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*The Politics of Authenticity*

Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America

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UNLIKE MOST PREVIOUS historians of the 1960s, the origin of my scholarship does not lie in a personal involvement with the events and movements about which I write. I am not old enough, by many years, to have been involved in the new left, much less the civil rights movement of the cold war era. I am not a Christian believer; I am not very countercultural (in the usual sense of the term); and I am not a Texan. As an undergraduate in the 1980s, I simply stumbled on the new left as a historical topic, never having heard of this movement before.

Although I did not witness the movements chronicled here (save as an infant and, at that, only on television), this in no way furnishes me with an objective viewpoint. Rather, my own experiences give me a particular perspective on the events I discuss. In the late 1980s, my political outlook underwent significant changes, and learning that there had been a "new left" in the United States during the 1960s, I was eager to see what I might learn from its experience. Early on, I was occupied not only with the expository question of what these people had said and done but also with the question of why their movement had "failed," that is, why it had lost its bid to transform American politics and why it had collapsed around 1970. The reflection of my own situation is clear: Why did there seem to be so little guidance available to those who were only then coming to a critical outlook on their society? Why were the connections to the past severed so cleanly?

These questions are flawed, but that is somewhat beside the point, since they no longer guide my analysis. I have come to think that the new left's greatest historical significance lies not in its impact but in its meaning, including its meaning for the larger political world from which it emerged. To neglect the vociferous opposition that the new left directed toward the political and cultural order in which new left radicals lived would be foolish and misleading. I intend no such neglect when I state that possibly the single comment most consistent with my own perspective on this movement is Raymond Williams's remark that "the dominant culture . . . at once produces and limits its own forms of counter-culture." The civil rights movement, the cold war, and the cultural experience of certain social groups in the twentieth-century United States converged to produce the new left of the 1960s. This was a movement of opposition, but opposition on the most intimate of terms. In an effort either to validate or to indict this opposition, however, sometimes the intimacy gets lost.

It is clear to me that my perspective on the new left is a product of the politically conservative times in which I have researched and written this book. Once, around 1960, historians interested in the history of American radicalism—likewise shaped by a young adulthood in conservative times—came to discern deep affinities between American dissent and the American mainstream. They were inclined to look at the larger structures of political expression and action, and disinclined to romanticize rebels of the past, sympathy notwithstanding. I have gradually come to feel a certain kinship with this group of historians. They sometimes are termed an "in-between" generation, since they were too young to have been deeply involved in the "old left" of the 1930s and 1940s and too old to be part of the new left (although they have been labeled the first "new left" historians). I feel a strong and sometimes partisan sympathy for the people about whom I write. However, my purpose here is neither praise nor burial. In the future, this book may seem like the product of another "in-between" time. One can always hope.

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## INTRODUCTION

### *From the Age of Anxiety to the Politics of Authenticity*

THIS IS A STUDY of the political culture of the United States between the late 1940s and the early 1970s. It traces the somewhat surprising emergence of a “new” political left following the politically conservative era of the 1950s, the flowering of this left in the 1960s, and its frustration in the 1970s. This “new left” stemmed from white youth participation in civil rights activism in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It attracted considerable attention in the early 1960s by promoting a project of both formal and social democracy, the emphasis on formal or “participatory democracy” receiving the most attention from the movement’s members and sympathizers. In the late 1960s the new left gained adherents rapidly, especially on college and university campuses around the United States, in step with the mounting frustration among Americans in general with the course of the Vietnam War. Yet this movement had dissipated as a coherent force for radical political change by the time the Paris Peace Accords officially ended the war in January 1973.

The new left broke sharply with the thought and activism of the “old left” of the 1930s and 1940s. By the late 1940s, hopes for a working-class-based social democracy—the dominant vision of the left in the previous century—had been severely dampened in the United States. Fewer than ten years later, small numbers of Americans, largely independent of one another, began laying the groundwork for a new left that would draw on a drastically different social and intellectual basis than had the old left. Although Students for a

Democratic Society (SDS), the main new left organization, advocated in its *Port Huron Statement* (1962) a liberal-labor-civil rights coalition, SDS nonetheless broke with what the radical sociologist C. Wright Mills called the “labor metaphysic” of the old left and promoted universities, not factories or working-class neighborhoods, as the most promising sites of left-wing insurgency.<sup>1</sup>

The new left was a movement of white, college-educated young people, few of whom ever had known poverty. Material deprivation provided neither their main explanation of insurgency nor their prime argument for social change. In fact, new left radicals launched what many have called a “postscarcity” radicalism, directing their basic criticism at the “affluent society” itself, which they, along with many liberals and conservatives of the 1950s and 1960s, considered an achieved fact. Under the influence of Mills’s writings and the civil rights movement, the new left from its start viewed students and African Americans as the two groups most likely to stimulate radical social change in the United States. For a time, the new left viewed the poor—a category they differentiated sharply from the working class, for new left radicals endorsed the widespread belief that the U.S. working class was comfortable and conservative—as the agent of social change. Yet even here the new left saw the poor’s political potential arising not from economic want but from political “alienation.”<sup>2</sup>

The broad salience of the term *alienation* is the key to understanding the post-World War II left’s shift away from a materialist strategy. Possibly no word was used more frequently in discussions of political discontent in the United States during the period considered here. *Alienation* means “estrangement,” and Americans in the 1950s and 1960s applied this term to many contexts—different individuals and groups can be estranged from a variety of things and people, after all—and paradoxically, it took on both positive and negative connotations among dissidents. Black Americans and the poor of all races were alienated from the formal political system, perhaps even from the values that underlay the social system (the argument went), so they might prove willing to storm the palace gates, unlike the industrial working class, which had been “bought off,” given a “seat at the table.” Marginality was the key to radical agency.

The new left radicals sometimes asserted that college students likewise sat outside the political system and therefore also had insurgent potential, but more often the new left emphasized the strategic location of students in the universities, which were increasingly important components in the nation’s political economy. It was not easy to argue that students—especially those who had grown up in an era of unprecedented material abundance

and whose leading role in the consumer culture was increasingly recognized—were marginal. Yet many observers had noted a malaise among affluent youth as early as the 1950s and had labeled this a variety of alienation. Not surprisingly, new left activists devoted a great deal of time to pondering the sources and meaning of this middle-class alienation.<sup>3</sup>

Those who found the prospect of radical change less attractive than did the new left found the phenomenon of alienation politically worrisome, not cheering. Many political liberals expressed dismay, and did so for years before the new left came on the scene, at the link they discerned between alienation and depoliticization. (Levels of voter participation had been dropping since the turn of the century, with a temporary reversal during the 1930s, and they continued to do so until the century drew to a close.) Political liberals feared a listless and perhaps volatile citizenry. The sociologist Kenneth Keniston called alienated, affluent youth “the uncommitted.” As early as 1949, as the cold war deepened, the influential historian, publicist, and liberal activist Arthur Schlesinger Jr. foresaw widespread political and moral alienation, and in the context of what John F. Kennedy later called the “long twilight struggle” against communism, an alienated citizenry seemed worrisome indeed.<sup>4</sup>

Alienation, Schlesinger argued, stemmed from an inability to cope with the cultural impact of industrialization, and he feared political tyranny would be the ultimate result. The transition to industrial modernity had “devaliz[ed] the old religions while producing nothing new capable of controlling pride and power.” Americans lived in an “age of anxiety,” he explained. Anxiety meant the awareness of moral and social alienation, the feeling of floating adrift on foreign seas, a feeling that opened the way to brutal regimes offering a sense of certainty through a “totalitarian” program. “Red fascism,” as some called communism, held a genuine appeal for many who were stricken with anxiety, Schlesinger believed, because it offered both new social forms and a new creed. The diplomat George Kennan feared that for this reason, communism would triumph. Schlesinger, too, doubted that the political culture of democracy, whose “thinness” he bemoaned, could win out over communism as a solution to alienation. “The spectacular reopening of these problems [of anxiety] in our time,” he concluded bleakly, “finds the democratic faith lacking in the profounder emotional resources. Democracy has no defense-in-depth against the neuroses of industrialism.”<sup>5</sup>

The new left, shaped by cold war anticommunism and by the collapse of the Stalinist left in the United States, set out to prove wrong this line of thought. It sought to chart a third way between the politics of communism and of anticommunism by showing that if invigorated and expanded, the culture of democracy could defeat the forces of alienation and anxiety.

Turning the politics of estrangement upside down, new left radicals asserted that alienation somehow could propel people out of anxiety and into social commitment—which was the polar opposite of alienation. Since these radicals favored drastic social and political change, the condition of alienation actually appeared as an opportunity, since an estrangement from society seemed like a prerequisite for recruitment into a new radical movement. Still, bringing people from alienation into commitment would not be easy. The new left argued that only a radical vision of democracy—a vision much more radical than anything Schlesinger entertained—could serve as the ideal that would bring water from the rock, commitment and wholeness from alienation and anxiety.

For all the social and political alienation that they observed among blacks or the poor, the new radicals of the 1960s agreed with scholars like Keniston that they themselves experienced a distinctive kind of alienation. But unlike Keniston, they felt that this alienation of the affluent provided the surest basis for new left recruitment. They felt their own alienation was an estrangement less from dominant social norms, or from conventional political activity, than from their own real selves. This estrangement from one's self caused subjective feelings like anxiety. The theologian Paul Tillich and other existentialists had long made this argument in a more spiritual vein. The fundamental estrangement that caused anxiety, they believed, was an alienation from God. According to existentialist thought, a state of unity with the self or the divine or, as Tillich put it in his disembodied way, “the ground of Being” furnished a kind of inner wholeness. This wholeness was the opposite of alienation in an internal sense, just as commitment was the opposite of social alienation; this inner wholeness was the state of authenticity. Adopting an existentialist outlook, the new left came to argue that social and political arrangements caused inner alienation and that only radical social change would open the path to authenticity. Thus a growing understanding among affluent youth of their own predicament would inspire this segment of the population to seek the twin goals of authenticity and democratization.

The search for authenticity lay at the heart of the new left. The new left was not simply a movement of opposition, the antithesis of the society that produced it, or merely an eccentric cousin of the Marxist left. Rather, it was a logical development of broad strains in twentieth-century politics and culture. Although the quest for authenticity stretches across industrial American history, only after World War II did it become a widespread preoccupation. T. J. Jackson Lears sees a sensation of “weightlessness”—a feeling of insubstantiality or inauthenticity—among the American upper class at the turn of the twentieth century. Christopher Lasch was the first to rec-

ognize that concern over this predicament, and a consequent desire to make contact with “real life,” animated some of those on the modern political left, usually those from rather genteel backgrounds. In 1965 he termed this “the new radicalism.”<sup>6</sup> At almost exactly the same time, the combination of the search for authenticity with leftist politics acquired a popular basis. Amid conditions of broad affluence, mass consumption, the bureaucratization of many areas of social life, and increasing disengagement from formal political participation, feelings of weightlessness migrated down the social scale, appearing among much broader strata of American society and leading to a widespread yearning for authenticity. Unlike the pessimistic upper-class yearning in earlier times for “real” experience, the young people who sought authenticity in the early cold war often believed strongly that they would achieve their personal and political goals. The triumphalism of cold war America influenced them as much as did American anxiety.<sup>7</sup>

The intersection of the search for authenticity and political life produced what, looking backward, we can see as a tradition of existentialist politics in these middle strata in cold war America. Not inappropriately, this politics appeared most conspicuously in the country's universities, among students whose experience in those institutions during the cold war had become the single clearest mark of “middle-class” identity. The poles of alienation and authenticity define existentialism, and existential politics spins political analysis and action between these two poles. It is not merely a historian's conceit to call this politics existentialist. The vocabulary of existentialism became widely popular in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, and the young people considered in this book made it the means of expressing their personal and political hopes. They talked all the time about becoming “real” or “natural” or “authentic” and about transcending their generation's “alienation.” Existentialism did not simply overtake the new left in its later years, displacing a rational, deliberative project aimed at cultivating participatory democracy, as some argue. Rather, existentialism was a powerful element in this movement from the start. The *Port Huron Statement* asserted that the “goal of man and society should be . . . finding a meaning in life that is personally authentic,” and the new left's ultimate aim was to alter social arrangements so as to allow as many people as possible to pursue that goal.<sup>8</sup>

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, clusters of American youth became enamored of different variants of existentialism. While many high school and college students spent hours in coffeehouses over paperback volumes edited by Walter Kaufmann or written by Jean-Paul Sartre or Albert Camus (who was the more readable and the more read of the Frenchmen), the most organized and most politically consequential source of existentialist ideas in

