

Campus Capers



Whatever happened to Student Power?

As the high-profile militancy and euphoric internationalism of the 60s and early 70s gave way to the harsher exigencies of the

Thatcher era, student power wilted along with its close associate, and sometime bed-fellow, flower-power.

The days when the Left could write, without a trace of irony, that 'the emergence of the student movement promises a renewal of revolutionary politics as well as the arrival of a new social force' (Alexander Cockburn's introduction to *Student Power*), when it viewed students as the revolutionary vanguard of a new social order, are long past. Today's student is more likely to be found manning the union bars than manning the barricades (although 'manning' would still be the operative word) or writing a research paper on student loans than editing an underground magazine.

Marxism Today takes a semi-serious look at today's student movement and student politics - and comes to no very serious conclusions.

They Shall Not Pass

6 Admission to *Marxism Today's* list of tame speakers has meant that I've been seeing more of the inside of buildings named after Nelson Mandela than I have for a few years, and what a familiar world it is. I had assumed that about the only things that hadn't changed in student political life since I left university were that Mandela was in jail, Thatcher was in power, and students couldn't do anything about either. In fact, it seems at times as though the students of Britain have vowed to suspend their political development until the South African leader is freed.

Unfair, I'm sure. But there you are, in a political meeting, grappling self-consciously with the ideological, and you wonder why the youth in the front row is staring at you so balefully; and then he opens his mouth to loftily dismiss you for inadequate attention to the industrial proletariat. The most malign influence in student politics is the presence in colleges of thousands of males,

in transition from adolescence to adulthood, who seem to think they should establish themselves in the manner of young male moose or monkeys; by aggression, territoriality and the subordination of females. Above all, they are competitive, particularly with males whom they perceive as enjoying higher status. It doesn't really square with the ideals of academic debate, let alone those of comradeship.

A telling detail of these meetings is the way in which the women present tend to keep quiet until the formal discussion is closed. It's then that you get the shy inquiries, the smiles and the gestures of normal social empathy.

The youths have developed in one respect: they've become funky; all baseball caps and trendy haircuts. They tend to hang around the ultra-Left party that is really easy to join; members can be either mad or stupid. Its newer competitor is jesuitically difficult to join, choosing its positions to deter the faint-

hearted, and requiring cadres to be both mad and brainy.

It also demands a grasp of a quintessentially intellectual concept: the hypothetical. 'Let us assume we are about to take power': what could be more donnish? You may composite your UGM motion *as if* it made any difference to the outside world; it may be a genuinely valuable form of play, rehearsing procedures for future application.

Admitting the playful nature of the process would make it less of a conduit for emotion, and would do nothing for the players' self-esteem. But it might help if new generations of activists realised that, for instance, a city council is not just a student union with lots of working-class members.

And then there is the fate of students, beguiled by slogans from distant places and times, who neglect their studies. They Shall Not Pass. •

Marek Kohn



It took a sustained campaign by women within their student movement to establish a women's unit and a women's conference in their national membership organisation, the NUS. It's taken even longer and even more determined campaigning to finally achieve a national executive officer with special responsibility for women students. Just two months ago Julie Grant was elected first national Women's Officer of the NUS. *Marxism Today* talked to her about the particular needs and problems of women students and about the necessarily changing role of the student unions in the face of the Thatcherite education project.

With a Women's Unit and a Women's Conference already successfully established within the NUS, was a Women's Officer really a priority?

The Women's Unit had no funding, no control. The national executive didn't have to reflect in the national union's work what women students actually wanted or needed. We were frustrated by lack of power and lack of resources and felt we had to change things within the NUS if it was to be genuinely democratic, more representative, more relevant and accessible to women and much more sensitive to their specific needs and expectations.

It might be argued, in some quarters at least, that the campaign for a Women's Officer has deflected or obscured the needs of other disadvantaged groups, like working-class and black students.

I don't follow that line of argument that says by supporting one group you withdraw support from others. This is the route that women have chosen to follow; other groups may or may not elect to do likewise, but either way we'll support them. The NUS is a membership organisation and, quite simply, this was one of the issues the membership wanted us to campaign on.

Can you identify for us some of

The Women's Campaign

the main difficulties that women students face?

That's a huge question and one we can only touch on here. At its simplest it's a problem firstly of access and secondly of sheer survival. Apart from the initial bias against them entering higher education there are additional barriers for women which make it more difficult for them than for men to complete courses and achieve good degrees - and these problems are even more acute for working-class and black women. Traditional student life and the traditional, stereotypical image of the student excludes women, socially, culturally and politically. And the sexism which is endemic in our education system - and which finds its crudest expression in sexual harassment - is a major cause of women 'dropping out' of education. The unequal power relations between students and teachers are compounded when the teacher is a man and the students are women. We aim to raise the level of awareness of sexual harassment, both at the day-to-day level and at the level where it can determine the outcome of a woman's whole future.

How would you assess the current mood of the student movement in general and the NUS in particular? There seems, on the face of it, to be an air of general political inertia and a concentration on narrowly parochial issues in comparison with the high-profile activism and internationalism of a few years back. There is even talk of a rightward swing.

There is an attitude, and I think it's a mistaken one, that the student movement is quiet. In fact the student unions have been extremely active recent-

ly and there has been a high level of politicisation over loans. That level of politicisation will be maintained and we'll be ready for 'top-up' loans and anything else the government has to throw at us. In Scotland, Labour students have made major gains over the proposed introduction of a student poll-tax and the student campaign against apartheid has been a major factor in Barclays pulling out of South Africa. And there were higher levels of politicisation and expectation during the last general election than at any other, with greater numbers of students getting out and voting and campaigning. All this indicates that the movement is still active - active on a more serious and well-informed level than before. We tend to think of 'active' as rampaging through the streets. The movement has shown itself recently to be more mature and more prepared to take long-term, considered views on political issues. What about the miners' strike? The miners' strike was a good example of student solidarity. But that kind of solidarity doesn't get press coverage. Lesbian and gay students supporting the miners doesn't get media attention, doesn't get recognised by the people who get to write the articles about whether the movement is active or not. Those kinds of people wouldn't recognise activism unless it hit them over the head. Today the student unions are not just campaigning on issues the traditional student activist wants, but on what the activist who is involved in his or her community and across a range of political groupings wants.

What sort of effect has the

women's campaign had on the structure of the NUS?

I believe the women's campaign has had a considerable effect. It has extended democracy in terms of women's participation. We've managed to set up a fully delegate-based national conference to which delegates are elected by women in cross-campus ballots, and which elects a member straight on to the national executive. I think that's a very healthy development. And a radical development. I don't know of any other similar organisation that does this. They may be talking about it, aiming for it, but they haven't actually implemented it.

Will the NUS be strong enough to withstand a third term of Thatcherism?

Our work on equal opportunities over the coming year - not just for women but for black, gay and lesbian students and disabled students too, is going to put us in a very strong position. I think that more of our membership than ever before is involved, interested and participating in the NUS. The problem is that the critics don't recognise participation; they don't know what it means. The NUS will be actively, not quietly, working away with its membership to achieve real gains in the coming year.

Finally, how will you set about ensuring that women can become more involved in their student unions?

There are lots of problems about getting women involved. Problems like child-care, like the atmosphere in the student unions, like the kind of sexism which says women can do the typing and hand out the leaflets and that men will make the speeches. Even when women are involved it's at a menial level, supporting and servicing men so that they can do the 'real' political work. The NUS has faced up to this. It's what the campaign for a women's officer was all about. The national union is weaker when it excludes its women, that's my argument. It took some time to win that one! •

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Style Counsel

Two terms that have never been particularly good classmates are 'students' and 'style.' But with recent shiftings in cultural classification, it's time to traverse the intersections of street and study, and examine student style ... beyond the college sweatshirt jeaneration.

It's a return to the school year with a return to school wear. The latest taste in uniform

fetishism transcends the simple expression of childhood fantasies when placed in the academic context where it shines as the epitome of 'back to school' pastiche. To be seen on campus cultivating a critique in blazers, skirts or shorts (or both) and knee-length stockings, with ties and scarves as optional accessories, is the simplest spectacle of autumnal parody.

For engagements in the lecture league, the post-casual consciousness can simultaneously manifest and disperse itself amid the diversity of serious styles in contempor-

ary micro-sports wear. For those quick off the mark, the trans-activity look of baseball cap and cycling shirt worn with rock climbing leggings (or surf shorts for the suitably wiped out), without forgetting the mandatory 'all year, all wear' pair of traiters, are essential to be seen sporting in a slightly strenuous yet perfunctory state of attention.

International inclinations are also well positioned, with a cross cultural melange, underwritten in overwear of Stateside design in the form of baseball, quilted and flight jackets arrayed in the latest

display of glasnost chic, while that perennial item of attire, the T-Shirt, is continuously *del* re-politicised with a multiplicity of graphics, ranging from campaign to Chanel logos. All of this is impeccably touched in the finish with true form in an evergreen pair of homegrown Doc Martens.

With the foundations of trend topography displayed, the financial foundations of fashionable purchase are quite obvious. The manner in which limited (grant) resources are spent, is, after all, a question of style. •

Darryl Moore

Campus



When the university teachers of English leave the lecture theatre for the word processor and turn to fiction, we generally end up with the campus novel. The paranoid polytechnic lecturer in Howard Jacobson's *Coming From Behind* envied the inhabitants of Bradbury Lodge, the jetsetting, novel-writing successful academics. But the comic novels of Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge have always left me with a sense of unease, their ideological project seems to be a domesticating of literary theory by mocking its more 'extreme' and 'foreign' versions, while their writing hides a conventional English novel of middle-aged, middle-class doubt beneath a veneer of post-modernist self-consciousness (fiction's awareness of itself as fiction, invention and lan-



Bad Press

Listen to a student apply for a summer job if ever you need proof of genuine embarrassment about status. Lumped together by the media as a social class of stereotypes with knee-jerk reactions, a non-productive part of a lean British economy, students are starting to believe their own bad press.

Students seem to lap up a culture that hates them. *NME* campus concert reviews thrive off the 'students can't dance and students wear crap clothes' critique yet they continue to buy the magazine in ever-increasing numbers. Real life is seen as something which goes on in a world *outside* higher education where people pay taxes and wear proper trousers.

Bank advertising dishes up old-favourite stereotypes that haven't changed for years: students bored by their oppressive parents (no way will Mid-

guage). The novels' view of universities often mirrors the wildest fantasies of the *Daily Mail*: overpaid, oversexed, underworked academics only seeing students for fleeting affairs before they fly off to another conference. The actual state of higher education, bruised and battered by Thatcherite rigour, disappears.

Terry Eagleton's first novel, *Saints and Scholars*, shows one of Britain's leading marxist critics avoiding the comic campus and reappropriating another source of liberal laughter. Tom Stoppard's *Travesties* lurks behind *Saints and Scholars*, as Eagleton reworks the comedy of ideas towards radical ends. The novel is set in Ireland at the time of the 1916 Easter Rising, beginning by postponing the execution of James Connolly, allowing him to escape and meet the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, Nikolai Bakhtin, brother of the marxist literary theorist Mikhail, and Leopold Bloom, on leave, as it were, from James Joyce's *Ulysses*. 'A Scottish Irishman, an Irish Hunga-

land students wear duffle coats or college scarves on the prompting of their mother) and blatantly smug (naturally I chose a bank that showed a clear understanding of the working of the free market economy' says the young Lloyds' client). Hardly subliminal advertising techniques reaching into the student psyche.

The *Animal House* and *The Young Ones* stereotypes work on several levels. Students can laugh at moonies and jobbie sandwiches as easily as a six-year-old, safe in their knowledge of Kafka's early novels and the background to the Gulf crisis. The humour is always directed against someone else, someone ignorant.

The media work on three broad male stereotypes: the young fogey, president of the dining club, who wears Church's brogues bequeathed by his father and 'Will power' badges; the hep, born in crepe-soled boots with discrete enamel badges of Battleship Potempkin bought in Red Square; and the rugby-playing chemist who knows the words to 'take it off, take it off, sang the boys in the back' and wears Adidas Samba trainers and badges saying 'Ignore me I'm pissed'. Certain key characteristics of these sophisticated stereotypes are isolated by programme makers and occasionally juggled around for anthropological effect (like the proposed ITV sitcom of the Lefty who wears brogues).

The media saw student politics after the 60s as a few rotten

tomatoes in the faces of famous politicians and not much more. That is why *Citizen Smith* dressed like Che Guevara and talked in clichés and Rick of *The Young Ones* was Anarchist and Militant turn and turn about; both were figures of fun in a medium that was laughing at the flimsiness of their politics. The media created and dismissed the Loony Left just as easily.

But to see student politics now, you can appreciate Rick has a lot to answer for. The causes of the Left are as valid as ever, but the voices are quieter and more self-conscious. Not because students are shifting to the Right, but because at last they have come up against the one stereotype that worries them: that of the hack.

Television is only interested in two student stereotypes. There's the ambitious all-rounder (like Jeremy Irons, usually at a redbrick university or Oxbridge) and the dossier like Ade Edmondson. In a testy recruitment quiz in the student press, the army attempts to sort out one stereotype from another; the A's in one pile, C's in another. A's would tell the coach to stuff it if he (by no stretch of the imagination was this ad aimed at a she) was dropped from the rucker team by the coach in favour of an inferior player. The decent chaps, the C's, would just damn well impress coach at the next training session round the quad. Is there really nothing in between? Will the B's please come forward? #

Richard Johnson

rian, an anglicised Austrian and a Russian', Connolly, Bloom, Wittgenstein and Bakhtin are the cast of an intellectual joke as well as the participants in a debate between philosophers trying to understand the world and revolutionaries, trying to change it. There's a real comic exuberance here, especially in the descriptions of the novel's cities - St Petersburg, Vienna, Dublin. Beckett is also parodied, as Eagleton's characters wait for Godot, with Connolly pursued by the British army and Wittgenstein fearing that he is being chased by Cambridge dons.

Duncan Webster

Not Standing Aloan

Since 1978/79 the real value of the student grant has fallen by 21%. In the same period parental contributions have risen by 185%. The average student is currently left with £3.96 a week or 57 pence a day to spend during term time after paying for food, accommodation, travel, books, equipment and clothing. These sobering statistics from the NUS reveal the extent to which the all-grant system of student finance that was introduced in 1962 has broken down.

As students continue to campaign for the reform of the grant system, they are also fighting off the government's proposals to abolish it and introduce student loans. Uniting under the slogans 'We Won't Stand Aloan!' and 'Living Grant, Not A Life In Debt!', students from all backgrounds have campaigned to reject the loan scheme. In 1984/85 an imaginative and well organised campaign, and the reluctance of the major banks to back the government's student loan proposals, led to a dramatic government 'U' turn. More recently education secretary Kenneth Baker has focused media attention on secondary education. But the loan scheme has not gone away.

Now there is talk of a top-up, or partial loan system. The NUS is responding with a sustained campaign. Armed with an impressive research document which pin-points the major deficiencies of loan systems in North America and Scandinavia, they are able to refute each line of the government's defence of the loan option. Experience in North America and Scandinavia suggests that loan schemes are expensive to initiate and to maintain. They discourage the participation of students from working-class backgrounds, women, ethnic minorities, the disabled; any group which traditionally has lower salaries than white, middle-class men and would probably find it more difficult to pay back a loan. Loans would not improve access to further and higher education to all those willing and able to benefit from it.

Mobilising and maintaining a national opposition of students and parents, educationalists and political organisations across party lines is necessary to ensure that this element of the Thatcherite project is resisted. •

Chris Granlund