



# Why Students Rebel

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**S**TUDENT protests are not new. Confrontation on a widespread scale, though, is fairly recent. Why is this so? Why are students protesting, anyway? Descriptions are in the news almost every day. Analyses and explanations, however, are more difficult to come by. This paper is an attempt to set forth one explanation of why young people are striking back at the institutions which are supposedly designed to serve their educational needs.

Educational institutions are social systems. Every social system is a human undertaking aimed at furthering or realizing human goals. Because people are involved, problems always arise. Human ventures are subject to human frailties simply because people are not perfect.

## What Are the Options?

When a problem area comes into focus, what options are available to those who are involved? Five avenues of thought or action seem possible.

When a person or group of persons in an educational situation feels oppressed, denied, or restrained, the "problem" comes into view. Whatever the nature of the problem, the first option available to the individual who feels slighted or wronged is to request a change. He can go to "the powers that be" and complain, and thus attempt to persuade them to bring about change. If those who feel wronged or constrained are successful in

their efforts to persuade the professor to change the grade or the chairman to grant the raise or the college to expand the program, then the problem is solved.

If he is unsuccessful in his efforts to persuade, then the person with the complaint can "go over the head" of the immediate authority and complain to those "above." That is, if the student cannot convince the professor to change his grade, he can request the department chairman to bring pressure to bear in hopes of getting the professor to change his mind. If the professor cannot convince his departmental chairman to grant a financial raise, he can appeal to the dean or even further up the academic "chain of command." If members of the Black Student Union cannot get the history department to offer a series of courses in "black history," they can go to the faculty senate or the academic vice president of the institution which is involved. Employing the traditional concept of administrative appeal, those who feel oppressed or denied can ask persons in positions of authority "over" those who refuse to bring about the change to use their superior "power" to "force" the others to change. Recycling the original request back through the entire authority chain, then, is the second option open to any person with a problem such as those that have been described.

If these efforts to persuade fail, what

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happens then? What options are available to persons who have been unsuccessful in their efforts to persuade "the powers that be" to change? Three choices seem evident: give in, get out, or revolt. To the person who feels that he has a legitimate concern, none of these alternatives is seen as a "positive" or "desirable" choice at all.

As long as "the powers that be"—be they instructors, administrators, janitors, secretaries, or counselors—are *reasonable* men, the system functions reasonably well. That is, if those who are in a position to give grades, grant raises, open closed courses, offer new courses, or whatnot are thoughtful, sensitive, honest, considerate men, then most problems can usually be "talked through" to a satisfactory solution. Through the give-and-take of dialogue and informal negotiations, persons who have honest differences of opinion can usually work out their problems in a mutually acceptable way. But if the person "in charge" (of the course or the department or the program) is a rigid, insensitive, inflexible, dogmatic human being, then the problem remains and may even be enlarged.

Back to the options which remain. If the original effort to *persuade* the individual in a position of authority to change is unsuccessful, and if recycling the persuasive effort through *appeal* further up the administrative line also fails, then the *give in, get out, or revolt* options confront the individual who feels that he has been wronged or constrained in a very direct way.

"Give in! Knuckle under! Do as you are told!" This choice is clearly available, and many persons in educational institutions accept this alternative as the lesser of evils. Because it requires submission on the part of the person who feels that he has been wronged, resentment and frustration generally accompany this option, if it is pursued.

"Get out! Withdraw! Leave!" This is another possibility which becomes evident if the persuasive efforts have failed. The individual may leave—physically or psychologically—and many admonitions along that line are sure to come his way. "If you don't like it here, why don't you leave?" "Either do as the authorities say, or get out and stay

out!" The choice is exceptionally clear and some persons leave. Others "drop out" psychologically; they become apathetic, but stay. Such persons forgo the hardships of the moment for the diploma and what it seems to assure, but their self-respect and their integrity have been destroyed. "If you can't beat them, join them," they are apt to say.

Some students, however, revolt. Unwilling to accept the fact that their efforts to persuade have come to no avail, they will not give in or get out, so the only option left is to strike back and out and down. "The system must be changed," they say, but most people do not seem to know just what they mean.

Violence, rebellion, and destruction are terrible extremes. One can attempt to explain away such actions on the basis of an "international conspiracy" or a "wild group of young nihilists," but there is a more fundamental and even simpler explanation. The system is rigid. *The system is not capable of rational, deliberate change.* The system must be changed.

There is absolutely no doubt that some Marxists and some anarchists are participating in revolutionary efforts on college campuses and high school campuses today. That much is certain. One only has to walk through college bookstores, read underground newspapers, or listen to certain protesters to recognize the fact that some persons are espousing the Marxist-Leninist or Mao Tse-tung propaganda line. Such persons are very easy to find. Like all persons advocating the ideology of a closed society, the propositions which they advance and the monologue which they maintain are never their own. One can even predict what their next words will be, they hew so closely to the party line.

Such self-styled revolutionaries are dangerous on a campus or anywhere, not because they advocate a Communist or anarchist philosophy, but because they are articulate automatons who seem to but actually do not think. Such "true believers" are always dangerous, precisely because they are irrationally convinced of the justness of their cause.

But there are not many of these "hard

core" revolutionaries on any campus or in any place where there is unrest in the United States today. The basic reason for the militancy is inherent in the fact that the system as a system is not capable of systematic, intelligent, compassionate change; thus the cry that "the system must be changed." To say it another way, *the system must be changed so that the system can cope with change.*<sup>1</sup>

To charge that the system is not theoretically capable of change, though, is a serious charge. Is that statement true? I think it is.

### Change in a Social System

Education is a social system. Those social systems which have integrity—that is, those which are whole and concerned with truth—are characterized in particular ways which might be thought of as "democratic" or "effective" or both. There is a deliberate *distribution of authority according to function*, in other words, and a way of working which ensures that truth will out and the best answer will prevail. Educational systems are not characterized in either of these ways.

Planning, implementing, and evaluating are the primary functions which any social system must accomplish if it is to realize the human objectives which it seeks to attain. Those social systems which have integrity and are fully functioning are characterized by the fact that each of the functions outlined above is accomplished by a different group which has authority. Further, the evaluative function is that point at which both continuity and change can be assured.

At times some systems work better than others, that much is sure, and at times any system functions more effectively or less effectively than it did before. Even so, the evaluative function is the key. Perhaps a closer look at the system as a functioning whole will show why this is so.

The planning, conceptualizing, thinking-

through, policy-making phase of education is typically accomplished by the governing board. It is here that general directions and broad policies for the system are described. In government this is where the laws are made. In industry this is where the decision to produce a particular product or service is made. Every social system has a planning, direction-setting, conceptualizing function which must be performed.

The accomplishing, implementing, doing phase of the educational system is a function which the professionals perform. Converting policies into programs and concepts into organizational and methodological procedures, the professional staff of any educational system operationalizes the plans which the governing board sets forth. In government this function is accomplished by the executive branch. In industry the policies established by the board of directors are converted into products or services to be sold by management and workers. Cars are manufactured. Coal is mined. Food is sold.

### The Evaluative Function

The evaluative function in education represents a system void. There is no formally established group with influence which accomplishes the assessing role. In government the evaluative function is accomplished by the judiciary. The courts weigh and consider and judge. "Are the laws which the legislature made constitutional?" "Are the actions of the executive branch appropriate and legal in a constitutional way?" In industry the buying public evaluates the product or service when it goes on sale. "Is it made well?" "Will it do what I want it to do?" "Should I buy it—yes or no?"

Those social systems which are fully functioning use evaluative data as corrective feedback to improve. When evaluations occur, new information is generated which did not exist before. If the buying public refuses to buy a particular product or service (in other words, if their evaluation results in negative action), what they do is create new knowledge which tells those who planned or those who produced that something about

<sup>1</sup> These ideas are developed more fully in: Jack R. Frymier. *Fostering Educational Change*. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1969.

their efforts went wrong. Perhaps the idea (for example, the plans to produce a car with certain characteristics, with certain dimensions, in a given price range, etc.) was inappropriate or wrong, or perhaps it was not operationalized in a satisfactory way (for example, the seams were not welded adequately, the motor did not run efficiently, etc.), or both. On the other hand, if the evaluations are positive and the people buy, that also creates new knowledge that did not exist before (for example, the price range is right, the production line is doing a superb assembly job, the motor functions powerfully in a very efficient way), and the system uses the feedback as a basis for keeping the operation satisfactorily and effectively under way.

The evaluative function, then, is the precise point at which new information is made available to enable the system to maintain its operation or to improve. Those social systems which are both durable and responsive—self-perpetuating, but with the capacity to change—reflect three different but related factors when the evaluative function is accomplished: *generation of new information, evaluation by a group with authority of its own, and a criterion against which to judge which is both accepted and clear.* When these factors are in evidence, then the evaluative function has the theoretical power to enable the system both to continue and to change.

The existence of the judiciary as a separate branch of the government, for example, illustrates the existence of an evaluative group. When the courts make decisions, they create new information which did not exist before. These decisions also have power. The rest of the system, in other words, pays attention to the feedback. Because there is a Constitution which clarifies the purposes and which has been ratified, the reality of an articulated and accepted criterion is also involved. In economics the same thing is true. One group plans. Another produces. And the buying public judges the plans and the product or service in an evaluative way. Furthermore, the judgments of the buying public have power. The producers and the planners have to pay attention to what the buyers say. And the criterion of profit is

both conspicuous and accepted by all parties involved.

In education the system is otherwise. There is neither a formal nor an informal group which functions as a part of the system to accomplish the evaluative role. There is no "third party" which is "objective" and which has authority to whom those who feel constrained or denied can turn. They can only go back up the same "legal line" which created the circumstances out of which the problem grew in the first place. Further, when evaluations are made, there is no insistence within the system that they be utilized. New data may become available as a result of evaluative efforts, but there are no clearly stated objectives which either have been ratified or are so widely understood as to have impact. Therefore, when evaluations do take place, they may be attended to or they may be completely ignored. It is in this sense that the educational system as presently conceived is largely incapable of self renewal and rational change.

## Changing the System

What might be done? Several things might be attempted, but the system must certainly be changed. Changing the people has been often advocated. Changing the system is another thing. Unless the system itself is changed, it will not be capable of thoughtful, deliberate educational change.

What is needed, of course, is some kind of evaluative mechanism which is sufficiently sensitive to the problems and concerns of those who are involved that it will be in a position to respond. However, this group must have adequate authority of its own. It dare not be a part of the hierarchy, and there must be a deliberate effort to distribute authority according to function rather than to consolidate authority. The "top-down" concept must be changed.

One cannot portray our concept of government in a "top-down" way. The legislative, the executive, and the judicial are separate and equal branches of the government. It is possible to show a line and staff arrangement of each of the three branches sep-

arately, but one branch of government cannot be described as "above" the others in a hierarchical way. Each has a function and an authority of its own.

In education, though, the policy makers and implementers are typically thought of and described in linear ways: governing boards are at the "top" and those who implement are "below." There is no separate group which has authority in the evaluative realm, either. That conceptual void has to be filled with a newly devised group, and that group must be granted the authority to accomplish the evaluative role.

Some universities have inaugurated the ombudsman idea, for example, as an effort to fill that theoretical void. Others have attempted to involve students more extensively in the formal decision-making structure of the university in order to assure them that their voice and their concerns would be heard. Such steps will not solve the problem, though they are definitely appropriate directions in which to go.

Expanding involvement is very important, but guaranteeing participation is no assurance that the evaluative function will be adequately performed. Likewise, the ombudsman idea is most certainly sound, but in those countries where the ombudsman functions most effectively,<sup>2</sup> there already exists a fully-developed judicial system which accomplishes the basic evaluative role. Presuming that the ombudsman can satisfactorily perform all of the basic evaluative functions plus the "extra" evaluative refinements which he traditionally accomplishes is probably not reasonable. This is not meant to suggest that the ombudsman idea is not an important one—it is. Yet we dare not expect one man to accomplish on an "extra" basis (usually in addition to certain other duties) that which probably ought to be attended to by a group of persons working full-time in an evaluative way.

The basic issue, of course, is the governance structure of the educational system. Can it be satisfactorily accomplished "top-

down"? Will it work effectively if evaluations are accomplished by the same persons who have responsibilities for policy making and implementing roles? I think not. The system must be changed.

Young people all over the world have been sending the adult community messages in many ways. Their ideas are not all sound. Their behavior is certainly not always appropriate or defensible at all. And the fact that some persons flout the law, destroy property, and violate the integrity of other persons is certainly not to be condoned. Such behavior is unacceptable and must be dealt with in legal but humane ways.

Even so, the complaints are real. The system is rigid. It is not capable of rational, deliberate change. "Good" men in the system can do a lot to make the system function reasonably well, but any system which requires "good men" to make it go is also a system which will allow a scalawag or an autocrat to wreak havoc and behave in arbitrary, obstinate ways. That is the system we have today, and that system must be changed. We must devise evaluative mechanisms which are sufficiently sensitive but fully responsive to the dynamic state of education. We must agree upon the purposes of education, and see to it that assessments and judgments are made according to those terms of purpose.

Schools do not exist to serve taxpayers' needs. Neither do they exist to serve administrators' or teachers' needs. Schools exist to help young people learn. Students are rebelling, but many of their complaints are unquestionably real.

Those who work in education have a problem. Since problems are their stock-in-trade, it seems reasonable to expect that they should apply the power of intelligence to the business of solving this particular problem. Let's hope they will. Repressive tendencies abound. We do not need educational institutions which are less free, but rather those which are more free. Progress always starts with criticism. Many persons are complaining now. "The system must be changed," they say. The governance structure of the educational system is one place to begin. □

<sup>2</sup> Walter Gellhorn. *Ombudsman and Others in Nine Countries*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967.

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