

The New Left

Key Political Leaders: Tom Hayden, Abbie Hoffman, and Jerry Rubin (US); Daniel Cohn-Bendit (France); Rudi Dutschke, Joschka Fischer, Andreas Baader, Ulrike Meinhof, and Fritz Teufel (Germany).

Key Intellectuals Associated with the New Left: Herbert Marcuse, Wilhelm Reich, Alan Sillitoe, Guy Debord, E. P. Thompson, Erik Hobsbawm, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Ernst Bloch, C. Wright Mills, Marshall Berman, Isaac Deutscher, Erich Fromm.

Rejection of the “Old Left.” The New Left represented a break with the orthodox Leninist-Stalinist communist movement of the 1920s and 1930s that had reached the apogee of its influence in the years right after World War II. Already in the 1940s, a few key communist intellectuals had come out against Soviet Communism as practiced under Stalin—most famously, Arthur Koestler (whose *Darkness at Noon* was published in 1940) and George Orwell (as suggested by his 1945 novel *Animal Farm* and the 1949 novel *1984*). The biggest blow to the influence of international communism came in 1956, when the Soviet invasion of Hungary made it increasingly difficult for communists to claim that communism had popular support in Eastern Europe. In the same year, the Soviet General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev had given his famous “Cult of Personality” Speech in which he denounced Stalin for his excessive use of violence and police power since the 1930s. Together, these events made many Leftists accept the fact that somewhere communism had taken a wrong turn in the Soviet Union.

Marxist Revisionism. A few intellectuals rejected Marxism all together, but an influential group of Leftists tried to recapture the original intent of Karl Marx. Marx, these thinker pointed out, had not intended to create a party-dominated, rigidly bureaucratic, politically oppressive society. Instead, his intention had been to set man free from the social bonds of capitalism and to create a more egalitarian society in which man could more fully realize his human potential. So a number of thinkers dived back into Marx to “save” Marx from orthodox Marxism (as practiced by the Stalinists). A number of British Marxist intellectuals (especially the historian E. P. Thompson and the literary critic Raymond Williams) tried to escape the rigid class analysis of earlier Marxist work by introducing a deeper emphasis on culture. Others connected Marxism with existentialism by focusing on the key term “alienation,” which, it was hoped, would allow for a more individualistic and humane version of Marxism to evolve. (Sartre himself increasingly developed a Marxist-inspired philosophy in the 1960s). Still others turned to the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School thinkers of the 1930s and 1940s, who had attempted to fuse Marx’s theory of society with Freud’s theory of personality development. To many, the work of the Frankfurt School (Theodore Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse) suggested the ways that *social* liberation from capitalism and *personal* liberation from sexual repression were deeply connected and dependent on one another. All in all, the effort of these Marxist revisionists was to keep some of the basic theory of Marxism, and yet to rework it to allow for a “socialism with a human face.”

Revealing the Illusion of Democracy. A common theme for many New Leftist was that Western democracy was an illusion that hid the repressive and authoritarian tendencies of society. The very important and influential American sociologist C. Wright Mills suggested in his work that America was in fact in the hands of a “power elite” who controlled America through its command of vast sums of wealth and their influence over various political and economic institutions (the “military-industrial complex,” as he called it). Others decried the vast expansion of government bureaucracies in the twentieth century, which in their minds had undermined personal freedoms and individuality in America. In America, the accomplishments of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s had suggested that words like “democracy” and “freedom” completely ignored the reality of life for the African-American population. And then the Frankfurt School intellectual Theodore Adorno had suggested that democracies could be undermined by the proliferation of “authoritarian personalities”—that is, someone who rigidly demanded social conformity and obedience to authority and were extremely hostile to people or ideas that are “different.” To young student who had lived through the Cold War and McCarthyism, such “authoritarian personalities” seemed to have run amok in Western democracies.

Revealing the Injustices of “the System.” Above all, the New Left generated a language and set of ideas designed to reveal the problems and injustices of society and the political system. There was a widespread feeling among the younger generation of the 1960s that some combination of the fear of communism generated by the cold war, the rising affluence of society, and the almost obsessive desire to return to “normalcy” after World War II had been used by people in authority to shut people’s minds off to the massive injustices left in the system. The American Civil Rights movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s woke a lot of young Americans up to these injustices, of course. In Europe, the controversy over the Algerian War had a similar impact by visibly revealing the violence and racism at the heart of European imperialism and European culture in general. The real threat of a nuclear holocaust, on the other hand, made the younger generation of the 1960s suspect that there must be some deep level of madness to our whole society in order to bring us to the point where we might destroy ourselves and the whole world.

Criticisms of Capitalism and Consumerism. From Marxism, the New Left took a general criticism of capitalism for being dependent on a dehumanized form of labor. Increasingly, though, they tended to focus their critique on the materialist values of the consumer culture associated with 1960s capitalism. From Frankfurt School thinkers like Herbert Marcuse, the New Left borrowed a critique of consumer culture that suggested that society had been “bought off”—that is, had traded true personal freedom (freedom of thought, freedom of personal development) for the simple pleasures and fake “freedom of consumer choice” associated with the consumer marketplace. The New Left also rejected the traditional work ethic as a way that individuals were manipulated into sacrificing their true individuality and right to free personal development and ultimately fit, like cogs in a machine, into a vicious cycle of work and consumer purchases that kept the system of capitalism running.

Rediscovery of Poverty. One of the major injustices focused on by the New Left was the persistent differential in wealth. In the late 1950s, a generation of young British writers (the “Young Angry Men”) wrote a number of works that expressed the alienation felt by the young working class men and women from the rest of British society. As it turned out, this foreshadowed a more general “rediscovery of poverty” around the turn of the 1960s, in which sociologists showed that poverty still existed in modern society, despite the growing wealth of society and the expanded welfare state institutions. The sociologist Michael Harrington was especially influential here. His 1962 work *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, which estimated that 40 million Americans were poor despite the general wealth of American society, had a tremendous impact on the Kennedy administration and eventually led President Johnson to embark on “The Great Society.” In Britain and America, a whole new generation of New Left social historians (Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, Herbert Gutman, David Montgomery, and Eugene Genovese, to name a few) tried to recapture “history from below,” that is the everyday life of the workers and ethnic and racial minorities that previously had been ignored by the more politically-oriented historians of the past.

Rebellion against Authority and the Search for Personal Freedom: “Sticking it to the Man.” In the vocabulary of the New Left, “authority” became synonymous with “authoritarianism.” Accordingly, all forms of authority—governments, bureaucracies, police forces, bosses at work, school administrators, teachers, parents, social elites, and so on—tended to blur together into a vast oppressive “Establishment,” sometimes summarized more pithily as “the Man.” The various institutions of authority were said to be hostile to realization of any true individuality, self-expression, self-realization, and freedom. All forms of rebellion were consequently justified—and in fact glorified by the New Left. Rebellion could take the form of adolescent or generational rebellion (a la James Dean), class rebellion, or race rebellion. The New Left, in particular, made heroes out of several key figures associated with the fight against European imperialism in the 1960s: Ho Chi Minh, Fidel Castro, and Che Guevara, for instance. Rebellion against the family connected with the sexual revolution of the 1960s and justified the communal living arrangements and “free love” practiced by some members of the New Left. Rebellion against the institution of the family also fed eventually into the birth of the feminist movement.

The Free Speech Movement. The general rebellion against authority and the personal quest for individual freedom associated with the New Left produced a general assault on the legal, social, and institutional controls that placed limits on what could be said. The Free Speech Movement at Berkeley started in 1964, as the University of California, Berkeley, tried to crack down on the first stirrings of student protest. Their efforts to forbid students from demonstrating or even setting up information booths created an outcry from the general Berkeley student population and led to the emergence of a Free Speech Movement that had considerable support. This support was in part due to a larger generational shift experience across American and Western Europe in the 1960s: many younger people felt increasingly stifled by the socially conservative atmosphere of the 1950s. The result was a general effort to confront the conservative norms. The comedian Lenny Bruce attracted younger fans for his confrontational style of humor that combined

cutting satire, offensive language, explicit sexuality, and situations that by some seemed just “sick.” The New Left also took to using offensive language in their speech and written materials. In their minds, there was a deep hypocrisy involved with stuffy, bourgeois morality. As one historian put it, “How could people be offended by words describing bodily functions but tolerate the immorality of [racial] segregation and poverty?” (Allyn, p. 60). The New Left suggested that the only appropriate reaction to the obscene injustices of society was to use an obscene language.

Social Activism. The criticisms and rebellious attitude associated with the New Left fed into rapidly escalating social activism of the 1960s. Notions of authenticity and personal engagement borrowed from 1950s existentialism were important here in enabling the New Left to articulate the importance of commitment to various causes. For many in the New Left, ideas were only important if they produced engagement and action. The New Left was not out to create a generation of ivory-tower intellectuals, but instead wanted ideologically motivated activists. The term “praxis” became the ideal, which suggested a proper balance ideological education and political practice. Whereas the Old Left, had focused on labor activism (that is, organizing the workers into labor unions), the New Left broadened their activities to include a whole host of different forms of social activism: the peace and anti-nuclear weapon movement of Europe, the anti-Vietnam War protests of the US and Europe, the civil rights movement in America, the Free Speech Movement, university reform movements. All this activism eventually fed also into the feminist movement, the gay rights movement, and the environmentalist movements that emerged at the very end of the 1960s. Connected with this social activism was also a whole host of politicized artists who various forms of shock theater, “happenings,” and dada-esque art hoped to shock people out of their complacency and enable their deeper engagement in social and political causes. The goal was to generate a “participatory democracy”—a state of mass social and political engagement that would destroy (depending on who you talked to, either through social revolution or by infusing it with new life) the passive voter-based democracy that ultimately worked into the hands of power elites throughout the world.

Evaluating the New Left. Conservatives at the time tended to portray the New Left as dangerous intellectuals who threatened to undermine democracy and social order. At best, they were gullible young people whose minds had been corrupted by drugs and the depraved ramblings of radicals; at worst, they were frightening communists who endangered the values and achievements of Western Civilization. From the conservative point of view, the New Left was egotistical and self-absorbed, rejecting tried and true values like the work ethic, family, and community. Even liberals, who sometimes agreed with specific criticisms rendered by the New Left, were shocked by the tactics of the New Left and often portrayed them as young, naïve students who thought with simplistic or fuzzy ideas; saw complex, difficult matters in over-polarized, black & white terms; and, last, were prepared to damn all of Western society to destruction without offering any clear alternatives.

New Leftists, at the time, retorted that they were not communists, but anti-anti-communists—that is, unwilling to accept the Cold War paranoia about communism that

had been driven into the 1950s generation (Gitlen, p. 109). They *were* radicals, but in the sense that they held up the most radical expectations for what man and his society could be and were prepared to use radical tactics to achieve those expectations. They did not want to undermine democracy per se, but only the “fake” democracy of the 1950s in order to create a more equal, more just social and political order based on “true” participatory democracy. In their own minds, they were not egotistical or self-centered, but in fact more deeply concerned with the injustices of poverty, racism, and imperialism than the dominant society. Their rejection of the work ethic, family, and the dominant social norms represented not a rejection of *values*, but a rejection of the *establishment* that would allow for a new, more just system of values and community to emerge in the long run. And, finally, liberals they accused of seeing the problems, but being too passive and too locked in “the system” to really do anything about the problems except complain.

Today, many New Leftists who have grown up and gained a new perspective on their past admit that their analysis and their ideological language were often overly simplistic, and that their youthful idealism got the better of them when they believed that all the world’s social problems could be so easily solved. And yet, few regret the social activism of the 1960s. They insist that the social activism was immensely empowering on an individual level that was ultimately positive for them and for democracy as a whole. And they insist that even if social revolution did not take place in any radical sense, real social and political change did happen in the course of the 1960s that was needed and positive.

Sources:

David Allyn, *Make Love, Not War: The Sexual Revolution* (Little, Brown and Company, 2000)

“Angry Young Men,” Wikipedia Encyclopedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angry_Young_Men)

Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, revised edition (Bantam Books, 1993)

Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c. 1958-1974* (Oxford University, 1998)

“Marxist Humanism,” Marxist Internet Archive (<http://www.marxists.org/subject/humanism>)

“New Left,” Wikipedia Encyclopedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Left)

William O’Neill, *Coming Apart: An Informal History of America in the 1960’s* (Quadrangle Books, 1971)

Roland N. Stromberg, *European Intellectual History Since 1789*, 6th Edition (Prentice Hall, 1994)

Nick Thomas, *Protest Movements in 1960s West Germany* (Berg, 2003)