

The New Bend Sinister

The New Left Reader, edited by Carl Oglesby, *New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1969. 312 pp. \$8.50.*

YOUNG MR. OGLESBY and the Grove Press had to push to get this anthology of the new left out in time: they published on December 17, 1969 and on January 17, 1970 an editorial in the *Guardian* announced “. . . the passing of the new left. . . . the break-up of the new left . . . the new left has ceased to exist. . . .” Of course the *Guardian*—voice, sign and avatar of the farthest-most Marxist skirmishers ever since Henry Wallace took that gambol with the “Progressive” party in Harry Truman’s 1948—had quite accurately diagnosed the lethal splintering now manifest in the student left. But out of its own dogged survival experience in a still basically unsympathetic ambience, the *Guardian* also knew that the passing of one new left does not foreclose the emergence of another. “Now,” it said, “we must build a new left. . . .”

The new left of Mr. Oglesby's book grew out of the so-called Port Huron manifesto of 1962, launching the Students for a Democratic Society (mostly white); and out of the sit-ins and freedom marches of the same period formalizing in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee of young blacks. Largely moderate-liberal at the outset, the Kids in both groups hardened toward radicalism as their steadily more turbulent assertion of the right to dissent raised matching zeal in behalf of the counter-right to affirm. These young people are not *apparatchiks* even now, as Mr. Oglesby makes clear in a succinct, well organized and sharply written précis at the beginning of the book. They see in the Soviet Union a betrayal of the dream, but in Mao, Ho, Castro, Guevara and other variants on the basic Marxist theme they do find their sustenance.

The book is divided into three parts, which may be labeled doctrinal, tactical and operational—C. Wright Mills, Marcuse, Kolakowski, *et al.* in Part I; Fanon on Algeria, Cuba's Castro and Huey Newton of the Black Panthers in Part II; in Part III Rudi Dutschke, *les freres* Cohn-Bendit and Mark Rudd, Kid-in-Chief of our own Columbiad, on the actual student risings here and abroad. As for doctrine, little new is offered the vigilant reader over thirty. We are all familiar with Wright Mills' increasingly quaint insistence that the way out of our troubles is to yield power to the intellectual community—as Wright Mills would define it. Marcuse is said now by the sharpest observers to be losing even the attention of the radical young with his curious argument that the collapse of Marx's prognosis under massive proletarian affluence really proves the Marxist claim that working-men are oppressed in the capitalist society. André Gorz offers an independent route to the Marcuse-like conclusion that the democracies operate an "apparatus of mystification," a "gentle terror" to keep George Meany and the AFL-CIO from joining the Kids in the streets. For those still interested,

Louis Althusser demonstrates that Marx did not, as widely rumored, simply invert the Hegelian formulation. In a fresh and useful survey of early Karl Marx manuscripts, Martin Nicolaus suggests new support for the theory of surplus value and for an ultimate capitalist collapse.

But the gem of Part I, and in many ways of the whole book, consists of excerpts from Leszek Kolakowski's "Toward a Marxist Humanism." Kolakowski is a professor of philosophy who was kicked out of the Polish Communist Party and off the philosophy faculty of the University of Warsaw, for reasons that are abundantly apparent here. He has since lectured at McGill University and at the University of California, Berkeley. His tone is warm, hate-free, appropriately meditative. He summarizes better than any of the other contributors, and as well as Koestler or Chambers, the yearning that impelled so many earnest and well-intending seekers toward what they saw as Marx's "liberation of man from the uncomprehended and uncontrolled powers of society and nature," as Rudi Dutschke puts it in this book. Of course Kolakowski has already despaired of one such search in the Gomulka regime of his homeland. The result in Poland, he reports, was merely another reaction. "The forces of the Left [now] stand between two rightist tendencies: the reaction within the Communist Party and traditional reaction. . . . [The Left] must simultaneously reject socialist phraseology as a facade for police states and democratic phraseology as a disguise for bourgeois rule. . . ."

Yet obviously Kolakowski's own phraseology disguises—at least from himself—the key to the generic leftist trouble. He speaks of a Marxist "humanism." The assumption is still that somewhere, sometime, somehow, there is a humanism as immune to the Stalinist as to the bourgeois temptations of power. "It does not seem that the possession of power is incompatible with the nature of the Left," Kolakowski pleads against every experiential testimony. "Over

the years history has witnessed many setbacks to demands (for example, equality before the law) that subsequently, after centuries of suffering and defeat, became realities. . . ." Yes, but what Kolakowski and his comrade seekers, one and all, overlook is the philosophical (or theological) premise on which such victories—limited victories often, but victories—have always rested. It is that "humanism" in itself is more likely to betray than to guarantee liberation, or as one of the American constitution-makers put it, that men are not angels. It was just because men are human and not angelic—because, being men, they were infected with imperfection and, worse, with imperfectibility—that the wisest constitutionalists took care to limit the king, to keep him, as they said in their old-fashioned way, under God and the law.

The contrary hope, this gnostic vision of secular salvation, the pathos of longing for demi-angels who will wield power virtuously and then virtuously yield it—when in the ripeness of time the Dialectic waggles the wither-away signal to the state—this ever-recurring wistfulness is the really worrisome thing about the student rebels and their fellow Kids of all ages, including the several over-forty contributors to Mr. Oglesby's book. Young men as bright as Oglesby, as Rudd, as Huey Newton and their foreign co-revolutionaries see the Stalinist terror, the seizure of the Czechs, the Red Guards up and the Red Guards down, the factional chaos in Algeria, the Castro program of "assassination" for those who fail the sugar harvest—and yet look with hate on limited government and with dogged admiration at its adversaries. The domestic impacts are widely apparent in the polarizations that obstruct true reform; even more mischievous are the enticements to adventure offered foreign adversaries who see divided loyalties in the United States, or undivided loyalties in, but not for the United States. Yet putting the Kids' own bleakest readings on constitutionalism—as the trickery by which power is made to seem subordinate to due process—many

of the student rebels yearn to assume that once they destroy due process, power will fail of other means to assert itself. Here they might well go to school to Kolakowski, who saw a new tyranny exceeding the old—except that Kolakowski, still seeking, does not seem to go to school to himself.

In sum, the student rebels of the new left, or the old-new left, suggest a frequent generosity of intent; yes, but also a kind of hallucinogenic naïveté, a deterioration of political perception, an ignorance of history and of philosophy; hence—and here is the grim crux—a failure of their professors and of their professors' professors through several decades of proto-Marcuse. It was twenty years ago that Joseph Schumpeter of Harvard warned us of the many men entering economic research and teaching in the twenties and thirties who "sneered at the profit motive and at the element of personal performance in the capitalist process:" they had burned their bourgeois membership cards and repudiated bourgeois values. Just now President Brewster of Yale has assigned the student radicals in their "skeptical cynicism" to "the tradition of those legal 'realists' of the thirties who pooh-poohed the objective compulsions of reason as determinants of judicial opinions." (Mr. Brewster was an undergraduate at New Haven at just about the time William O. Douglas and Abe Fortas were quitting the largely "realist" Yale law faculty for broader opportunities in Washington, D. C.)

The book testifies to an erosion in the consensus on which the country was founded, has flourished, and needs, to keep on flourishing. The new left is dead, says the *Guardian*, but "we must build a new left." Nothing is more certain than that new lefts will be built on the anti-reform, pro-revolutionary schemata of this book as long as the Mark Rudds can say, as Mark Rudd says here, that "whatever 'good' function the university serves is what the radical students can cull from its bones—especially the creation and expansion of a revolutionary movement." The first defense against

such a use of the university would fall, of course, to the silent majority which still exists in many faculties and in most student bodies.

Reviewed by C. P. IVES
