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A LECTURE DELIVERED AT THE JOHANNESBURG COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

student revolt

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I SUPPOSE TO TALK to an audience primarily composed of students if one is a professor, about student revolt, is like talking about hot dinners to an audience of cannibals. So I am going to steer a somewhat tricky and erratic course between support and opposition.

What I shall say this morning is, first of all, to try and distinguish student revolt in general from what I think is probably student revolt properly speaking. Then to try to examine some of the explanations which have been put forward for the causes of the world-wide movement of ideas among students and, ultimately, to suggest some ideas of my own.

Types of student revolt

I would distinguish very much the movement of students in what one might euphemistically call a revolting direction, between that is, those movements which are, so to speak, determined by and for student purposes, and those which have purposes quite different from those of the students proper. Now, if I may, I will take an example of revolt in general. We have, I think, many examples of student activism being devoted to causes outside the narrow causes of student interests, properly speaking. For example, in the Soviet Union or in Egypt, and in many other countries, students may well be brought out to demonstrate in the streets, usually to burn down the American Embassy, at the express suggestion of the government concerned. This is not something that we are used to, I think, in the Western world, but, historically speaking, it has been a prominent technique of mass control by authoritarian or revolutionary regimes.

An opposite case, but one which is, of course, parallel to it, is when the students are brought out in support of a popular movement of revolt against the government or the oppressive authorities. This is usually the case in Latin America and was, of course, the case in the heroic student movement in Czechoslovakia in 1967 and 1968. Now I think this movement in support of a popular movement against an oppressive government has been historically the major single form of student activism. It has been prominent in colonial situations, for example in India before 1947, or in Ghana at the time of the overthrow of Nkrumah's dictatorial regime. Again I would not think that student revolt in this particular context is worth much attention by itself in the present context because the focus of attention naturally would be the revolutionary movement as a whole in the country concerned, in which students would be taking part just as ordinary, committed people.

A third case of what I had in mind that is not student revolt properly speaking, is when the students or groups of students come out in support, not so much of a popular movement to overthrow the government, as in support of a particular political movement. One has in mind, for example, the Fascist students who came out in support of Mussolini's "march" — or motorcade — on Rome in 1922, or the Communist students who came out in support of the Communist coup d'état in Prague in 1948. Here again I think the students are not acting, so to speak, as students proper. They are acting in just the same way as any other members of supporters of a political organisation would do if the political organisation decides to proceed to achieve its ends by popular demonstrations and other techniques. Student movements of this kind have a central characteristic in that they are organised and sometimes led as part of a wider movement, either a movement organised by the government, a popular movement against the government, or a narrower violent political attempt to overthrow the government.

I would have thought that the characteristic of the student revolt that we have seen in the 1960s and early 1970s is that it has not

usually taken this particular form, and that a new and much more important form of student revolt has emerged. I am not denying for one conceivable moment that the student movements which have emerged in the 1960s and early 1970s can be used in these ways by particular people whose concern is not, so to speak, with the interests of the students, but with a wider aim, usually that of the overthrow of the government. This is, after all, characteristic of any kind of organisation. If you set up an organisation for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, I suppose it **could** be penetrated by Communists or Fascists. But I would have thought that it would be unwise to assume that most of the student movements in the Western world in the last few years have been of this kind, that they have been used by other people in support of wider and more profoundly political purposes. There is some evidence, of course, of the penetration of the student movement by other groups, but I would have thought that the striking thing to the dispassionate observer, however much one might be opposed to the student movements, is how little in fact the appear to have been penertated by outside bodies.

What I have been talking about, the kind of student revolt that I am not primarily concerned with this morning, is circumstances in which the students are acting and must be considered as on a par with any other group of citizens which decides to proceed by "unconstitutional" means. I want to turn, then, to a different category, the category which I think is what concerns us here, this morning, the student movements proper. The sort of student movement proper that I have in mind is the Berkeley troubles which began primarily in the autumn of 1965, the Prague student movement of 1967, the events of May, 1968, in Paris and in Western Germany, the events in 1969 and 1970 in Germany and in Japan and the widespread sporadic outbreaks which have been taking place in Western Europe and North America this year, 1971. Here I think we have a whole series of questions to ask, because there is now an extensive volume of instant literature, of rapidly written sociology, attempting to explain the nature and causes of the student revolt, and the central issues which have been raised by the analysts of this revolt take the following form. The first and major question which has been raised by Marxist scholars is whether or not the students should be considered as a class, as a group with social roots similar to the social roots of the middle-class or of the working class who therefore act (autonomously as it were) in their own interest, or whether, as the orthodox Marxists theorists would argue, the students are not in any sense a class. This view I shall hope to demonstrate, is the central theoretical issue in Europe and it does have profound implications for one's diagnosis of the way that the thing works. But before I come on to this central question, I want to try, if I may, to distinguish both the different characteristics of the revolt and the different explanations (at a relatively superficial level) that have been put forward for it.

The revolt has taken a number of forms, ranging from simple demands put forward in a timorous and extremely respectable manner, to movements of violence, reaching in the case of Japan to murder and in the United States and some European countries to arson and destruction of property and wounding of people. It has also been characterised in some countries, of which Australia is an example, by being confined, pretty severely, to the campus — sit-ins, for example at Monash University in Melbourne, have become almost a ritual characteristic of that university at the moment. In France, however, it took the form of the student body pouring into the streets and attempting to take over the city as in Paris in May, 1968. In other words when we talk about student revolts we must remember that we are talking about a very wide spectrum of manifestations of non-traditional behaviour.

Reasons for student revolt

Having looked at what the students were saying they were revolting about, some people have therefore attempted to characterise the student manifestations by putting forward explanations of what the students were really trying to say. If I may I would like to enumerate some of the things the students have said and some of the things the people have thought that the students have said. Freud and his followers have been an immense help to people who write about students, because if a student says that he loves

his mother, Freud has taught us that that means that you hate her, so therefore if the students say that they are revolting about the odious conditions in their universities, it is perfectly simple to explain that that is part of adolescent revolt.

The first explanation that the students have put forward for their restlessness, has been the fact that enormous numbers of students have been poured into existing educational facilities without a commensurate expansion of those facilities, with the consequence that there has been gross overcrowding and a severe fall in standards. There is no doubt whatever that this has been characteristic of almost all the ex-colonial higher education institutions and certainly of the French, German and Italian universities. The Sorbonne, which was designed for about 5 000 students, reached 110 000 students with very little extra building and the West German universities were in much the same case. So, therefore, there is no doubt at all that many of the original sources of student protest and many of the immediate causes at the moment are the fact that the conditions which have been offered to the students are worse than those that had been offered to their parents, and appeared to be deteriorating. This has been interpreted, however, not so much as a direct respons to bad conditions, as a consequence of the huge increase in the number of students, which has been the chief characteristic of the post-war world — the number of students has risen in many countries by a factor of 10, in some countries by more than that number. It has been said, first of all, that there is a kind of law that the more people you get, the more likely they are to be restless, and furthermore, that this large number of students includes a substantial group, perhaps a majority, who are not academically motivated, the so-called first generation students whose parents were not themselves at universities or colleges and who therefore have no family experience of higher education and just don't know how to behave. There may be something in this explanation though I find it ,on the whole, implausible since the American analysis and the analysis of the English difficulties, particularly at the London School of Economics, suggest that the students who have been most vociferous and have appeared to play the leading part in the revolt, are not the first generation students, but the middle-class students whose families have had wide experience of higher education. And many of the institutions which have been the source of some of the major difficulties, have been the universities which have managed to improve their physical plant and the quality of their teaching staff at the same time as they were increasing the number of students. The most severe difficulties outside Berkeley University in California have been at Harvard University and there is no doubt whatever that Harvard University is not only the greatest university in the United States, but is also much the most lavishly financed and equipped. The worst institutions in most countries have not been the source of the major revolt. It is characteristic at the moment that the greatest difficulties in France are at the École Normale Supérieure, which is the highest calibre institution in France.

A second thing which students have said — and said most frequently in California — is that you can't trust anybody over 30. I should think that that may be true. It is associated with the widespread American belief that there is some virtue in youth itself, which may also be true. In modern circumstances youth has had a radical break in experience with earlier generations. I won't bore you with a tedious reiteration of the way in which youth has had a different experience now from previous generations. I think there is some truth in the fact that some young people do have such an experience. But it is certainly true that there has been a radical change in the status of many young people in many countries for which I would offer a simple social and economic explanation. In California it is roughly true now that to all intents and purposes for about a quarter of the population, economic constraints have been removed. A professional family in California, a business family in California, in fact, earns enough to support its progeny, through its many marriages, in comparative affluence during a student period which appears to stretch into the remote distances of late middle age in many cases. It is the first time that a wide group of young people in a modern country have no need to work. They are in exactly the same state as the children of affluent aristocratic families in Europe in the 19th century — many people in Californian uni-

versities have no urgent need to work — they can concentrate on writing unprintable novels or they can take temporary positions of one kind or another, to keep the wolf from the door (and it is not a very fierce wolf). This must in some sense have affected their attitude to their studies. This is not unconnected with the fact that in those institutions, catering for a lower social and economic class of students, where the students are much more heavily vocationally oriented, there has been much less trouble. This would be one of the causes of the location of the dissidents in the prestige institutions.

Then, in addition, the explanation has been put forward that the students are dissatisfied with the universities or colleges they are at, either dissatisfied with the physical conditions or with the curriculum, or with the teaching, or with the general atmosphere. It takes the form of a reaction to so-called paternalism, a denial that the staff are **in loco parentis,** a desire for curricula which are student-oriented rather than subject-oriented, a desire for curricula which are relevant and meaningful. That is to say an unwillingness to get on to the educational ladder and a general questioning of whether there ought to be a ladder at all, or if there is a ladder, whether it ought not to point in a different direction. This is part of a much wider feeling in modern societies that the universities and colleges are not adapting fast enough to the social context within which they operate and that there ought to be more rapid steps to change their structure. This particular part of the discussion, which in many ways has been the most fruitful and constructive, deserves deeper consideration. At this stage I merely want to note that this is an area which has become increasingly important in the last couple of years and which I think deserves consideration. It seems at first sight an eminently reasonable and sensible way of looking at the question and many liberal academics have welcomed this concern. I, have come to have grave doubts about this logic.

There is no doubt, also, that beside these things (which are, so to speak, specifically within the universities and colleges) there have been (particularly in America and elsewhere) two absolutely critical matters. The first is the Vietnam war. Large numbers of students — not, I think, the majority, but a significant minority and almost all the intelligent and best students — are bitterly and horribly opposed to the Vietnam war; they regard the United States' activities in Vietnam as war crimes and they feel bitterly and deeply involved in this. Indeed it is arguable that if Vietnam had not occurred, the American student revolt would not have occurred on anything like the scale that it has.

The second issue has been the whole issue of racial discrimination. For one reason or another the students in the United States and the students in Europe are very, very deeply concerned about racial discrimination. This has been a major source of their dissatisfaction with life as it is and their desire to take part in wider movements of protest.

Lastly, in this list of points which I want to draw your attention to before I make what I regard as my basic analysis, there is the simple factor of imitation. I think all people, if they see something done by a similar group, reported in the newspaper, find the thought flashes aross their mind whether it might be a good idea for them to try it too. And with young people, particularly young people with time on their hands, as is the case with many students, particularly in the arts, and also with a vitality and a physical endurance denied to older people, imitation has been an important element, particularly influenced by the speed of modern communications and the intense visualness of so much student revolt in the United States which they have repeatedly seen on the films and television. It is not only imitation in general. It is imitation of quite specific techniques. The sit-in, for example, is something which is a device which has characteristically spread throughout the United States from Berkeley and then spread into Europe. Also, a great deal of the literature is from time to time copied by one group of students from other groups of students. For example, in the revolt in my university one of the most widely circulated pieces of newspaper was how to deal with tear gas attacks. Now, in fact, the English police do not possess tear gas and so the probability of tear gas attacks depended on an invasion by the Northern Irish Protestants, sailing up the Thames and coming to our campus. This was, in fact, a news sheet which you could tell from the spelling of the word

"program" had been sent from Berkeley to us. This is something which is fairly important and, of course, the imitation has also spread in the other direction: the defensive measures which the staff feel obliged to take against the students, such as taking your income tax papers home, if there is a fear of fire. Professors of economics can be seen in London, regularly, with bulging briefcases whenever there has been a report of student unrest in some part of the world. It is their income tax files.

Student leftism

If you were a serious analyst of revolutionary movements and of sources of social tension and social protest, the words that would spring to your lips would be the words of Lenin about a great deal of this movement. They sound particularly offensive, as many of Lenin's words of course, were. That is why they were so effective. They would be the words "infantile leftism". There is no doubt that for the serious critics of society, and for those who are urgently concerned to improve the conditions of the working class, or of the racially oppressed, or of any other group, this kind of activity seems extremely frivolous for the most part. Certainly the old French revolutionaries in 1968 characterised the May risings in Paris as manifestations of "infantile leftism".

I would like to explain precisely what I think "infantile leftism" would mean, as it is applied to the student movement. I think Lenin used these arguments mainly about groups of liberals and social democrats who sat around in coffee houses in St. Petersburg and Moscow and chatted about the general desirability of the millennium and the possibility, infinitely remote, of the assassination of the Tzar, and then cheerfully went home and carried on with their work and earning their living, and so on, but did nothing serious about the revolution, and who, furthermore, analysed the social stresses and problems of Russia and other countries in purely contingent terms without any sense of the organic or dialectic movement of social causes and social movements. I think that many people would argue that the movement of the comparatively prosperous, affluent American students against the Vietnam war and against racial discrimination in the United States, while continuing to enjoy the extremely affluent situation of their families, and with a fair guarantee of their futures in the United States because of their social and educational background, was a paradigm of this. For this merely meant that it was, so to speak, almost a matter of chance and personality that they had chosen to take to the streets and demonstrate rather than concentrate their energies upon amateur dramatics or American football. The serious revolutionaries or the serious politicians would use Lenin's term in this particular sense. They would apply it, too, in an analysis of a great deal of the student explanation of why they are fundamentally opposed to the kind of education that they are receiving.

The student's literature, supported by Professor Marcuse and other analysts of his kind, have argued — a familiar argument in Communist explanations of the way the world is — that there is no such thing as a neutral institution, that in the social movements all institutions take their place on one side or the other. The claim of the university, of academics, that they are in some sense "independent", that they stand above social conflict and are therefore able to analyse it, is according to this view, fallacious, just as it is, according to this view, fallacious that there is such a thing as independent law and independent judiciary. The argument has always been expressed — not a point of view that I share — by Marxists that the judiciary and the law serve the ruling class. The corollary of this argument is that the university is in the service of Capitalism. Marxists use all sorts of specific examples of this. The fact that many of us, economists particularly, have argued that a major function of the education system is to supply skilled manpower into the economy, has been used to explain that our major function therefore is to supply skilled labour of a Helot kind to powerful capitalist firms. Furthermore, because in the United States, for a whole series of rather complicated constiutional reasons, it is against the constitution for the federal government to directly support education, a great deal of research money in the United States has been chanelled into the universities on the defence vote. Therefore it is argued that a great deal of the research going on in American universities is in direct support

of the United States military defence of capitalism. So that the major argument which has been put forward by these people is that the university is in the service of capitalism, that therefore the university's function is to brainwash them into the service of capitalism or the dominant regime, and that their revolt is an attempt to extract themselves from this circle and in that way to overthrow the universities as part of a wider task of overthrowing capitalism.

I think there are two problems here. One is an age-old problem which no Marxist, I think, has ever been satisfactorily able to explain anyway: if we are all in the service of capitalism, and whatever we may say consciously, we are unconsciously in the service of capitalism, how is it that they — the revolting students — are alone able to see the truth, and they, alone, are able to act objectively against capitalism? I think this is a fundamental, logical point, which so far has not been answered.

The second thing is, of course, that "capitalism" is a word which I would think is now almost without meaning. I really find it extraordinarily unusual and unwise to lump together the United States, Sweden, the United Kingdom, South Africa, Australia, all countries with extremely different economic patterns, with completely different political structures, with radically different ideologies in the dominant political parties, and to call it all capitalism. Or if you choose to call it all capitalism, then I can only think, myself, that capitalism is a word which is now totally empty of content. It would follow, therefore, that if you agree with my analysis of the word capitalism, to say that the university was in the service of capitalism is the equivalent of saying the university is in service of itself or the university is in the service of God or the university is in the service of something else, some other concept which is equally difficult to analyse and to put forward as a concrete, "scientific" analysis.

Furthermore, there is no doubt whatever that a great deal of the characteristic of the major student movements has carried with it something which could, I think, legitimately be called not a radical attack on capitalism as such, but something very near totalitarianism or fascism. For example, the American students resolutely oppose the use of the secret ballot in student affairs. They resolutely oppose representative democracy in student affairs. They demand, both in Europe and in North America, the government of the universities by general assemblies of staff and students in continuous session. Those of us who have been forced to take part in these continuous assemblies can report, first of all, the total tedium and boredom of the whole thing. Government of universities is not in itself a very thrilling subject, I can assure you. Secondly it is a very simple tactic to leave the field open to those with the longest stamina and those with a prepared position. In institutions where the secret ballot has been absolutely insisted upon, and where representative democracy has been insisted upon, the situation has been much more carefully controlled. The London School of Economics, as you know, has now escaped from the grip of the far left into the grip of the "gay liberation front", as a result of the secret ballot.

The conspiracy theory

Now, behind all this, I see something which has not been much discussed, which I think is important. The first is this that it is a mass movement of students, centred around a small group of students. There is no doubt whatever that the evidence from Berkeley, the London School of Economics and from Paris shows that the number of student activists is very small, but there is also no doubt whatever, if you go from institution to institution, that the number of students participating in the activities of the whole student revolt, is very large indeed. So you have a phenomenon of a mass movement in some sense organised or precipitated or made articulate by a small group and this, I suppose, is what has lent some validity to "the conspiracy theory" of the student revolt. I don't think it, in fact, lends all that much validity to that kind of analysis, because if you think about it, there isn't a single institution which doesn't take this characteristic. There is no political party with a widespread membership which, in fact, isn't organised around a hard core of activists. There isn't any sporting organisation with a large membership which isn't organised around a very small group of people who actually do most of the work, or play most of the games. It is not in itself, I think, therefore suspicious that the hard core in the

student movement is a small group. What I think is very important is that this hard core has applied to the situation in different institutions in many different countries almost exactly the same analysis and quite frequently the same language, going so far, as I have already said, as the actual copying of documents, so that there will be for example, violent protests about the United Kingdom participation in the Vietnam war in documents issued in the United Kingdom. Vietnam is one of the few wars we have never actually been engaged in.

Adult doubt

I don't believe, therefore, that it would be wise to characterise the whole student revolt as being something which is organised around a conspiracy theory. I believe it has much wider causes. I think that what has actually led to the widespread upsurge of student dissatisfaction in the last five years or so, is something of all the things that I have said, together with something that I believe is more important, and that is what I might call adult doubt and submission. In those countries where the governing class is self-confident and absolutely ruthless, there has been no student revolt, of which the supreme example is, of course, the Soviet Union. I imagine that any student that shows his head is promply sent to the Lubiyanka and it would not occur, I suppose, to most members of the Communist Party in the USSR that any other response would be possible. Whereas, for those of us brought up in the liberal tradition of the United States and the United Kingdom, the moment somebody stands up and says, "You are a revolting filthy fascist in the service of capitalism," you immediately feel, "Well, I probably am." We are, of course, in the West, particularly, moving through a period of profound doubt, particularly among people of my age and older, and also of a complete reassessment of what we believe. I came here, voluntarily, and I said that when I came to South Africa I would not be so unwise as to talk about South Africa, while I was here. One of the reasons why South Africa has played such a large part in the demonology of the revolt in the United Kingdom is precisely because so many of the issues about which we do have very profound doubts are found in this extremely complicated country. A lot of the things that are said about Africa are, I think, also things that we are saying about ourselves. I think many of us are asking ourselves what it really means to be a democrat in the late 20th century.

Democratic and academic values

Now, having said that, I would like to end, if I may, upon just this note, of what I believe. I am a believer — I think a profound believer — in two things, in democratic constitutional values, the way, broadly speaking, in which I would like to think that my own country tries to behave, from time to time, and the way in which I hope that our universities are governed. I am also a believer, as an academic , in academic values, that is to say in the supremacy of truth and in the academic hierarchy, that is in the hierarchy of knowledge. The fact that some people know more than others is, and ought to be, a source of respect. It is a respect ultimately for the truth and for the understanding of the way the world is. But I would like, just as my concluding point, to raise a note of doubt. Having said that there is a supremacy of academic values on which I absolutely take my stand, I have no doubt that in many fields, the humanities and my own somewhat dubious area of the social sciences, what we claim to be authorities on, are issues which are, of course, in profound dispute throughout the world, namely "What is truth?" — Pilate's question — "What is justice?" "What is exploitation?" "What is value?" And to say that I know more than my students about those issues is in one way profoundly true, in the sense that I have read Berkeley and Hume and Marx and they haven't (or at least I imagine they haven't — not great readers, my students). But it is also, in another sense, profoundly untrue, because, of course, in this area of moral debate (in the very widest sense of the word "moral") to claim authority to speak is to claim a very great deal, and in terms of my own social philosophy is to claim something which is, I think, invalid. So that in a sense, although I regard the prevelance and widespread character of the student revolt as something which is ultimately attributable to our own self-doubt, I am not at all sure that self-doubt isn't the thing that we should be rightly most proud of.