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# Revolt of Youth and Intelligentsia

**T**he revolt of youth pervades the whole of modern society. Especially in democratic countries which are highly industrialised, it has recently shown the vehemence of an epidemic. However, its incidence is not absent from totalitarian state systems or from developing countries either. It is not particularly hard to find an explanation for the international character of this syndrome. On the other hand, student riots may have greatly varying causes and background histories from one country to the next, depending on national conditions, so that also their significance need not be the same for all nations. But they have one thing in common: they represent everywhere reactions of the young intelligentsia or semi-intellectuals to their environment, because these young people meet with difficulties in trying to find an acceptable position in their social surroundings. It may also be stated that, in industrialised countries, these reactions are more or less irrational expressions of protest against the anonymous and faceless machinery of society, against the inescapable compulsion of economic forces, and against the attitude of conformity of the older generation, who sometimes accept without demur these conditions even in situations where resignation is premature. Last, but not least, revolt—as so many spectacular developments of the world's public life—has acquired, with the aid of the mass media, a self-perpetuating and snowballing force. Revolts have a model effect on those who have not yet revolted, they mould intellectual and political fashions, and they thus promote feelings of solidarity and motivate emulation among persons who are seemingly or actually in the same mood. The establishment then discovers with trepidation that it is faced by a new and anonymous force, which it assesses, by preference, as an inevitable concomitant of modern conditions, the more so as the establishment itself has gradually lost the capacity to evaluate these conditions.

Attempts at analysing these developments, which have been made in recent years, frequently ignore three distinct characteristic traits of the revolt: that the revolt is less one of youth at large than one of the intelligentsia, which makes use of youth and its special situation; that the establishment is progressively losing its capacity for meeting its task to provide leadership; and that amateurish approaches of ideological origin are offered growing chances to interfere, through the ubiquitous lack of adequate overall knowledge of conditions in industrialised societies, as these become progressively more complex.

Modern democratic societies are depending more than ever on sufficient consent among their populations, which means that social conflict is kept within limits and medium-term decisions for the future may be evolved in the right direction, whilst clashes on targets are circumvented. At the same time, however, dynamic progress of science and technology, as it impinges on society, requires perpetual and non-conformist, i.e. critical, reassessments in order to determine whether the rules of social and political life which are currently in force should be redrawn in agreement with new structures, possibilities, and requirements. If you change the rules, you also change the balance of power, the distribution of incomes, amenities, and vested interests. It thus becomes more and more difficult to reestablish the indispensable equilibrium between conformity and non-conformity. Naturally, it is easier to make out what are short-term advantages for individual groups than long-term or even medium-term requirements of the community as a whole, and it is a foregone conclusion that, in a so-called pluralistic society, short-term advantages will always be successfully pushed at the expense of long-term necessities. It thus becomes inevitable that social problems, whose solution is more or less vital for everybody, but in whose favour nobody is prepared to forego his own aims or desires, accumulate.

In a pluralistic society, not even the state with its legislative and executive powers will be able to resolve these conflicts, as far as the state itself has become the shuttlecock of opposing sectional interests, and as far as its role as the supreme and impartial referee is being undermined by the prevalence of absurdly exaggerated individualistic ideologies.

Modern industrial society is not characterised anymore by a distinctive penury of underprivileged strata or classes. Its outstanding features, on the contrary, are an anonymous political and/or economic machinery, whose workings are hard to understand, the wishes of the masses leaving real possibilities far behind them, one-sided and specialised vocational training of the establishment, and the underdevelopment of political knowledge and education of the citizens. Under such conditions, a distinct type of personality is given a new chance for action, a type which already in the past has shown its "mettle" in acting as the protagonist of revolutionary trends. Though these personalities can hardly be identified satisfactorily as representatives of a single social group, they have in common the rejection, in principle, of all existing things, which they criticise without mercy. This is the intelligentsia.

It was Joseph A. Schumpeter who, in his book, "Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy", which was published in New York in 1942, has drawn a convincing collective portrait of the intellectuals in their role in democratic and capitalist societies. His description has been strikingly confirmed by the events of recent years. In Schumpeter's view, members of the intelligentsia are people, who are able to use spoken and written words as instruments of power; do not bear responsibility for practical things; lack first-hand knowledge of facts, as this can be acquired by actual practical experience; will always be critical, on the one hand, because all the intelligentsia are forever condemned to remain mere spectators and outsiders, on the other hand, because their maximum chances of personal success are tied up with their actual or potential capacity for making trouble. For, honours and financial gain may be obtained in more than one way: practising flattery and fawning on the powerful frequently produce fewer gains in this respect than the opposite.

Professor Schumpeter defines journalists as the prototype of the intellectual. But this definition fits also those students who are active as protagonists or fellow-travellers of students' revolts. It also explains why journalists, by preference, indulge in heroic adulation of rioting students, instead of criticising them or of ignoring them.

During periods when every intelligent observer was able to identify clearly social evils or the misuse of power, and when also the means for their dismantling were conspicuously at hand, the intelligentsia have been able to assume a useful function in revolutionary movements. That is why they are often able to dedicate themselves to such a task in developing countries, though not always and not everywhere. But in the industrialised countries, the intelligentsia's inclination to criticism at any cost finds its expression in their destructive hostility to any social order. This is bound up with their refusal and their inability to learn the required facts. The freedom of the press—the most powerful vested interest in the big democracies—rapidly changes from a fundamental condition of keeping a free society alive to an ideology of complete licence for journalists, to whom everything is permitted and to whom nothing is any longer forbidden. A similar description fits the students who are in revolt. Proudly wearing the mantle of pretended non-conformity, they have become the true conformists by doing everything which is customary in a permissive democracy. They have found out how powerful they are, and they use their new-found power regardless, in order to gain advantages. At the same time, they try to persuade a bemused establishment that they alone, though dominated only by the vaguest of ideologies, are in possession of the true remedies for curing all the modern diseases of society. Since the political leaders have proved that they are in every respect even weaker than the rebels themselves had originally believed, the unrest created by the rebels is more of a hindrance than an instrument to the overcoming of the topical problems.

*Heinz-Dietrich Ortlieb*