

# THE MARGINALITY OF THE AMERICAN LEFT: THE LEGACY OF THE 1960s

Barbara Epstein

By virtually any definition of the term, the US left is not doing well. In the sixties the left was intertwined with a series of progressive social movements; these movements and the left within them attracted enormous numbers of young people, many of whom changed not only their ideas but the way they led their lives through this experience. A vibrant left politics and culture flourished in every major city in the North and in many in the South; few college or university campuses were untouched by it. The left was a major presence in national politics and in intellectual life, outside as well as within academia. The left brought a freshness, honesty and moral integrity to national discussion that compelled attention and respect. Today this is virtually all gone. Though there are many organizing projects concerned with specific social problems, there are only the remnants of a left able to link these issues and call for systematic social change. In national politics the left has little if any influence. There is a subculture that identifies itself as left, but it is insular and dispirited, and too often preoccupied with policing the attitudes and language of those in or close to the left. The staleness of the left's perspective and its political marginality in the nineties stand in sharp contrast to its attractiveness and influence in the sixties.

The mistakes of the left are only one reason for its decline: the left has also been undermined by the rising power of global corporate capital and discouraged by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the apparent victory of capitalism over socialism. But this article will focus on what the American left has contributed to its own marginalization because while the left cannot reverse these trends, it can rethink its own perspective. In the sixties, the left was intertwined with a set of social movements. In the nineties, the left has come to be an intellectual milieu, a climate of opinion, with no coherent, collective relationship to movements for social change. What holds this milieu together is a common memory of or identification with the radicalism of the sixties. Many of the ideas that the left has drawn

## BARBARA EPSTEIN

from the sixties do not fit the conditions of the nineties very well. Gradual dissociation from social movements and increasing immersion in academia over the last thirty years has also led large sections of the left to revise the legacy of the sixties in ways that isolate the left and divert it from issues of social change.

In the realm of electoral politics, where 'the left' designates an arena that includes programmes with even faintly social democratic overtones, left perspectives have almost disappeared from sight. In the 1996 elections the left was barely visible. In 1984 and 1988 the Rainbow Coalition was strong enough to have some impact on the party's programme, and in 1992, even without the Rainbow Coalition, Clinton still felt enough pressure to present a health care programme that was partly addressed to the left. In 1996 there was no visible left within the Democratic Party, and Clinton's welfare reform programme reflected pressure from the right but not from the left. Meanwhile Pat Buchanan and the extreme right more generally were a major presence within the Republican Party. Ralph Nader and the Green Party ran a minimal campaign. Though many people on the left voted for Nader out of a sense of utter disillusionment with Clinton, the Nader campaign had no significant impact on national politics.

At the other end of the spectrum, the explicitly socialist left (representing the most restrictive definition of the term) is also in serious decline. The major organizations of the socialist left are at best stagnant. Since the late seventies the most prominent socialist organization in the US has been the Democratic Socialists of America. Formed out of a merger of two previous organizations (one, the New American Movement, consisting largely of people with histories in the New Left, the other, the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, made up of social democrats oriented toward the left wing of the Democratic Party), through the late seventies and early eighties DSA had many members who were engaged in community organizing as well as a group of Democratic Party and trade union luminaries who were willing to lend their prestige to the organization.

DSA has ceased to be an organization of activists. It still has a large paper membership, and it has a staff which conducts various campaigns; in the recent national elections DSA helped mobilize progressives in Congress around a programme for a living wage, and held a series of hearings on the economy. When John Sweeney was elected head of the AF of L he publically joined DSA as a statement of his break with the right wing Democrats who had been **Meany's** associates. But despite the fact that DSA still speaks for the left in some Democratic Party and trade union circles, it is a shadow of its former self. In the recent past, one of the things that distinguished left organizations from liberal or mainstream organizations was the role played by the membership. The direction of left

organizations was determined by their memberships; that of liberal and mainstream organizations, by a staff, which sent out mailings to, and collected dues from, a paper membership. DSA now fits the latter model.

DSA is probably the most widely known explicitly socialist or left organization in the US. Other than DSA, there are various small sectarian groups which have little if any influence. There are the Committees of Correspondence (CoC), formed in 1992 by dissidents leaving the Communist Party along with leftists from other backgrounds, in the hope that the left could be revitalized by creating a common ground and transcending sectarian divisions. Over four years the CoC has dwindled from roughly two thousand at its founding convention to a few hundred at its last convention. There are a number of left projects oriented toward combining electoral politics with community organizing: the New Party, the Labor Party, the Green Party, the Alliance. It is possible that a movement could emerge out of one or more of these. But at the moment they are small and struggling.

Left journals in the US are in only slightly better shape than organizations of the left. A few left journals have collapsed, a few have either been forced to cut back or have shifted toward academic issues and audiences, a few are holding their own. In 1992 the National Guardian, an independent left weekly newspaper with a large audience, including people in many left and progressive organizations, folded. Nothing has emerged to take its place. Soon after *In These Times*, another independent left paper but with an audience weighted more towards academics and professionals, was forced to cut back from weekly to biweekly publication and from newspaper to magazine format. *Socialist Review*, which at one time was a leading theoretical journal of the independent socialist left in the US, has located itself in the academic field of Cultural Studies and employs a jargon so obscure that only those steeped in this literature can hope to understand it. The leading journals of the left, *The Nation*, *The Progressive*, *Z*, *Monthly Review*, *Dissent*, *New Politics*, are stable but stagnant.<sup>1</sup>

The relationship between left journals and their readers has been transformed in more or less the same way as the relationship between left organizations and their members. In the sixties and seventies, and still to some extent in the early eighties, readers of the left press cared a great deal about what appeared in its pages, because what was said in the left press affected what positions organizations took, what people on the left did. In the nineties the left press is read with considerably less passion. What appears in its pages may affect what people think, but it has little impact on what anyone does.

It would be too narrow to restrict one's definition of the left, in the US, to the electoral left and/or organizations, publications, projects that are explicitly socialist. In the late sixties and early seventies there was a large

## BARBARA EPSTEIN

ideologically and politically diverse arena of organizations, groups, individuals, who called themselves radical or left, who were opposed to a society based on inequalities of wealth and power, and believed that a better society could be attained through collective action. Among people who regarded themselves as left or radical there were differences over which structures of inequality were fundamental, which issues needed to be attacked first, and also over how a better society would be organized. Though probably most people in this arena regarded class as one dimension of inequality, there were many who were more concerned with gender or race. Some people in this arena would have called themselves socialists. Many others would not have, often because they associated socialism with a highly centralized, state-controlled society, which clashed with their vision of decentralized, small-scale communities. Though there were sharp disagreements among the radicals of the late sixties and early seventies, nevertheless anarchists and socialists, radical feminists, anti-imperialists and radical anti-racists were all in some loose way part of a broader movement that was opposed to all of these dimensions of inequality.

The diverse radical movement that was so strong in the late sixties and early seventies now barely exists. At that time there was a cohort of radical or left activists, stretching across the civil rights/Black Power movement, the women's movement, the anti-war movement; despite their differences these people talked to each other, influenced each other's thinking, and in some very broad way regarded each other as part of a common struggle. In each of these movements it was radicals who led, who set the agenda. Participants in these movements were by no means predominantly leftists – but through their involvement they were likely to develop more radical views.

In the nineties nothing comparable to this exists. In one movement after another the liberal sector has become dominant, the radical sector, barely visible. In the late sixties and through at least the first half of the seventies the radical wing of feminism,<sup>2</sup> based largely among students and other young women close to the anti-war movement, was equally or more visible than liberal feminism, whose constituency was older, more cautious, more removed from radicalism. Members of liberal feminist organizations such as the National Organization for Women were more likely to be drawn toward radical feminism than were radical feminists to be drawn to liberal feminism. Today the large bureaucratic liberal feminist organizations, such as NOW, are at the centre of the women's movement. These organizations tend to consist of paid staff and large paper memberships. What was once the radical sector of the movement has evolved into, on the one hand, an arena of alternative social and cultural organizations for women, and, on the other, women's studies programmes and a diffuse feminist presence in the universities.

## THE SOCIALIST REGISTER 1997

In one arena of progressive politics after the next, a once-vibrant radical wing has faded. In the late sixties and early seventies black radicalism, taking up the slogan of Black Power, challenged the cautious **integrationism** of the established black organizations. By the early eighties the movement for Black Power had subsided into valuable, but often not especially radical, electoral efforts. In the nineties the African-American movement is divided between the socially and politically conservative nationalism of the Nation of Islam and the beleaguered integrationism of the NAACP. Many black intellectuals speak and write eloquently for a radical perspective, but this does not constitute a movement. In the gay and lesbian movement, the radicalism represented in the eighties by organizations such as Act Up and Queer Nation has subsided. Since the war in Vietnam solidarity movements, through their opposition to US interventionism, have been a major focus of radical activism in the US. In the late seventies and early eighties, leftists played a major role in mobilizing against US intervention in Central America. Since the end of the Cold War this sector of the US left has disappeared.

This does not mean that progressive efforts no longer exist. Community organizing remains strong. There is a widespread environmental justice movement, made up of local groups concerned with environmental hazards, often along with other community social justice issues. There are networks of activists concerned with housing and tenants' rights, with immigrants' rights, with capital flight and workers' rights. There are groups concerned with violence against women, defending the right to abortion, opposing racism and the right. There are many people of the left scattered through these movements, and many of those involved in these movements for any substantial length of time move toward the left by coming to see connections between various issues and forms of injustice, and coming to believe that these problems call for a fundamental transformation of society.

These tend to remain, however, private beliefs rather than the public positions of organizations. In the case of the environmental justice movement, for instance, it is clear to many in the movement that doing away with environmental toxics would require drastic government control over the process of production; it would mean putting public welfare ahead of the right of corporations to make a profit. This would mean a dramatic turn away from market values; it would mean moving toward at least a radical form of social democracy. This view is at most hinted at in public statements. Leftists as well as others point out that taking such a position would undermine the movement's effect in the public arena and also narrow its base: local groups rely on drawing people with a range of political views. All of this makes perfect sense. Community organizing efforts can mobilize constituencies that the left sees as important (poor and

working class people, people of colour, women), and many leftists are involved in these efforts. But community organizing in relation to specific issues, for particular, limited reforms, is not the same thing as a left, which implies a broader social analysis, an agenda for system-wide social change.

In the nineties the term 'the left' has come to describe people who read more or less the same journals, hold opinions that fall within an identifiable range, people who are part of more or less the same subculture. The left is more visible in academia than anywhere else in society, and the arena of Cultural Studies, where a left or radical perspective is more or less part of professional identity, is the most visible part of the broader academic left. What makes the left visible is not social action but access to publishing. In the sixties the left was bound together by common involvement in a broadly defined common project. In the nineties it is held together mostly by a common relationship to the past, by having participated in, supported, or having subsequently come to identify with, the movements of the sixties.

The left's mistakes are only one source of its problems. The left has declined around the world: clearly there are forces at work that go beyond anything that the US left could have brought upon itself. It is difficult to think of any nation, in the mid-nineties, where the left has a strong base, exercises real influence, and has a clear sense of direction. When the Soviet Union collapsed, some on the left hoped that the end of a Stalinist form of socialism would create an opening for democratic socialism, in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and possibly in the West as well. So far these hopes have not been borne out. Though capitalism has failed to bring the prosperity that its advocates predicted (and in fact in many places has made the economic conditions of the majority worse), challenges to the market system have not succeeded, and do not seem to be gathering momentum. In the seventies and eighties left movements emerged in Western Europe that inspired the left in the US and elsewhere. In the seventies Eurocommunism seemed to be combining Marxism with a commitment to democracy; in the late seventies and eighties the Greens held out the hope of a politics that addressed social and environmental issues. Both for a time combined local activism with electoral politics. But both failed. Eurocommunism was unable to break out of the bureaucratic mould of the Communist parties that it tried to reform, and the Greens were swept aside by the unification of Germany. Nothing has emerged to take the place of these efforts. In Central America, the revolutionary movements that flourished in the seventies and early eighties have faded. The PRD, in recent years central to the Mexican left as a whole, is in decline. Even in South Africa, where the Communist Party and non-Communist leftists played a major role in the movement against apartheid, and continue to

exert influence in the governing ANC, the left is on the defensive.

Movements of the left everywhere have been weakened by events and forces beyond their control. The collapse of the Soviet Union demoralized the left around the world, including the US left, despite the fact that the Soviet Union had long since ceased to be regarded as any kind of model by the vast majority of leftists. Nevertheless, the Soviet Union did hold capitalism at bay, and provided a counterweight to the international power of the US. With the Soviet Union gone it became difficult to argue convincingly that socialism was possible or that capitalism could be replaced by any more humane system. The view that capitalism is natural and inevitable has been reinforced by corporate capital's success in spreading its tentacles around the globe. By weakening states' control over their national economies, globalization weakens social welfare systems. Heightened international economic competition makes it difficult to defend spending on existing programmes, let alone propose new ones. In this environment movements of the left easily come to look like relics of the past.

Despite the real difficulties that it causes for progressive politics, globalization does not eliminate the possibility of a left. The late twentieth century is, after all, not the first instance of the globalization of capital. Through its history capitalism as a world system has alternated between periods in which national economic development took precedence and periods of intense international competition for world markets. The most recent instance of heightened international competition took place during the last decades of the nineteenth, and the first decades of the twentieth, centuries. As is now the case, corporate capital crossed national boundaries, disrupted existing social and economic systems, and let loose waves of international migration. In that instance social and economic disruption strengthened the left rather than weakening it, leading to heightened conflict between capital and labour and the emergence of revolutionary movements.<sup>3</sup>

In the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century the contest between capital and labour seemed to many people to be more or less equal. Many people hoped (or feared) that a radicalized working class would win this battle, that capitalism would not survive its surge of international development. The extravagant hopes that the Bolshevik Revolution inspired in leftists in Europe and North America (and the equally extravagant fears that it inspired in advocates of the status quo) reflected the widespread assumption that socialist revolution could spread through the capitalist world. By the early twenties it had become clear that this was not going to happen, and it is possible that capitalism had been stronger than either the left or the right thought throughout the preceding decades. But the rapid growth of the left during this period of expansion of

international capital shows that there is no automatic equation between globalization and a decline of the left. The industrial system that was taking shape around the turn of the century created the basis for working class solidarity by sharpening divisions between capital and labour, bringing large numbers of workers together and pitting them against a common capitalist enemy. In the late twentieth century capitalism is being transformed in ways that so far at least seem to mostly undermine working class unity, by heightening divisions among working people, by dispersing workers into smaller workplaces and replacing many stable full-time jobs with temporary or part-time employment. The way work is being reorganized poses real problems for the left. But globalization is not in itself the problem.

Though the current transformation of capital discourages working class consciousness and collective action by fragmenting the work force, it might be creating the basis for a different sense of solidarity by widening the gap between rich and poor, by worsening the living standards of the majority and fostering social and environmental crises that are likely to impinge on virtually everyone. In the US, the standard of living of the majority has gradually declined over recent decades: most people work harder for less real pay, at less secure jobs. Meanwhile the social welfare net that was created by popular struggles during the thirties is being pulled out from under the feet of those who need it, excluding those on the bottom rungs from participation in the economy, and undermining whatever loyalty they may have to society. The social consequences of these policies and of decades of environmental degradation will undoubtedly escalate. A left is likely to re-emerge in the US because the US needs a left. The existing left does not have the power to stop the process of globalization. But it can make the re-emergence of a large left easier by rethinking mistaken approaches.

For the left of the nineties, the movements of the sixties remain the point of reference, the basis for conceptions of what constitutes radical politics. The radical politics of the sixties included a critique of liberalism that was very appropriate for the sixties, but left radicals utterly unprepared for the subsequent revival of conservatism; a rejection of electoral politics which made sense in the context of the sixties but is no longer a viable left position. It also included a cultural radicalism which in the sixties meant extending protest against injustice to the realm of personal relations, and expressed a utopian vision of a better society. In the nineties cultural radicalism has been recast, particularly by the academic left, as a deconstructionist stance that pursues criticism for its own sake, regards truth as an illusion and values as matters of preference. This cultural radicalism has little connection to movements for or visions of social change, and is mostly driven by the internal pressures of academia.

## THE SOCIALIST REGISTER 1997

The conception of radicalism that was developed by the movements of the sixties also contained elements that by the end of the decade were causing problems for those movements themselves. In the more politically oriented wing of the movement it was widely assumed that there could be a revolution, when in fact interest in revolution was almost entirely limited to young people, and only a sector of youth at that. In the counter-cultural wing of the movement cultural or personal change tended to be equated with social change. Throughout the movement it was assumed that it was always better to be more radical than less, and radicalism was often taken to mean challenging limits because they were there and/or escalating standards of militancy. Radicalism also came to be equated with a politics of separatism that did not merely call for organizing particular groups separately, but included a tone of hostility toward outsiders, especially former friends and allies. Unfortunately some of the aspects of sixties radicalism that were most destructive to the movements of that period continue to be part of what is understood as radicalism or left politics. This article is intended as a plea for rethinking the legacy of the sixties in the light of the nineties, distinguishing between those aspects that remain valuable in the nineties and those that do not (and which may not have been such good ideas even at the time), building on the former and discarding the latter.

The movements of the sixties began as expressions of liberalism, as protests against violations of liberal values, but over the course of the sixties came to regard liberalism as the enemy, and developed a critique of liberalism that was accurate, insightful, and constituted a major contribution to left social and political analysis. The conception of radicalism which by the late sixties constituted a loose intellectual framework for movement culture as a whole evolved out of a passionate, enraged rejection of liberalism that took place in one movement after the next. The passion and rage expressed a widespread sense of betrayal, based on a growing perception of liberalism as an ideology of social control. Student and youth-based movements for social change found themselves in conflict with a liberal establishment that defended the status quo, saw themselves as betrayed by liberal allies unwilling to cut their ties to liberals in power, and came into conflict with liberal organizations, mostly made up of older people, that resisted the movement's confrontational approach to the authorities and egalitarian internal culture and organizing style.

Both the civil rights movement and the Northern student movement revolved around liberal perspectives and demands: the civil rights movement demanded equal rights for blacks, especially the right to vote, and SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) pointed to the hypocrisy of official claims that the US was a model of democracy given the realities of

racism, poverty, and a foreign policy that promoted the Cold War. There were individual leftists in both movements, but in their early years both were dominated by young people who believed in liberal values, were outraged that they were being violated, and wanted them put into practice. Both movements found themselves pitted against Democratic administrations that called themselves liberal and defended their policies on this basis.

For the civil rights movement, the critical moment in the shift from liberalism to radicalism was the Democratic Party convention of 1964, in Atlantic City, where the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), whose delegation, representing black voters registered by civil rights workers, demanded that it be seated. In the ensuing negotiations liberal allies of the civil rights movement within the Democratic Party swung their votes to a proposal that the MFDP be given two token seats, a 'compromise' that the MFDP rejected. Many civil rights workers concluded that anyone within the system was inevitably beholden to it, that in order to bring about change it was necessary to oppose the system from the outside. This rejection of liberalism was underscored by the realization, on the part of many civil rights workers, that liberal administrations might well give blacks the vote, but that that would not be enough, that real equality for blacks required questioning racism more broadly, and also challenging the class divisions that made achieving the right to vote a somewhat hollow victory.<sup>4</sup>

For the anti-war movement, the critical moment of disillusionment with liberalism came at the 1968 Democratic Party convention in Chicago. Anti-war Democrats were silenced on the floor of the convention by being shouted down or finding, when they rose to speak, that microphones had been disconnected. Meanwhile anti-war demonstrators on the streets outside the convention were being beaten by police. The convention nominated a liberal candidate, Hubert Humphrey, who maintained the party's support for the war. Many in the anti-war movement came to the same conclusion that civil rights workers had arrived at four years earlier: one could not bring about change from within the system, one had to work outside the system for its overthrow.<sup>5</sup>

In fact the view that liberalism was the problem had been developing within SDS, the main organization of the New Left, for several years. Early New Leftists had resisted calling the system that they opposed capitalism, partly out of uneasiness about adopting a Marxist vocabulary, and partly because the term 'capitalism' did not convey the problems of faceless bureaucracy and meaningless lives that they were concerned with (and to which socialism was not in itself a solution). They tended to prefer vague terms like 'the establishment' or just 'the system.' But by the mid-sixties many New Leftists were coming to the conclusion that doing away with

racism, poverty, and war required structural changes in society, that students alone could not accomplish these changes, and that they needed an analysis of society in order to identify potential allies and construct strategies for change. In 1964 Paul Potter, then president of SDS, gave a speech at the first March on Washington against the war in Vietnam in which he said that it was necessary to name the system in order to change it, but stopped short of saying what that name might be. A year later, at the next March on Washington, Carl Oglesby, the next president of SDS, recalled Potter's speech and proposed a name for the system: corporate liberalism. He pointed out that the war in Vietnam was being run and defended by liberals, and argued that liberalism served to justify the actions of the corporate state, protect it from criticism, and prevent change.<sup>8</sup> This made sense to young people in whose experience liberalism had mostly served to defend the status quo. The radicalism that the movements of the sixties moved toward in the latter half of the decade was shaped by the widespread view that liberalism was the ideology that needed to be discredited, corporate liberalism (or liberal capitalism) the social system that needed to be dismantled.

The movement's critique of liberalism made sense in the sixties. It was true that conservatism was no longer the problem. The depression had destroyed the confidence of those in power that capitalism could run itself. Through a combination of fears of revolution from above and demands from below for government action, laissez-faire economics had been replaced by a consensus in favour of a liberal welfare state. In foreign policy conservative isolationism had been replaced by what was called liberal internationalism, meaning a policy of extensive economic and/or military intervention to extend US influence and protect the interests of US corporations. The critique of liberalism was important not only because it described the exercise of power in the postwar era more accurately than older conceptions of a ruling class wedded to conservatism, but also because it emphasized the importance of ideology: liberalism protected the status quo by giving it moral justification.

There were, however, problems with the critique of liberalism. First, it was easy to gloss over the difference between liberalism as a strategy for social control or as a justification for the status quo, and liberalism as a commitment to democracy, as the basis for popular demands for reform. The people who developed the theory of corporate liberalism noted these distinctions. When Carl Oglesby called the system 'corporate liberalism' he pointed out that it rested on values that were opposed to those of authentic humanist liberalism, which he said were more genuinely represented by the movement. The two histories that traced the development of liberal reform as a strategy on the part of large corporations and the state (James Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism,*<sup>9</sup> and James Weinstein, *The*

Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State<sup>8</sup>) both distinguished between demands for reform by popular movements and the appropriation of reform by those in power. But when the theory of corporate liberalism was adopted by movements that were more interested in distinguishing themselves from liberals than in making alliances with them, these distinctions were easily forgotten. In many parts of the movement the word 'liberal' became an insult.

The second problem was that it was easy to infer, from the theory of corporate liberalism, that conservatism had been permanently discredited, that people in ruling circles had become convinced that an extensive welfare state was crucial to the functioning of the system and would never allow it to be dismantled. Many people on the left also thought that widespread prosperity was a permanent feature of advanced capitalism, that the main problem for the left was and would continue to be persuading people to rebel against a system that showered them with material rewards. Herbert Marcuse, in his book, *One-Dimensional Man*, which was widely read throughout the movement, argued that advanced industrial society rested on technical advances that had solved earlier problems of scarcity. Such societies, he argued, produced repressive or false needs, especially desires for unnecessary consumption, and that the endless cycle of the production and satisfaction of false needs squelched independence of thought, dissent, true democracy. Marcuse saw the welfare state as prototypical in a society that produced total administration and fostered total dependence.' There was a large grain of truth in this argument, and good reasons for the widespread appeal of anarchist visions of a stateless society and an economy in which production and need would be brought back into balance. But the critique of liberalism and the confidence in continued prosperity that accompanied it created a left unprepared for the political and economic shifts that have followed the sixties, the decline in standards of living, the appeal of conservatism and its gains in political power, the dismantling of welfare systems.

In the sixties the intransigence of the Democratic Party and the stability of the two-party system prompted the movements largely to abandon the arena of electoral politics and focus instead on direct action, protest in the streets, and cultural radicalism. The fact that the renunciation of electoral politics came to be regarded by many people as a measure of radicalism was not a major problem at the time. The problem is that continued lack of interest in the electoral arena on the part of the left has meant abandoning that arena to the right. Since the late seventies the right has put a great deal of effort into electoral campaigns ranging from the local to the national level, and has become a major force in politics. Though the left has participated in local elections in many places, it has not been a significant factor in national politics, and it has not accomplished anything remotely compa-

able to the achievements of the right in any arena of politics.

In the late seventies and eighties, while the right was reappearing as a political force in the US, postmodernism was becoming a major influence in the academic left and Michel Foucault in particular was being widely read. Through the eighties and into the nineties 'Foucaultian theory,' a distillation of sometimes contradictory assertions drawn from his (actually much more complex) writings, was widely coming to be regarded as the intellectual framework for radicalism. One tenet of Foucaultian theory, summed up in Foucault's image of the panopticon from which a guard surveys the surrounding prison yard, and from which he is able to observe virtually every motion of every prisoner, is that the state is nothing but an instrument of surveillance and discipline. This implies that resistance consists of avoiding the gaze of the state and fleeing to the margins of society. Another tenet of Foucaultian theory is that power is diffused everywhere in society, infusing everyday life, the family, sexual relations.<sup>10</sup> In the late seventies and eighties many feminists, gays and lesbians were drawn to this perspective because it provided a theoretical basis for a radical critique of personal relations and culture, a justification for the path already being pursued by radical feminist and gay and lesbian organizations.

Foucaultian theory, however, did not merely extend politics to the local and the personal, it substituted these arenas for the state as the arena of radical politics. The Foucaultian equation of the state with disciplinary surveillance left no room for struggle in that arena and no possibility that people might need state services. This view of the state had something in common with the view held within the radical anti-nuclear movement of the late seventies and early eighties, that radicalism meant changing people's ideas, not seeking political power through the state. People who held this view rejected the conception of revolution as a seizure of state power, which had taken hold within the anti-war movement of the late sixties. But the conception of radicalism as operating mostly or entirely outside the arena of the state was linked to the cultural radicalism of the sixties.

In the nineties, the absence of a left presence in national electoral politics in the US has more to do with the left's habit of focussing elsewhere than with explicit arguments against entering the electoral arena. It is still possible to find arguments from the cultural left against electoral politics. **Amarpal Dhaliwal**, for instances, in an article in a collection of essays on Radical Democracy, condemns democracy as a 'modernist project,' liberalism as a strategy of inclusion aimed at silencing critics of racism, and the vote and other democratic rights as means of cementing state power." But most people on the left understand that liberal democracy is no longer the main problem, that the rightward tilt of mainstream politics

BARBARA EPSTEIN

has to be taken seriously. The problem is that the left has little in the way of a vocabulary or set of concepts for addressing this. The full title of the collection in which Dhaliwal's article appears is *Radical Democracy: Identity, Citizenship, and the State*. Despite the title, there is little discussion of the state; most of the articles focus on issues of identity, the construction of subjectivity, and cultural conflict.

The cultural radicalism of the movements of the sixties, which consisted of a range of critiques of prevailing culture and also of the radical culture (or more accurately, cultures) that were constructed within the movements, was a great strength of those movements. Much of the movements' moral authority came from their commitment to egalitarian values, and much of their appeal to young people had to do with the degree to which the movements themselves became alternative communities in which these values were put into practice. The cultural critique developed by the movements was at least as important and lasting an achievement as their more practical contributions to achieving voting rights for blacks in the South and ending the war. Liberal aims were so thoroughly intertwined with radical ideas, especially by the late sixties, that distinguishing between the two is a little artificial, but on the whole one can say that what was radical about these movements was their ideas: their social analysis, their vision, their attempts to realize that vision themselves. The movements of the sixties that lasted past the end of the war and went on to flourish were feminism, gay liberation, environmentalism—each of which, at least during the sixties, was primarily oriented toward cultural critique. The cultural radicalism of the sixties also had its problems. By the late sixties in large parts of the movement radicalism had become an end in itself. In the anti-war movement this led to an upward spiral of militancy and the adoption of revolutionary theories that were doomed to failure in the US, giving rise to sectarian battles and authoritarian behaviour. Through the movement as a whole it prompted tendencies to reject limits of all kinds because they were there, and an equation between radicalism and a separatism infused with hostility toward former and potential allies. Unfortunately the cultural radicalism of the nineties often has more in common with the weaknesses than the strengths of the cultural radicalism of the sixties.

Movement culture, both in the civil rights and the Northern student and anti-war movements, included an emphasis on authenticity, which meant putting aside dogmas and thinking for oneself, speaking honestly, relating to others with openness and trust. The equivocations of government officials and anti-Communist liberals unwilling to admit that there were social problems in US society or government policy contrasted sharply with the movements' eloquent protests against racism in the South and a

senseless war in Vietnam. The movements' emphasis on creating what in the civil rights movement was called 'beloved community,' a band of brothers and sisters committed to struggle for a better society and to each other, contrasted sharply with postwar middle class culture, with its materialism and its emphasis on social convention, its elevation of family life and the privacy of the home. These conceptions of authenticity and community had a good deal in common with some versions of anarchist thought. In early SDS, at least, Paul Goodman's *Communitas* was read widely, and anarchist conceptions of a society made up of small, self-governing communities were taken seriously. In the early sixties especially a large part of the appeal of the movements (or of 'the movement,' as it was gradually coming to be called) was that many people found it a better place to live than mainstream society. Movement people who had previously been isolated dissidents were glad to have found each other. On the whole people listened to each other with respect, and treated each other with more care than they were likely to find outside the movement.

Over the course of the sixties frustration and anger grew and began to erode or at least transform the idealism of the early period. In the South this partly had to do with the **difficulty** of maintaining non-violence, or passive resistance, in the face of continued violent assaults and the failure of the federal authorities to provide much help. In the second half of the sixties the tone of the movement in both the North and the South was changed by the war, which enraged movement activists as well as increasing numbers of young people generally. For many in the movement the context of war undermined the appeal of non-violence, replacing it with a pursuit of militance. The rapid influx of angry opponents of the war into SDS and the movement generally changed the tone of movement culture, giving it a harsher quality, a rebelliousness that involved rejecting conventional limits, loosening sexual constraints and taking the lid off anger.

By the late sixties a logic had taken hold within the anti-war movement that measured commitment to ending the war in terms of an escalating standard of militancy. Demonstrations became occasions for skirmishes with police and there was increasing talk of violence. To the extent that this was guided by strategy rather than emotions, the idea was to force the repressive apparatus of the state to show its true character (as in provocations designed to force 'pigs' to act like pigs), and also to create enough disruption to force the government to end the war. The disadvantage of this approach was that it tended to isolate the radical anti-war youth movement from other sectors of the population, and it also drove away some young people. But by the late sixties there were enough students and young people angry enough about the war to give escalating militance a mass base.

The escalation of tactics that took place in the late sixties rested on the

widespread but largely unexamined assumption that revolution was possible and could be brought about by finding the right revolutionary theory and applying it vigorously enough. There was little discussion of how this revolution would actually take place, what the post-revolutionary society would look like, or why anyone should expect that the majority of the US population would support a revolution. Rigid and dogmatic versions of Marxism circulated; vanguard parties were formed; many people looked to revolutions in the Third World as models to be imposed on the US, overlooking the authoritarian elements of those models, and ignoring the fact that the same approaches might not work in an industrialized liberal democracy. SDS, the centre of the anti-war movement, was taken over and destroyed by debates between factions, in effect sects, putting forward equally implausible revolutionary scenarios.

There were many people in the anti-war movement who had no interest in the fantasies of armed struggle and seizure of state power that had swept so much of the movement's leadership. This conception of revolution had little appeal in the emerging women's movement or in the counter-cultural left. But the idea that some kind of revolution was possible was part of a broader belief, or at least hope, that the movement could accomplish whatever it wanted, that external constraints did not really matter, a fantasy summed up in the slogan of May '68, 'all power to the imagination.' Throughout the movement, if one doubted that a radical transformation of society was likely any time soon one was likely to keep quiet about it, because saying such a thing was tantamount to distancing oneself from radical politics.

The rapid decline of the left after the war came as a shock to many people who had expected that it would remain strong and would turn its attention to issues of domestic social justice. The movement declined quickly when there was no longer a war to hold it together partly because of the recession of 1973, which undermined the youth culture that had sustained the movement. The youth culture and the movement had been sustained by low rents, low prices, the ease of obtaining and supporting oneself on part-time work, and confidence that one could go back to school or resume a career. The movement had also been weakened from within in its last years, partly by the sectarianism and fantasies of violence that had taken hold in the anti-war movement and partly by the growing equation of radicalism with a separatism that was laced with hostility to outsiders.

The turn toward separatism began in the civil rights movement. In 1966 the Student Nonviolent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC) expelled whites, urging them to return to their own communities and organize there. SNCC also renounced non-violence and soon after adopted the slogan of Black Power. There were reasons for blacks to exclude whites. Whites who joined the movement were mostly from the North, middle class, and

college educated, and they could easily dominate discussions in the movement and intimidate the poor blacks whom the movement wanted most to reach. The fact that most whites could return to lives distant from the conditions that faced Southern blacks at times affected the roles they played in the movement. There were good arguments for an exclusively black organization. But while it would have been one thing to have created such an organization from the outset, expelling whites already there, and urging them to leave the movement and return to their own communities, had quite different implications. The effect of this decision, along with the renunciation of non-violence and the shift to Black Power was to weaken or destroy ties with white organizations that supported civil rights and with black organizations that wanted to maintain those alliances. These changes isolated SNCC and led to its destruction: in the rural South a black movement could not survive without support from the black church and the black community generally. But many young black radicals in the North adopted the slogan of Black Power and, to one degree or another, the separatist stance associated with it.<sup>12</sup>

Radical feminism also took a separatist stance. As in the civil rights movement there were good reasons for women to organize separately from men. Life in the anti-war movement had become very difficult for women, and for some men; in the movement climate of the late sixties men with streaks of authoritarianism tended to rise to leadership. When women began to raise the issue of women's rights, most men in both the civil rights and the anti-war movement were quite resistant. It did not seem likely that a feminist politics could be developed in these arenas. But as in the civil rights movement, feminist separatism meant not just organizational autonomy but suspicion and hostility, not just the formation of organizations for women only but a conception of radicalism that involved attenuating or breaking ties with men. A rhetoric took hold that described men as the enemy. Women who openly disagreed were likely to be seen as supporters of the patriarchy; women who were in relationships with men often found it easiest to belittle their importance." For heterosexual women, at least, a separatism laced with hostility to men was at best a half-truth, a partial or temporary stance.

The equation of radicalism with separatism first by blacks and then by women more or less sealed the link between the two. In the seventies and eighties identity politics largely took over the realm of progressive politics, meaning a politics organized around claims based on identity by race, gender, sexual orientation, and a tendency to reinforce such identities by emphasizing differences with other groups. In this sense identity politics is something new. The civil rights movement was not an example of identity politics; its goal was racial equality, not the assertion of black identity or the redefinition of black culture, though both took place as side effects of

the struggle for equality. The women's movement can be seen as transitional, between an older politics in which identity itself tended not to be in question and movements based on particular groups would be likely to seek alliances, and a newer politics in which the need to assert identity, and defend its boundaries, is more salient, and often discourages alliances.

The cultural politics of the left in the nineties echoes aspects of the cultural radicalism of the sixties that least deserve to be emulated, and which, in the context of the nineties, tend to isolate the left. In the academic left, particularly in Cultural Studies and elsewhere in the humanities, radical politics is mostly understood in terms of a cultural radicalism, for which postmodernism, or more specifically the poststructuralist theory by which it is informed, is the intellectual basis. In the early eighties the term 'postmodernism' was widely used to refer to what was at that time a relatively new literature that pointed to widespread changes in culture and at times tried to connect these to changes in society. But the term came to be seen as not very useful because it covered too much: trends in popular culture, avant-garde art and architecture, literature that criticized, commented on, celebrated, or showed the influence of these trends. The term poststructuralism refers more specifically to a set of theories that originated in France in the sixties which address issues of language, culture and society.

The association of poststructuralism with political radicalism is based on the poststructuralist emphasis on flux, instability, fragmentation, and its critical stance toward everything it addresses: the social order, prevailing culture, existing theory. Poststructuralism's association with political radicalism also has to do with its origins with a group of French intellectuals who were associated with the radical student movement of the '60s and tended to see May '68 as a formative moment in their intellectual and political development. Poststructuralism does express many aspects of the ethos of May '68: its anti-authoritarianism, its rejection of Marxism, its celebration of the imagination, its resistance to all constraints or denial of their existence. As the influence of poststructuralism has faded in France, it has been taken up by intellectuals in the US who are attracted to this stance and also to the fact that it places language, discourse, culture at the centre of social analysis.

The problem with equating poststructuralism with political radicalism is that poststructuralism's stance of across-the-board criticism of all claims and all values leaves it without any set of values against which existing society might be measured or which might provide the basis for a vision of a better society. Poststructuralism puts forward an extreme epistemological scepticism according to which, because our perceptions of reality are filtered through our categories of understanding, we cannot attain any accurate, reliable knowledge of any reality, and we have no basis for

judging alternative accounts. If one takes this seriously one cannot claim that the left's view of society has any greater validity than that of the right. The poststructuralist campaign against 'essentialism,' meaning the belief that things, beings, social or natural processes or relations, contain any inherent qualities which might resist being recast by human discourse, pushes poststructuralism and the academic world guided by it toward a fascination with language and interpretation and a disinterest in reality, natural or social. Poststructuralism's stance of suspicion toward all values discourages efforts to define a progressive set of values and remove any basis for questioning or attempting to check the marketplace values that are invading academia generally. In the sixties cultural radicalism was tied to movements engaged in social struggles and also had its feet solidly planted in a set of social values. In the nineties radicalism might have a wider appeal if it included an essentialist component of this sort.

When movements are too weak to bring about the social changes that they want, or find themselves too isolated to even try, they are often tempted to retreat to the arena where they do have some power, and conduct campaigns for correct attitudes among their own memberships or constituencies. In the late sixties, when the unrealistic goal of revolution took hold within the anti-war movement, sects proliferated and discussion within the movement as a whole took on a strongly sectarian flavour. Over the last decade or so a different kind of sectarianism has become widespread in left and progressive circles. In the absence of a movement that is capable of effectively challenging racism, sexism, and other forms of injustice opposed by the left, it is easy to turn to a symbolic or vicarious politics that consists of hunting for bad attitudes and rooting them out in an arena where one has some influence, which means among others who are also on the left. Campaigns to police language stand in for more substantial efforts throughout the left; this accords with views of language and discourse as the central concerns of radical politics. Such campaigns impede free discussion, promote intellectual conformity, and drive people away from the left. Authoritarianism is always a danger in social movements, and the record of twentieth century revolutions shows that left authoritarianism can become a very serious problem when movements of the left gain power. The best antidote is combatting authoritarianism on the basis of democratic values, including freedom of speech. This again requires a radical culture with a streak of essentialism, a left willing to assert and insist upon a set of values.

The left does best when it is connected to a popular movement, or a set of popular movements, with clear **agendas**. In this context the left can provide a social analysis and articulate the social vision and set of values that make it possible to formulate strategy and to develop a progressive culture. The

## BARBARA EPSTEIN

left is also much more likely to revise outdated views when it is connected to popular movements than when it is not. The social analysis and cultural views of the left were developed in important ways in the thirties and transformed in the sixties. In periods in which the left is disconnected from popular movements there is the danger that left analysis will remain static while society changes.

There is no mass movement with a clear agenda today, and the left cannot wish one into existence. There are some hopeful efforts, projects which deserve attention from the left, such as efforts to form a progressive third party by groups such as the New Party, and the signs of a possible revival of labour, where there are the beginnings of a campaign to organize the unorganized, and overtures to left organizations and left intellectuals to contribute their skills. But these are still no more than signs of hope. Fundamentally the left in the US is in the anomalous position of having become mostly an intellectual arena with stronger ties to movements of the past than to any in the present. Under these circumstances it seems like a good idea to take a careful look at how that legacy is being cast, what aspects of it might be most helpful to left politics in the present.

### NOTES

1. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list of publications that are important within the left. I have left out journals with particular foci (such as those concerned with political economy, in particular *URPE Review* and *Dollars and Sense*), despite their contributions to left analysis, because of their specialization. However my point holds here too: interest in left political economy is not growing.
2. In relation to the women's movement of the sixties terminology poses some problems. What I am calling the radical wing of the women's movement contained two tendencies, one socialist feminist, the other calling itself radical feminist. Radical feminists put gender first, and either did not accept the class analysis of the socialist feminists or saw class as less important than gender. Socialist feminists and radical feminists often had links to or at least histories of involvement in the civil rights and/or anti-war movements. Both were quite distant from the liberal feminist National Organization for Women, which had been organized by somewhat older, professional women associated with the Democratic Party. Women in what I am calling the radical wing of the women's movement generally referred to this wing of feminism as 'the women's movement.' Elsewhere in this piece I use this term myself. The same problem exists in describing the movements of the sixties, which by the end of the decade had become sufficiently intertwined that many people spoke of 'the movement.' Though there were liberal organizations that addressed the same issues that young radicals were concerned with, these were not usually part of what people meant by 'the movement.'
3. Giovanni Arrighi describes the history of capitalism in terms of successive waves of globalization in *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Times* (London, Verso, 1994).
4. Clayborne Carson describes this conflict and its consequences for the civil rights movement in *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1981).
5. Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York, Bantam, 1987), ch. 14, 'The Crunch.'

## THE SOCIALIST REGISTER 1997

6. Carl Oglesby 'Trapped in a System,' *The New Left: A Documentary History*, ed. Massimo **Teodori** (New York, **Bobbs-Merrill**, 1969), pp. 183-188.
7. James Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Re-interpretation of American History, 1900-1916* (New York, Free Press of **Glencoe**, 1963).
8. James Weinstein, *The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State, 1900-1918* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1968).
9. Herbert **Marcuse**, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston, **Beacon** Press, 1964).
10. The identification of the state with of surveillance, discipline, and repression, and the image of the panopticon, can be found in Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York, Vintage, 1979), and the conception of power as diffused through society and resistance as necessarily local, especially from Foucault's *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction* (New York, Random House, 1978), though this idea can be found elsewhere in Foucault's work as well.
11. **Amarpal K. Dhaliwal**, 'Can the Subaltern Vote? Radical Democracy, Discourses of Representation and Rights, and Questions of Race,' in *Radical Democracy: Identity, Citizenship, and the State*, ed. David Trend (New York, Routledge, 1996), pp. 44, 52.
12. For an account of the decision to expel whites from SNCC, the political shift associated with it, and the impact of this on SNCC, see Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 60s* (Cambridge, **Harvard** University Press, 1981). For the subsequent history of Black Power, see Manning **Marable**, *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990* (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi), pp. 84-119.
13. For an account of the internal culture of radical feminism, see Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989).