. The findings were consistent with the first follow-up study. The radicals were more politically active on every dimension except Voting and Patriotism. They were more active especially in political protest. They were also more active on the three institutional dimensions of political behavior: local community politics, party and political campaign work, communicating and trying to pursuade others to vote. They scored significantly higher on the complete-activism measure (Fendrich and Lovoy, 1988: 782).

A similar follow-up study of the 1960s activists was conducted with regard to the Free Speech Movement arrestees at Berkeley (who were operationally defined as those arrested in the Sproul Hall sit-in in 1964) in comparison with student government members and the campus cross section group. In terms of political beliefs free speech arrestees characterized themselves as more liberal and expressed strong approval of the movement relative to the other two groups. Student government members were somewhat more liberal than the cross section group.

Free speech movement arrestees also showed different characteristics in occupational choice and the level of income from the other two groups. The movement arrestees tended to be predominantly in the social service and creative occupations and were under-represented in education and private enterprise. The student gov-

ernment members were the most likely to be in private practice, while students in the cross section were over-represented in private industry. The income level movement arrestees attained was substantially lower than that of the other two groups (Nassi, 1981: 758).

Findings in these two follow-up studies of the former student activists are consistent with other follow-up studies (Jennigs, 1987 and Marwell, Aiken, and Demerath III, 1987). The findings basically support Mannheim's theory of political generations. This means that twenty years after leaving college, the former student activists still kept the political commitments which they developed through participation in social movement in their youth. Participation in student protest was a powerful socialization experience for the former student activists, so they were likely to take different paths from the rest of their generation. They did not grow out of their political commitments. Their radicalism has nonetheless waned over the intervening years, and they seemed less resolved that change occurs only outside of the political system. The professional commitments that allow creative expression and human service may serve as an outlet for their social convictions. Although as adults they are less likely to engage in acts of collective protest than they were as college students as well as more conventional dimensions of political behavior, they are clearly more involved than their nonactivist adult peers (DeMartini, 1983: 208).

Social Movement Participation and Life Course

So far it has been argued that the former student activists still keep the political faith formed in their college years. The follow-up studies discussed, however, have failed to describe the process of their life course after their participation in social movements. As individuals the former student activists experienced different phases of persistence and changes as dilemmas. Drawing on two case studies based upon in-depth interviews with former activists, the common patterns of change, persistence, and dilemma expressed by the former student activists will be described.

Freedom Summer

Freedom summer project was spearheaded by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the project lasted less than three months, from June until late August, in 1964. During that time, more than 1,000 people, the vast majority of them white, Northern college students, journeyed to the South to work in one of the forty-four local projects that comprised the overall compaign. Their days were taken up with a variety of tasks, principally registering black voters and teaching in so-called Freedom Schools (McAdam, 1988: 4). This study was con-

ducted between August 1984 and July 1985 with forty volunteers being interviewed and another forty no-shows, who did not come to Mississippi after attending the project orientation, were selected at random from among all of the applicants. The purpose of this research was to fully understand the dramatic changes experienced by the volunteers between Freedom Summer and now (McAdam, 1988: 5).

The Freedom Summer project was an audacious undertaking demanding courage and confidence on the part of planners and participants alike. The volunteers who finally decided to participate in the Freedom Summer project were special groups in the unique social and historical context of American society. Much of the self-assurance and confidence displayed by the volunteers were attributed to their family background, upper or middle class, the sons and the daughters of the privileged families. They also belonged to baby boom generation who enjoyed the postwar economic prosperity. The combination of these advantages made them uniquely optimistic about the future (McAdam, 1988: 13).

National political leaders were supportive of liberalism and historical events occurred to race relations in American society. John F. Kennedy in particular represented the best example of a politician whose liberalism encouraged youth to activism. At the same time, in 1960 SNCC had been born of the same mix of optimism and idealism that the volunteers now embodied. The momentous 1954 Brown decision declared segregated educational facilities to be inherently unequal. A series of successful mass challenges to Jim Crow such as the bus boycotts in Montgomery and other places were organized and achieved success.

Those applicants who finally made it to Mississippi were an interesting and very special group. They were advantaged and relatively free from adult responsibilities. Academically they numbered among the best and brightest of their generation. Reflecting their privileged class background as well as the prevailing mood of the era, the volunteers held to an enormously idealistic and optimistic view of the world. They shared a sense of efficacy about their own actions. The arrogance of youth and the privileges of class was combined with the mood of the era to give the volunteers an inflated sense of their specialness and general potency. The volunteers were already linked to the civil rights community (McAdam, 1988: 65). This description of former student activists is also consistent with those of the "liberated generation" (Flacks, 1967) and volunteers in Vietnam Summer (Keniston, 1968).

In the orientation for Freedom Summer project, the applicants were fascinated by SNCC veterans' talk about their experiences in the civil rights movement in the South. The orientation sessions also reinforced a sense of identification, later called, "countercuture". For many, the legions of reporters and television cameramen swarming over the campus had an effect. Their presence communicated a sense of

"history-making" significance that was intoxcicating. These feelings were combined with their sense of political mission to realize justice in the U. S. (McAdam, 1988: 61-71).

Through participation in Freedom Summer in the South, volunteers experienced both personal transformation and political radicalization. The volunteerss became more political as a result of their experiences in Mississippi. The sources of this radicalization can be attributed to the existence of the "colored only" drinking fountains and KKK billboards and the poverty of black Mississippi which was part of the inherent supposedly goodness of America. Also, it was the endemic quality of official lawlessness and the blatant contradiction it posed to their law and order upbringings, more importantly, the depths of federal complicity in maintaining Mississippi's system of segregation contributed the volunteers' radicalization (McAdam, 1988: 127).

Personally they were liberated from what they used to be. Freedom Summer moved the volunteers in two directions away from various aspects of mainstream society and toward an alternative vision of America and themselves. The summer in Mississippi had put considerable distance between themselves and the privileged worlds. The Freedom Summer experience was bound to raise questions and plant doubts in the minds of the volunteers (McAdam, 1988: 133)

Returning to the North, most of the volunteers had every intention of acting on the personal and political lessons they had learned in Mississippi. The Free Speech Movement at Berkeley, the first white student demonstration of the 1960s would not have taken place without personnels who experienced Freedom Summer. Second, because of the political sophistication learned in Freedom Summer, activists could see the parallels between aggression against blacks in Mississippi and against the Vietnamese in Southeast Asia war. Its impact was evident in the Spring 1965 "teach-ins". The third movement, the women's liberation movement colud emerge because female volunteers experienced sexism in the civil rights movement and the student movement (McAdam, 1988: 162-179 and Evans, 1980).

The volunteers in Freedom Summer keep their political faith today. Although some of the volunteers have grown pessimistic about the prospects for political and economic change, their collective commitment to the politics they practiced fifteen or twenty years ago remains strong (McAdam, 1988: 213)

The political and cultural wave has put more and more distance between them and mainsteam society with each passing day. In a sense the volunteers are anachronisms. They remained idealists in a cynical age. In their view, it is they who have kept the faith while America has lost it. Still, for the volunteers, the biographical legacy of the project has not been entirely negative. There is a pride and a strength to the volunteers that owes a great deal to their memories of that summer nearly quarter century ago. That is more of an affirmation of self than

most of the rest of their generation will ever know. Remembering Freedom Summer, the one volunteer expressed his feelings:

> The memories of that summer are very important to me because they……redeem me personally……(They serve) as a reminder to me that there are qualities in me that are worth……something and that people are capable of quite remarkable things. It's the single most enduring……moment of my life. I believe in it beyond anything. (McAdam, 1988: 239-240)

As described above, the volunteers in Freedom Summer became involved in various social movements and applied their lessons from Mississippi in the North. Without these significant real experiences in the South, social movements in the North would not have taken place. Even after the political and cultural trend changed, the volunteers still keep their political faith or commitment to what they learned in Mississippi with a social isolation and guilt feeling.

Santa Barbard Political Protest

Whalen and Flacks (1984 and 1989) conducted in-depth, life-history interviews with eighteen people who played signifcant roles in student protest action at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) and its neighboring youth community of Isla Vista during the 1967-71 (1984: 61).

The scene of American society of 1970 was different from that of the 1964 Freedom Summer after activists experienced various protest actions ranging from the civil rights movement, the student movement, the antiwar movement to the women's liberation movement. The more politicized ideological perspectives of the New Left added to the emphasis on personal freedom and self-expression in the counterculture. Activists shared the goal of living one's life in terms of service to the community, of overcoming self-interest and consumerism in order to sustain identification with oppressed, and of resisting complicity with oppressive insitutions by refusing careers that depended on capitalist firms and imperialist states.

This is a time when Isla Vista protest took place. Between February and June of 1970, Isla Vista experienced three violent uprisings. The community was occupied by National Guard troops and police SWAT teams. Over 900 people were arrested. A student was killed by police gunfire. Scores of people were injured. The university was forced to be temporarily closed. Observing this social scene, former Isal Vista activists felt that their community was a microcosm of America and that the nation was on the verge of a revolutionary. A collective vision of the coming apocalypse was brought into being. A number of individuals described their feelings:

> In this whole time period, leading up to the bank burning and the riots, there was a sense that we were all embarking on some path that was utlimately leading toward revolution, of whatever nature—and it was very undefined. During all these demonstrations and riots there was a sense that revolution was imminent—it was just around the corner, the downfall of the state was coming (Whalen and Flacks, 1984: 66).

This apocalyptic vision had profound consequences for how the former activists conceived their direction in the future. New Leftists came to believe that there would be no future, but revolution would be the future.

However, the apocalypse did not come. It became evident that revolution was not around the corner or anywhere in sight and that a totalistic revolutionary posture served only to heighten the New Left's isolation. Here are characteristics of the ways the respondents in this study came to understand the problem:

> I finally realized there wasn't social revolution going on, and that there wasn't going to be one, when I looked at a Gallup Poll in the newspaper and I realized that I was part of what was only a 10% that could easily be ignored or eliminated (Whalen and Flacks, 1984: 69-70).

One response was to withdraw from politics and the seemingly insurmountable dilemmas created by political engagement. One of the respondents put it:

> I felt tremendously burned out, tired of the whole thing. It's like, there's no way that you could do any more. I guess 'cause we had done so much······we didn't really have anything that we could put our finger on and say "Okay, this is what we've accomplished." It was just like we'd run a race it was finished and that was it (Whalen and Flacks, 1984: 70).

The various withdrawals took place in the months immediately following the bank-burning trial in 1970-71. At that point, however, most of the activist sample were still seeking collective, politicized solutions to the intertwined personal and political crises they had come to recognize. The largest and most self-aware group of the movement activists to embark on post-student protest activism was the feminist movement. A second kind of collective experiment was the creation of "alternative institutions" to work for the interests of activists. A third effort to mesh vocation and politics was "radicals in the professions," which could help reconstitute professional identities along morally accountable and politically engaged

lines. A final form of "collective experiment" that emerged during this period was the establishment of a disciplined cadre organization, a "new communist movement" (Whalen and Flacks, 1984: 72-73).

These collective experiments of the early seventies were entered into in the hope that they could provide long-term vehicles for integrating personal needs and political commitment. However, by the mid-seventies, many participants had begun to find collective experiments inadequate. Tensions between collective demands and personal identity began to resurface. By the second half of the decade, most of the respondents who are still politically active can be seen as entering further phase of post-movement development: a turning toward more individualized forms of activity and toward more stable vocation and career path.

One reason for this shift was economic. As the seventies wore on, however, vocational insecruity became an increasing preoccupation for most of these men and women as expressed by the phrase, "living from hand to mouth". As one respondent put it:

> After five years I had never made enough money——we were always living on the edge. I was tired of it——It was always a struggle (Whalen and Flacks, 1984: 74).

Such demoralizing effects of economic insecurity were seriously compounded by tensions that were built into this kind of political activity. It was difficult to feel that the routine, day-to-day legal work of the collective was having a significant political effect. In addition, in the absence of a national or organizational structure capable of linking these local efforts to larger political strategies, to resources, and to a sense of historical impact, many veterans of the sixties felt an increasing pessimism about with the possibility of realizing the dreams and hopes that had justified the sacrifices and risks they had taken.

Thus, the veterans of student activism spent their post-student years in what can be best understood as an ongoing struggle to resolve the tension between self-sacrifice and self-fulfillment, between personal autonomy and social responsibility, a tension that was inherent in the socialization experience of the movement and the counterculture. It has been difficult, in the 70's and 80's, to sustain such political projects in a national climate of economic crisis and conservative retrenchment and in a society which lacks a well-established and national relevance to activist vocations (Whalen and Flacks, 1984: 76).

Conclusion

This paper has summarized the image of the Sixties generation in the mass

media and negated the image as falsely constructed in the reactionary and conservative times of the 1970s and 1980s in the United States by referring to recent social science studies on former student activists in various social movements. Briefly, it is argued that the former student activists are distinctly different from the rest of their generation in terms of political orientation and values as well as occupational choice and the income level. They still keep political faith in what they believed in their youth although they are less active in political actions.

This paper also has referred specifically to two in-depth interview case studies on former activists in social movements in 1964 and in 1970. The first was on vounteers in Freedom Summer in 1964 where the civil rights movement reached its turning point. The other was on arrestees in Isla Vista in 1970, when various social movements had already become violent everywhere and the Federal government had begun taking a severe policy toward any riot.

The volunteers of Freedom Summer and the arrestees in Isla Vista have experienced a similar pattern of struggles for keeping political faith: the tension between "history making" and "making a life". When they were younger, they became politically and personally radicalized in the 1960s when political liberalism was still predominant and prevailing in the United States. However, the conservative forces were prevailing over liberalism in the 1970s and the government's reaction to any social movement became violent. To the extent that the government's action was violent, activists became violent everywhere. It was such a time when the "making history" act seemed to be hard to sustain any more.

How is the current situation of former student activists in the United States? This is one of the questions this paper started with. They are still there in the United States and continue to keep their commitment to what they believed in their youth. They experienced a sense of guilt or disappointment because they failed to achieve what they hoped to do. However, their bitter experience of social movement participation imprinted their later life. The experience of social movement participation was so intense that it is always with the Sixties generation. In their reunion (Flacks, 1988: 279-283 and Hayden, 1988: 504-507), the Sixties generation shared a special identity. They may not act upon the very same political faith they had in their youth any more, but they will be politically involved in "history making" aspect of their life while they make a living as citizens in society. It is this group of the Sixties generation who have learned lessons from their youth and will make the best use of it to change American society into a more democratic society.

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