

Campus Activism Today – Some Lessons from Students for a Democratic Society

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In a previous essay published in *Cultural Logic* (2013) and in *Works and Days* (2013), *SDS, the 1960's and Education for Revolution*, a short narrative analysis was presented describing and explaining some of the reasons for the successes and weaknesses in the 1960's campus antiwar movement and specifically Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Rather than repeat much of that, readers are strongly encouraged to read that essay for more background.

For tens of thousands, perhaps a hundred thousand or more, young people, the basic framework of SDS from 1965-1969 provided the most effective approach to building a grassroots movement against the Vietnam War, against racist oppression and for a society where economic justice was promoted and cultural repression was eliminated. There were many student-youth organizations at that time – a proliferation of socialist and communist groups and a number of very well-known coalition organizations. There were also many black and latino organizations, many of which organized massive, heroic activities. The scope of this discussion is limited to those campus organizations mainly filled with “white” students only because the anti-war/anti-racist movement was generally segregated and because it would be presumptuous of me to write about situations about which I'm not that familiar.

There were several characteristics distinctive to SDS during that period. Unlike coalitions that were generally organized to mobilize people for a single event or series of events, generally around single issues, SDS was multi-issue and especially important, it was a *membership organization that worked to involved grassroots students into the structure of the organization* in order to build a lasting, grassroots movement. Most of the coalitions, which may have been useful for bringing together large demonstrations, nevertheless, did not have the outlook of building on-going membership organizations, with regular meetings that involved rank-and-file students in a wide range of activities for the purpose of building an organization and a movement that would deepen the students' commitment to keep working for social justice after they left school. Some of the coalitions were overly preoccupied with getting lists of the names of organization sponsors of the events rather than doing the grassroots organizing to win over rank-and-file folks and bring them to events and into the movement on a long term basis. Taken to the extreme, and I'm sure I'm not the only one who experienced this, there were even occasional demonstrations that had more sponsors listed on the bottom of the leaflet than there were people attending the event!

Intertwined with this grassroots approach was the *multi-issue outlook*. Students could come to the organization with a wide range of concerns – anti-war, of course, but also exposing the universities' links to the CIA, or racially biased admission policies, or defending a professor

whose work might have offended cultural conservatives, or opposing imperialist actions in other countries, or opposing police brutality in the community, or supporting labor strikes. This had the dual benefit of *involving more people on the basis of social justice issues that genuinely touched them*, which made their/our connection to the movement more organic. Liberal, radical, socialist, communist, anarchist, pacifist or just non-political but interested in social justice, this multi-issue approach offered a vehicle to work together with others on common interests. Furthermore, the multi-issue strategy helped build the understanding that capitalist practices were the common link to all these oppressions and therefore, a movement needed a comprehensive strategy to build a lasting movement. The main weakness at the time was a segregation within the movement. While perhaps the most powerful struggle, San Francisco State, and another very important struggle at City University of New York, did have a strong multiracial component, the reality was that the movement nationally was weakened exactly because in most places there may have been coalitions between black and white students but there wasn't really the deep lasting grassroots unity.

Just a little about my background to give some sense of perspective. It started with four years at the University of Wisconsin Madison involved with the Committee to End the War in Vietnam, the Wisconsin Draft Resistance Union and various pro-civil rights organizations. After graduating I was attracted to SDS specifically because of its grassroots multiracial approach. I moved to Boston and took an unpaid job traveling first around New England and later the Midwest and the South to recruit people to join SDS and build into a national organization. There were many independent antiwar committees and the prospect of uniting them all into one mass membership organization seem to hold great potential for helping to end the war and build the movement for social justice.

Of course much of that was shattered when SDS split in 1969 and the "Weathermen" group (Ayers/Dohrn) and other "RYM" allies (Klonsky/ Coleman/Davidson/Avakian), the media, and the government did an effective job demoralizing students and making them feel powerless. Imagine if just a few months later there had been the massive nationwide SDS linking together the tsunami of protests that took place on college campuses after the invasion of Cambodia and the Kent State/Jackson State murders by the National Guard and police. But since the Weathermen destroyed all the membership files, SDS as it had existed was a much smaller, less effective force during that important time.

After five years of working with SDS and in various other community organizations some of my friends said to me: *"You need to get a real job if you want to be an effective organizer. Otherwise you will end up as a bureaucrat. You can't just be a radical. You have to be a radical something. A radical teacher, social worker, factory worker, taxi driver, caseworker -- something but not just a radical."*

"I ain't gonna become a bureaucrat," I said. *"I don't sit behind a desk. I'm out among people all day long."*

"That may be true," said my friends, *"but you spend almost all your time talking to other radicals and leftists and that can give you a distorted view of the world and make you a less effective organizer. You like to talk a lot, why don't you become a college teacher?"*

“Not a college teacher,” I said.

“Well then maybe a lawyer. The movement needs lawyers. You might be good at that,” they said.

“Hell I’d rather be a professor than a lawyer,” I said. I then put in for all sorts of jobs, office jobs working in the state unemployment office where they had a strong AFSCME the union, other social work type jobs, and graduate school just for the hell of it. Graduate school accepted me much to my surprise on a conditional basis and then later offered some funding. So I started graduate school at the University of Illinois Chicago knowing full well I would never finish. I was involved in some protest activities there then transferred to Northwestern University, and somehow did finish. The Sociology Department and the Center for Urban Affairs at Northwestern encouraged critical thinking and combined solid education with a willingness to challenge conventional wisdom. Somehow was able to complete my PhD. I was committed to the Chicago area and when a position opened up at Purdue University Calumet in Hammond, just twenty five miles from downtown Chicago, I jumped at the chance. The campus was a mainly commuter campus, average age 26 or so, mostly part-time students, not much campus life with virtually none of the political activism one might find at an urban school or major residential campus.

Hammond is in the Rust Belt, sandwiched between the South Side of Chicago and Gary, Indiana. Within fifteen miles of campus, there were over 60,000 steelworkers and their families and Purdue Calumet was one of only two public universities in the area. I figured with all these working-class students, I would be able to organize a take-over of the factories and totally transform US society within about two or three weeks. It’s taken a little longer. Over the next twenty years, perhaps seventy percent of those jobs were lost, Gary Indiana and East Chicago, Indiana - both major steel producing towns - lost over half their population. Hammond lost about a third. My emphasis for the first two decades combined activism on campus and the community and within a few professional organizations including some scholarship. A book on Marxist sociology *“Crisis and Change”* (1991,2011) was co-authored with Peter Knapp, and I served as chair of the Section on Marxist Sociology of the American Sociological Association and of the Division on Class, Poverty, and Inequality of the Society for the Study of Social Problems as well as activity within the Association for Humanist Sociology and on several internet lists, including REVS, a listserv I set up involving hundreds of people from dozens of countries dealing with Race-Religious-Ethnonationalist Violence. But it was activism on behalf of social justice, anti-racism, anti-imperialism, pro-working class interests that drove my academic career rather than the other way around. There were lots of issues dealing with racial discrimination on campus and in the community but building a lasting organization on campus was not so easy partly because it was a commuter campus and partly because my approach was somewhat limited.

In 2002 I reoriented my approach somewhat reflecting back on what made SDS so effective and also what some of its major weaknesses were, including especially the racial-ethnic segregation. I met with some students and we decided to help develop an ongoing lasting multi-issue campus organization.

All the good words were taken by other groups around the USA, so they settled on Social Justice Club – not too radical, not too liberal, open-ended enough to be welcoming to students of a variety of political philosophies who wanted to make the world a more just place. I did not want to control the organization because people learn to become effective leaders by leading and not by being told what to do by some authority figure. I did propose two core principles.

The first was that it did have to be open, even *welcoming* to students of a variety of political philosophies. For example, while I did not support Democratic Party, if an individual student in the organization want to say something supportive of a Democratic Party politician, that student should not be made to feel that he or she was somehow an outsider. There could and should be open political debate about these questions, but in a way that was neither hostile nor politely condescending but rather respecting the fact that the student involved was genuinely committed to working for social justice. Tied into this was the perspective of combining some sharp protest-oriented activities with community service activities. The community service activities were not meant to be a kind of bribe to make people “like” the organization; historically some left organizations had that outlook. On the contrary, the purpose was to provide genuine service as well as to unite with people around common issues of concern and demonstrate that this is what radical activists do. These “reform type campaigns” help illuminate and expose the contradictions and hypocrisy of the system.

The second principle was that the organization had to be multiracial-multiethnic in both the membership of the leadership. There was and is a proliferation of black and latino-oriented organizations, and most of the other “left/progressive” organizations in the US primarily consist white students. If this somehow became a mirror of one of those many “white progressive student organizations” it would be replicating the errors of the past. This campus in particular was over 25% black and latino, and a social justice organization must reflect and encompass and take significant leadership from the folks who in general bear the brunt of capitalist injustice and who also would therefore have the experience and the wisdom to contribute importantly to the leadership of the movement. I was never the faculty advisor to the organization; other professors were the official sponsors.

The very first campaign that SJC engaged in was blood testing to try to find a bone marrow match for a young black child in Chicago. While this was a far cry from my early days of shutting down college campuses and battling the police, it was very important both in building unity and providing the opportunity to discuss racism in health care and racism in society in general. Shortly after that the US military invaded Iraq/Afghanistan and that became one of the central issues for the group on campus. Dozens of students from this previously sleepy apolitical commuter campus went with SJC to downtown Chicago to join in a huge protest against the war and witnessed arrogance, misconduct and brutality by the police. In the coming years there were teach-ins on campus, protests against the CIA and military recruitment on campus, demonstrations in the community, and bus trips to Washington and New York involving hundreds of participants from the campus. There was also participation in the massive pro-immigrant movement in the middle 2000’s and work on campus educating about the issues of imperialism, labor exploitation and racism that underlies the anti-immigrant policies.

SJC has made a specific priority the building of grassroots, multi-racial unity, in contrast to either the “color blind” racism of some white groups, or its twin, the acceptance of segregation

with the phony excuse of “*white people may be fit to be ‘allies’ but are not fit to work closely with black people*”—a convenient way for timid white folks to avoid deep interpersonal relationships and actual struggle with black students. SJC brought white and latino students, as well as, obviously, black students, into the heart of the black community in Gary to protest the police murder of a high school student, and those protests kept the issue alive for over a year. When another black youth was murdered in his home by police in Calumet City, Illinois, SJC was again involved, again bringing a multi-racial group and working with the family. SJC also brought white and black students, as well as, obviously, latino students to the largely latino demonstrations in support of immigration rights. This approach had a profound effect on the members of SJC as well as others in the community who were often surprised and pleased to see this kind of genuine sincere grassroots multiracial unity. While the SJC sometimes had alliances with other campus groups, especially the Black Student Union, it was always significantly multi-racial itself – it never became the so-called “white” group that “allies” with black and latino groups, as is the case on some other campuses.

There were numerous protests against the KKK and neo-Nazis and major involvement in the multi-ethnic protests against Maurice Eisenstein, an extremist professor who stated in class that Muslims never contributed anything to world “society”(sic!) except for raping four year old children. (*Look that up on YouTube...Eisenstein-Purdue, especially “Audio 2.”*)

There was strike support – the Gary teachers’ strike, the massive, important Chicago teachers’ strike, Republic Windows sit-in, participation in the huge labor rights protests in Madison, Wisconsin and solidarity trips to Jena, Louisiana and Ferguson, Missouri in opposition to racist violence and support for prisoners’ rights.

Additionally there were campaigns opposing imperialism including a variety of issues ranging from Coca-Cola’s alliance with death squads in Latin America to sweatshops around the world, opposition to Israeli government suppression of Palestinians and explaining the connection between the HIV-AIDS epidemic and the combination of capitalist globalization, sexist exploitation of females and the lack of decent health care for low income people around the world. And there were “smaller” issues, such as opposing the elitist way the Honors College was run on campus.

Many of these campaigns are fairly typical of “left/progressive/radical” type campus organizations. The two principles mentioned earlier is what were especially important. The absolute determination to keep the organization multi-racial (at various times, “white” students were numerically the minority) required the kind of positive affirmative action that takes into account the special needs of various folks without being condescending – Marx’ “to each according to need.” If black, latino, or working class students in general, for that matter, can’t attend so many meetings because of transportation problems, the rest of the group should find a way to make that happen, rather than just give in to capitalist oppression and say: “*Gee, I wonder why ‘they’ don’t seem as interested in coming to meetings.*” It is not charity – it is sisters and brothers united in equal solidarity assisting sisters and brothers. It is too easy to give in to “color blind racism” and then to pretend to compensate by promoting segregation under the cover of “self-determination.” And there were social events, picnics, house parties, poetry slams on campus, bowling!, trips to state parks and to museums in Chicago and lots of one-to-one discussions on matters political and personal (which, of course, is political.)

The community service activities were also especially important and perhaps unusual for a “left/progressive/social justice” type of campus group. They provided the opportunity for students to build solidarity with each other, to understand that building a movement for social justice involves real people and real issues and not just debating words or shouting slogans, and to provide a way to show how the system continues to fail to meet the needs of people. In addition to the bone marrow match campaign mentioned above, one of the most important campaigns was a several month long campaign collecting and cleaning a huge amount of clothing sent through charitable organizations to low income people in other countries. Many students spent many hours working together, talking personal and political, as they worked to make lives better for others. SJC members also went to New Orleans to help with clean up and rebuilding after the defective levees broke in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and did similar work locally when a major flood in 2009 damaged dozens of homes in the nearby towns of Gary and Munster.

There was also participation with other organizations on more typical food and clothing drives, cell phone collections, and other products for food banks, battered women shelters, and homeless facilities and a concert to raise money for Haiti earthquake victims. One other very important result of the community service activities has been that it created a “floor” below which the activities could not sink. During more “quiet” periods, perhaps protest in the community was at a lull, or the weather was bad and general political climate on campus on campus was somewhat passive, there would still be some consistent activities which can keep the momentum of the group moving forward. An unintended side benefit of this approach has been that it often disoriented the university officials. Even as they were investigating SJC for a protest on campus, the main university web page was praising SJC for its community work!

The net effect of all this had been an organization that has thrived for over thirteen years. Of course there are ups and downs—slower periods, faster periods. But it has sustained itself by focusing on activities and actions and utilizing these experiences as schools that illuminate and expose the contradictions in society. It is too easy to fall into the common false dichotomy trap on either being so immersed in the reform issues that one never struggles politically for fear of creating disunity or the opposite one-sided mistake of simply throwing words at people, words with perhaps “impeccable” logic, but words that do not connect to the life experiences of people. Actually what these opposite mistakes have in common is that they both avoid engaging people in a deep, patient way and dealing with the discomfort that comes with honest political struggle. It is easier to just get along with people or to assert some philosophy and then walk away when someone does not respond favorably immediately. But honest patient political debate in the context of working together learning about how the system works in learning when and how to trust others creates lasting results. In many parts of the world there is a significant drop off of activism when students leave the campus and face the reality of family finances and jobs. This is especially true because on campuses many students have dozens of hours each week to spend debating and discussing politics but when someone only has half hour or hour lunch break on a job it requires a whole readjustment of how to function. Furthermore the campus concentrates activists where it is easy for them to interact with each other and build deeper relationships. Many of the jobs available today are often much more isolated than one might experience as a college student. Nevertheless, SJC has been somewhat effective in hanging onto the relationships and connections among those students after they leave the campus. A significant number have carried on social justice work in public schools, community groups, hospitals, and other work

places. This is probably at least somewhat the consequence of having patient long-term rather than simply trying to mobilize people for one big action every so often.

As the faculty member I tried to be very aware of how I related to the students. There are some instances, for example forums on campus, where I might take a strong public position. But in general I tried to not smother the students, dominate the meetings, or overly influence them to follow my ideas. In the classroom, of course I put forward my political perspectives. Those who claim to insist on political neutrality in the classroom either live in a naïve world of illusion or are dishonest. All courses, all instructors, put forward one or another perspective. When conservatives complain that critics of capitalism should not express political ideas in the classroom, do they also insist that all of the pro-business, pro-capitalist, pro-individualist, pro-patriotism, pro-government courses devote fifty percent of their time taking the contrary position? Of course not.

What is crucial is that the instructors never use the power granted to them by the institution to reward or punish students based on the students' personal – political outlook. There are gray areas, of course. If a student wants to insist that black people are biologically intellectually inferior to white people, an instructor certainly has the right to deem such conclusions as incompetent. But the instructor must be very careful to confine the evaluation/grade to the quality of the student's work. Similarly in a classroom there has to be an attitude where students are free to express their opinions as long as they are not directly or indirectly abusing others based on ascribed characteristics. And even if a student does say something racist or sexist, it is more effective to explore the contradiction in the student's thinking than to simply SLAM the student down with a torrent of words --- although it is important to make clear in a strong way that while good people with bad ideas should be tolerated, the bad ideas themselves should not be tolerated. I generally try to utilize the "Socratic Method" (dialectical method) of posing abstract questions and then exploring the contradictions in our thinking as a way to motivate students to deeply engage the material.

Out-of-classroom experiences can be important, but never, ever, ever "bribing" students to participate in an out-of-classroom or off-campus activity, but rather asking them to choose various forms of extra assignments, of diverse political perspectives, as a way to have extra-classroom experiences illuminate the classroom discussions. Students get no "points" for participating in any activity, but if a student observes (whether participating or not) an activity and writes a paper, that might be part of the course grade. But again if an instructor teaching a sociology course offers students the opportunity to observe an anti-war demonstration, for example, for some course credit, students also given to observe (whether participating or not) an activity that reflects a conservative perspective.

With all this, there were a million mistakes. Hopefully, some of today's young campus activists can find some useful insights in this short essay. The purpose of writing this was not to tell of "my personal journey" or how great I supposedly am. It also was not meant to be a simple description of one group's history on a campus. The examples were meant to illustrate how some of the lessons of SDS in the 1960's – the successes and the weaknesses – could be applied today. And if these could be done with some success on a commuter campus in Indiana, they could be done anywhere!



Since 1997

ISSN 1097-3087

<http://clogic.eserver.org/>

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