

A Series of Essays on the Relationships between the Early American New Left and the American Tradition of Democracy

Ren-Fuw Kuo*

I. The Native Origin of the American New Left

The American Left in the twentieth century was born in America. Contrary to popular belief, it was not the product of foreign powers and alien ideologies. Although each Left generation would have its rendezvous with European Marxism, Marxist ideas were usually embraced to support a radical movement that had already come into being. Most Left intellectuals and activists in America read Jefferson and Whitman before they read Marx or, later, Mao, and many caught the flame of William Jennings Bryan or John Fitzgerald Kennedy before they felt the fascination of Lenin or Castro. Sprouting from native soil, the Left often erupted in a fury of radical innocence and wounded idealism so peculiar to American intellectual history. (Diggins, 1973, p.v.)

These are the opening words of John P. Diggins' preface to his book, *The American Left in the Twentieth Century*. That left included, according to Diggins, the Lyrical Left of the World War I era, the Old Left of the 1930s, and the New Left of the 1960s. The greatest merit of Diggins' book lies, as I see it, not in his description and analysis of those three different

* Professor and Director, Graduate Program of Political Science, Soochow University.

American Lefts, but in his stimulative idea that contrary to popular belief, they were not the products of foreign powers and alien ideologies, but were born in the native soil of America.

The idea is, of course, controversial and problematical. However, if it is less applicable to the Old Left of the 1930s, it seems to be more so to the New Left of the 1960s. As Edward E. Ericson, Jr. rightly pointed out, "If the New Left was new in comparison to the Old Left, which took its theory from Europeans, perhaps it was not so new when placed in the American historical context." (Ericson, 1975, p.11) In was in that context, according to Ericson, that Edward Schwartz analyzed the New Left Movement as a last, desperate attempt to revive the American democratic tradition. (Ericson, 1975, p.211, n45.)¹

From my point of view, however, to see the New Left Movement as a last, desperate attempt to revive the American democratic tradition seems to be only a half truth. For it was untrue that the New Left as a whole made a desperate attempt to revive the American democratic tradition as a whole. In its few years of existence, according to Irving Howe, the American New Left has gone through two distinct phases. The first was "a phase of populist fraternity, stressing an idealistic desire to make real the equalitarian claims of the American tradition, a non- and even anti-ideological approach to politics, and a strategy of going into local communities in order to help oppressed minorities." The second phase of the New Left signified "a sharp

¹ Unfortunately, Edward Schwartz's *Will the Revolution Succeed? Rebirth of the Radical Democrat* (New York: Criterion Book, 1972), from which Ericson quoted, is out of print.

turn: away from fraternal sentiment and back to ill-absorbed dogma, away from the shapelessness of 'participatory democracy' and back to the rigidity of vanguard elites, away from the loving spirit of nonviolence and back to a quasi-Leninist fascination with violence." (Howe, 1970, pp.6-7)

Furthermore, as Arnold S. Kaufman indicated: The New Leftists ... are appalled by the failures and distortions of democracy in this country. They are deeply committed to the proposition that those who are vitally affected by large decisions have a right to participate in making those decisions in ways more meaningful than an occasional vote. And so they advocate a democracy of participation, hearkening back to the Jeffersonian tradition of direct participation that has existed since the birth of the Republic as an unrealized part of the rhetoric of Americanism, while the Madisonian tradition of coalition politics has triumphed. (Kaufman, 1968, p.49)

II. Difficulties in exploring the relationships between the early American New Left and the Jeffersonian democratic tradition in America

Since the American new Left did not have a constant character throughout its existence and since the American democratic tradition had not been a single unity, it is safe to say that the American New Left in its early years did make a desperate attempt to revive a branch of the American democratic tradition, the Jeffersonian tradition of American democracy, as an unrealized ideal. As is always the case, it is far easier to say something than to do it. As far as I know, no one has yet attempted to explore the relationships, both historical and conceptual, between the early New Left and the

Jeffersonian democratic tradition in America. It is the central purpose of this series of essays to do so.

This undertaking will certainly be an extremely difficult one. It will be so for several reasons. In the first place, at the time of the emergence of the American New Left, Thomas Jefferson had long been remembered as the “Father of Democracy” in the American mind² because of, as Merrill D. Pe

² For how Thomas Jefferson came to be the “Father of Democracy” in the American mind, see Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 68-76, 98-110. The following praise of Jefferson as the “Father of Democracy” made by William Green, once the President of American Federation of Labor, in 1943 was one of the typical examples: “Thomas Jefferson is more than a name to Americans. ... His life and the philosophy which he evolved and handed down to us ... is equally applicable to our lives as individuals and as a nation. The philosophy was in part tersely embodied in the Preamble to our Declaration of Independence, of which Thomas Jefferson was the author, ‘that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’ We are further reminded in that memorable document that it is the function of the government to guarantee those rights — ‘a government whose powers are derived from the consent of the governed’. ... Perhaps the most outstanding contribution which Thomas Jefferson made to us as a nation was the authorship of the Declaration of Independence which was based upon the firm determination of the Colonists to be free from control of a foreign nation. His passion for freedom — religious, economic and political — was further exemplified in the legislation which he drafted such as the bill he offered in the Virginia Legislature ... Jefferson was a staunch advocate of higher educational opportunities for all the people that they might thus be enabled to reason their problems out to a logical conclusion. ... He was the father of our elective system and is known as the Father of Democracy. He founded the Republican Party in our American political life, now known as the Democratic Party. He believed in the ability of the people to rule themselves and that education was a prerequisite to the extension of self-government to all. Jefferson was firm in his belief in states rights lest the national government become tyrannical. ... ” William Green, “Father of Democracy,” in *Thomas Jefferson: Then and Now 1743-1943, A National Symposium*, ed. James Waterman Wise (New York: Bill of Rights Sesqui-Centennial Committee, 1943), pp.50-52.

terson emphasized, his compelling relationship to the American experiment in democracy. (Peterson, 1962, p.vii.) But, as Saul K. Padover, the editor of *Democracy By Thomas Jefferson* indicated, Jefferson himself never systematically formulated his thought on democracy in any one book or even essay. (Padover, p.1) Still worse than this was the fact pointed out by Peterson: "Jefferson was a baffling series of contradictions. ... Later generations comprehended his thought only in fragments, crossing and colliding with each other, until it seemed that the protean figure, if ever he had genuine historical existence, must never be rediscovered." And, Peterson added: "Every man was his own Jeffersonian. This was due not only to the enigma of the man, but also to partisan memories and to some mysterious attraction that caused men in every generation to interpolate Jefferson in their living worlds." (Peterson, 1962, p.9.) Consequently, the author of *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* told us: "The image is highly complex, never uniform and never stationary. It is a mixed product of memory and hope, face and myth, love and hate, of the politician's strategy, the patriot's veneration, and the scholar's quest. (Peterson, 1962, p.vii.)" So the first difficult question for us to decide is this: What had been the truly Jeffersonian tradition of American democracy for the American new Left to revive?

The second but no less difficult problem we must solve is: What was the American New Left? As Massimo Teodori, the editor of *The New Left: A Documentary History*, indicated: "The fact that a New Left exists in the United States today, in 1968, is the proof of a reality which manifests itself both in society at large and in the political arena. What this New Left is is more difficult to say, because there is very little unity between the various

organizations, programs and ideological statements which form the phenomenon usually referred to as 'the Movement.' ” (Teodori, 1969, p.3). Lyman Tower Sargent, the author of *New Left Thought*, also admitted the difficulty in defining the New Left:

This book has been extremely difficult to write. The movement is elusive; its goals tend to be very general and lacking in specifics, hence hard to pin down. The New left is made up of innumerable parts, both groups and individuals, which seem on one level to be in fundamental disagreement on many issues; and the difficulty of achieving accurate generalization has been formidable. ...

it is impossible to define New Left precisely, since many of the individuals and groups that seem to agree on the basic ideas and traits outlined in this book are not happy about labels. Others, who sometimes identify with a particular label, do not seem to fit the labeled category in any way except by their use of the label. ...

The New Left is not united. There may seem to be some unity in the demand for radical change, but a glance at the specifics of priorities and tactics immediately dispels the sense of unity. It is rarely possible to find any cohesion in the New Left by looking at the specifics of either goals or tactics. (Sargent, 1972, pp.vii, 2.)

The final but even more difficult problem for us to solve is how to link the American New Left with the Jeffersonian tradition of American democracy, if both are well defined. The formidable difficulty lies in the fact that not a single American New Leftist consciously and explicitly related the goals and tactics of the New Left to the Jeffersonian democratic tradition as if there had been no such thing as the latter in his mind. Frequently read by many newer New Leftists were the works of adult New Leftists such as C.

Wright Mills, Albert Camus, Herbert Marcuse, Paul Goodman, and Frantz Fanon rather than those of Thomas Jefferson or other Jeffersonians.³ It appears to be farfetched, if not absurd, to combine the American New Left with Jeffersonian tradition of democracy in the same framework of analysis, at least in the eyes of many New Left commentators and many New Leftists themselves.

III. Guiding Principles to Overcome Difficulties

Difficulties mentioned above must be revealed rather than hidden and admitted rather than ignored. They must be overcome, though not once and for all, otherwise this series of essays cannot proceed. I try to overcome those difficulties by the following principles which will guide the proceedings of the series. First, the Jeffersonian tradition of democracy will not be analyzed within the limit of the tradition per se but beyond it. The analysis will

³ In the mid-1960s Jack Newfield interviewed twenty-five newer New Leftists (newer SDSers) and got the following findings as to their readings: "There is an appalling anti-intellectualism among the newer SDS members. Not only do they read few novels and almost no scientific or philosophical literature, they have read little within the radical tradition. Of twenty-five activists interviewed, none had ever read Rosa Luxemburg, Max Weber, Eduard Bernstein, John Dewey, Peter Kropotkin, or John Stuart Mill. Less than five had actually read Lenin or Trotsky, and only a few more had ever read Marx. Almost all of them had read C. Wright Mills and Camus, and about half had read Goodman, Frantz Fanon, and Hubert Marcuse." Jack Newfield, *A Prophetic Minority* (New York: The New American Library Inc., 1966), pp.87-88.

go back to the origin of that tradition, i.e., the democratic ideas of Jefferson, either expressed by himself, no matter how fragmentarily, or interpreted by later commentators, which have imprinted both spirit and substance on it. Moreover, the tradition will also be highlighted by contrasting it, in proper places in this series of essays, with other branches of American democratic tradition such as anti-Jeffersonian tradition (Calhounian tradition) in the South, and non-Jeffersonian traditions (sem-Madisonian tradition and neo-Madisonian tradition) dominating in the nation.

Second, the main unit of analysis in this series of essays will be a single organization which was definitely far more representative of the American New Left as a whole than any other organizations. It will be the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). "To most Americans," as George R. Vickers rightly emphasized, "the New Left and the Students for a Democratic Society were one and the same. In the late sixties, it seemed that the SDS was involved in every activity associated with the New Left, and individuals like Tom Hayden and Rennie Davis [SDS leaders] became familiar to millions of TV viewers as spokesmen for whatever demonstration was going on at that moment. Such an identification greatly oversimplifies the complex and often varied development of a New Left during the last decade, but it does reflect the fact that somehow the development of the Students for Democratic Society contained most of the ingredients that were associated with that New Left." (Vickers, 1975, p.65.) In addition to SDS, the Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee (SNCC) will be the supplementary unit of analysis in this series of essays. I select SNCC as a supplementary unit not only because it was, as Edward J. Bacciooco stressed, the first organization of the Ameri-

can New Left representing the moving spirit of the early New Left in the United States, (Bacciocco, 1974, p.29.) but also because simultaneously it was the primary link between SDS and the Jeffersonian tradition of American democracy and the chief factor for SDS's distortion of that tradition.

Vickers is the author of *The Formation of the new Left: The Early Years*. He justified his study of the early New left instead of the late New Left by making a significant distinction between the studies of the two which would lead to different results:

Most accounts of the New Left have focused on the tremendous expansion of political opposition during the late 1960s and have treated theory and practice found in the black, antiwar, and student movements of that period as the starting point for an understanding of the character and significance of that New Left. Such a focus may, however, be very misleading. If one begins, not from the massive protests and revolutionary rhetoric of 1968, 1969 and 1970, but from the birth and slow growth of the movement during the early sixties, the events of the later sixties appear in a very different light. If one traces the emergence of a theory and practice uniquely characteristic of the New Left in relation to the theory and practice that characterized the old Left, the civil-rights movement, and "New Frontier" liberalism during those early years, if we begin with these relationships, we are led to very different lines of inquiry than those typical of other accounts. (Vickers, 1975, pp.1-2)

Like Vickers, I shall concentrate my study on the early New Left in America rather than on the late. But unlike him, I shall not contrast the early New Left to the Old Left. Instead, I shall relate it to the American tradition of democracy from which the late New Left ran away. So the main unit of analysis in this series of essays will be the early SDS. The early SDS was that in its first stage which ran from 1960 into 1964, what Ericson called the

“reformist” stage,⁴ or what Kirkpatrick Sale called the two periods of “Reorganization” and “Reform.”⁵ So the relationships between the American democratic tradition and the early New Left which I shall analyze throughout this series of essays were those between the former and the early SDS from 1960 to 1965.

The final principle which will guide the proceedings of this series of essays is that those relationships will be analyzed as neither pure historical nor pure conceptual relationships, but as a mixture of both; though the emphasis of the former part of this series will be on the historical while that of its lat-

⁴ Edward E. Ericson, Jr. has classified the development of SDS into three stages: “The first stage ran into 1965 and was a period of activist protest based on moral and personalist values. It was essentially non-ideological; the general tenor of its politics was more reformist than revolutionary. The second stage, roughly covering 1965 through 1967, grew out of disillusionment caused by lack of success in making significant changes in American society. There ensued a desperate search for an ideology to support the activism in which SDS was engaged and to provide it with an intellectual framework. In 1968 and 1969, the third stage saw a fragmentation of SDS into warring factions. Principal lines of opposition were a full acceptance of marxism-Leninism and a reversion to the personalist and existentialist concerns of the early SDS” Ericson, *Radicals in the University*, pp.1-2.

⁵ Kirkpatrick Sale has divided the history of SDS into four periods: “the first, the period of Reorganization from 1960 to 1962 when SDS takes a new name and lays the basis for the shape it was to assume; the second, the period of Reform from 1962 to 1965 when SDS tries to make American institutions live up to American ideals; the third, the period of Resistance from 1965 to 1968 when SDS spreads out from coast to coast with open confrontations against these institutions; and the last, the period of Revolution from 1968 to 1970 when SDS sets itself consciously for a thorough — and, for some, violent — overthrow of the American systems.” Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1973), p.6.

ter part on the conceptual. The historical relationships included both direct and indirect ones which might be either conscious or unconscious on the part of SDSers. The conceptual relationships were objective from the viewpoint of the outsiders rather than subjective from the viewpoint of the insiders of SDS. My central thesis with regard to both historical and conceptual relationships between the early SDS and the Jeffersonian tradition of American democracy can be simply stated in advance like this: the early SDS appeared to be Jeffersonian in spirit and far more ultra-Jeffersonian than Jeffersonian in substance. Most of this series of essays will deal with the early SDS as an ultra-Jeffersonian democrat in substance, though it will start with treating the early SDS as a Jeffersonian democrat in spirit.

IV. Essays Accomplished and Published Already:

1. SDS's Heritage of the Jeffersonian Spirit of Democracy (In *Soochow Journal of Political Science and Sociology*, No. 13, December, 1989, pp.1-41).
2. The Indirect Jeffersonian/Ultra-Jeffersonian Sources of SDS's Initial Activism: Jefferson's Democratic Doctrine of Protecting Equal Human Rights and the Old Abolitionist's Ultra-Jeffersonian Anti-Slavery Movement (In *Soochow Journal of Political Science and Sociology*, No. 14, December, 1990. pp.1-78).
3. The Direct Jeffersonian/Ultra-Jeffersonian Stimuli to SDS's Initial Activism: the New Abolitionists' Ultra-Jeffersonian Civil-Rights Movement (In *Soochow Journal of Political Science*, No. 1, March, 1992, pp.15-112).

V. Essays to be Accomplished and Published in Years to Come:

1. SDS's Initial Ultra-Jeffersonian Activism in the North and SNCC's Jeffersonian/Ultra-Jeffersonian New Left Movement in the South.
2. SDS's Jeffersonian/Ultra-Jeffersonian New Left Movement in the North.
3. The Origins of SDS's Ultra-Jeffersonian New Left Ideal of Democracy.
4. SDS's Ultra-Jeffersonian Critique of Jeffersonian and Semi-Madisonian Realities of American Democracy.
5. SDS's and SNCC's Ignorance of the Rationale for the Traditional Reality of American Democracy — the Madisonian Form and Spirit of Limited Representative Democracy.

Bibliography

Bacciocci, Edward J.

The New Left in America: Reform to Revolution 1956-1970

(Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1974)

Diggins, John P.

The American Left in the Twentieth Century

(New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973)

Erickson, Edward E.

Radicals in the University

(Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1975)

Howe, Irving

Beyond the New Left

(New York: Horizon Press, 1970)

Kaufman, Arnold S.

The Radical Liberal: New Man in American Politics

(New York: Atherton Press, 1968)

Newfield, Jack

A Prophetic Minority

(New York: The New American Library Inc., 1966)

Padover, Saul K. (ed.)

Democracy by Thomas Jefferson

(New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1939)

Peterson, Merrill D.

The Jefferson Image in the American Mind
(New York: Oxford University Press, 1962)

Sale, Kirkpatrick

SDS
(New York: Vintage Books, Random House 1973)

Sargent, Lyman Towar

New Left Thought
(Homewood, Ill.: The Dorsey Press, 1972)

Teodori, Massimo (ed.)

The New Left: A Documentary History
(Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill co., 1969)

Vickers, George R.

The Formation of the New Left: The Early Years
(Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Health and Company, 1975)

Wise, James Waterman (ed.)

Thomas Jefferson: Then and Now 1743-1943, A National Symposium
(New York: Bill of Rights Sesqui-centennial Committee 1943)