

When Students Took On the Government

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A review of

SDS: Students For A Democratic Society: 50th Anniversary Edition by Kirkpatrick Sale. Autonomedia, 2023

The 50th anniversary edition of Kirkpatrick Sale’s history of SDS, the 1960s radical student organization, is more than a time-capsule. It is a breathing, encyclopedic compendium of hope and outrage, a chronicle of chaos and courage. The book connects contemporary readers with a radical lineage filled with inspiring stories of the contagious movement among rebellious youth during that tumultuous decade.

The text is expansive and exhaustive, comprehensive and chronological. At almost 700 pages, it’s daunting at the level of something like David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, but probably more approachable for anyone with a serious interest in this topic. It can be read both as an adventure in radical storytelling and as a history of the 1960s itself, told and interpreted through the lens and perspectives of the students and activists that were there.

This book is incredibly helpful insofar as it serves as an interconnected and documentary recollection of how specific movements became The Movement. Many causes were not campus-specific, but nationwide and world-wide, yet with dynamic, widespread, and unprecedented youth leadership that caught fire and caught the collective imagination.

Was the student left about civil rights and Black Power? Was it about the antiwar movement and the draft? Was it about imperialism and militaristic domination? Was it about racist police and prisons? Was it about sexism and male chauvinism giving way to feminism and women’s liberation, foreshadowing queer liberation? Yes, the movement was all of this and more. What has been said elsewhere about the early days of this publication could be said about the youth movement more generally, in that people were drawn to various strands, to whatever had the scent of authentic rebellion: Mao and Murray Bookchin; the Viet Cong and yoga; national liberation groups and the MC5.

An immediate takeaway would be how successful some of the specific SDS on-campus campaigns actually were, from removing ROTC requirements at some colleges to chasing them off campus entirely at other places, to inspiring and instigating the free university movement (which was so innovative and needed, that its ideas and models were mostly co-opted and made part of mainstream colleges as easily as tie-dye and bell-bottoms were commodified).

This book is also about factions and fractures and the charismatic magic of powerful personalities, people of leftwing legend like Tom Hayden and Bernardine Dorhn, Carl Oglesby, and Mark Rudd. The most heartbreaking, and at times darkly hilarious aspects of this book come from the ways that Sale’s lively, mostly journalistic style of storytelling expose the endless radical in-fighting among different factions for control of the national office in Chicago.

As to internal squabbles, do activists today make some of the same mistakes as our predecessors? The militant SDS we encounter at the end of the book seems hardly recognizable as the same group we are introduced to at its 1962 beginning with its hopeful dreams of reform. And that is one of the more enchanted aspects of the volume,

one of many contemplative riddles that make this text worth studying, and then studying some more, for anyone involved in oppositional movements.

Sale uses countless abbreviations throughout the text for all the different groups and subgroups. There's a glossary of organizations in the back, but it's mighty maddening to remember them all, as it's the same old alphabet soup of left sectarianism.

It's like all the splits and more splits in religious denominations, and the fights themselves actually make more sense as personality conflicts than the ostensible ideological hair-splitting. Yet, SDS kept it together and accomplished so much, even in spite of themselves. Kirkpatrick makes it clear how SDS was a testimony to the intensity of the times and the audacity of its radical youth. Is this book also about the tensions between an eclectic anti-authoritarianism that percolated in the early SDS days and remained active in most local chapters contrasted with the authoritarianism and squabbles at the top that sealed its demise by 1969? Yes, very much yes.

Self-seriousness is everywhere, from fraught parliamentarianism to fierce protests. For all the movement's bearded and beaded counterculture flourishes, there's so much more that's hard-edge and hardline about the version of SDS that ends the decade and crashes in on itself. The self-appointed vanguardism, at war with rival vanguards from within, the purges and shunnings, were somehow propelled by the unexamined and bold premise that this particular handful of 20-somethings, in their collectives and cells, would lead an entire nation into war against itself, to overthrow the mother country beast, once and for all.

This internal hubris, when acted on, seems even more disturbing than the potpourri of pretentious hard-left theories that reduced the immense radical imagination to a catastrophic lack of imagination, at least among the authoritarian and communist factions.

It's wild to contemplate how some within the later SDS would have probably despised the early SDS, how phrases like "too diverse" or "too undisciplined" were now negative critical assessments rather than counterculture calling cards. This story is also a forewarning for activists who think they can make revolution by simply going door-to-door to evangelize "the masses." Sale makes this clear when describing some SDS groups in the late 1960s imposing tedious and joyless lectures on high school students and street youth intended to liberate them, but only alienating them from future revolutionary joy.

Although much ballyhoo has been made about the "smash monogamy" and programmatic free love orgies of the late SDS and early Weather Underground, it does not come off here as liberated polyamory. If anything, it seems impersonal, as cringe-worthy as the cringe-worthy self-criticism sessions of psychological self-loathing which were intended to erode the overconfidence of their bourgeois egos. But if they were anything, the later SDS and burgeoning Weather Underground leaders were overconfident and afflicted with certainty.

Sale quotes one anonymous activist, turning the Weather group's appropriation of a Bob Dylan lyric from "Subterranean Homesick Blues" on its head: "You don't need a rectal thermometer to know who the assholes are." Sale also assesses one speech in defense of the Weather gang this way: "[Bill] Ayers managed to justify for the Weathermen their recklessness, arrogance, self-righteousness, and isolation, in the strongest and most persuasive terms."

Sale's book is neither a treatise for or against revolutionary violence, but he acknowledges both the outlaw stature and stupefying normality of the Weather Underground and their bombing campaign, that "did not create any significant terror," in part because "violence is already so endemic in American society." These topics of SDS, and of the 1960s and '70s more broadly, are continually worthy of examination, interpretation, and reinterpretation, as they remain relevant in a world with all the same ills, and probably some new ones, and the inevitable crises and rebellions such a world requires.

While some SDS activists were involved with Trotskyist, Maoist, and other Marxist-Leninist organizations, there were also anarchists. Anti-authoritarian groups like the Motherfuckers, Chicago Solidarity, Yippies, anarcho-syndicalists, including the IWW, women's liberation projects, free health clinics, later reaching into community health centers for addicts and AIDS, Movement for a Democratic Society, etc., got more energy, even as SDS was disintegrating and the small band of the Weather Underground were playing their particular vanguardist games including constructing theories of white skin privilege and identity politics.

SDS had heady aspirations of abolishing war, ending racism, and creating free egalitarian universities, but it was more than could be expected or realized by students alone. They fought as hard as they could for those goals, many relinquishing the middle-class life expected of them, instead committed to revolutionary change. Their ef-

forts sputtered out because they had nowhere to go politically. A radicalized working class was needed such as occurred in France in 1968 to really threaten capitalist institutions, but that was never forthcoming.

Still, SDS was successful in leading white students against racism and war, and many of the individuals went above their privilege in challenging the university system that was set up for their benefit.

The national organization crashed early, even before the 1960s ended in a paroxysm of adventurist militancy such as the Days of Rage in Chicago. But, the local chapters and the thousands of students touched by the SDS ethos and energy continued on into the 1970s with the struggles in their cities and campuses far from the disputes in the national office that they often barely understood or even cared about.

The 50th anniversary republication of Kirkpatrick Sale's book deserves new readers as a key portion of an ongoing conversation about understanding our radical lineage since the 1960s. The book also leaves readers looking toward today's radical youth and wanting to address with revolutionary hope all that remains wrong with this pathologically authoritarian society, especially when such entrenched hierarchies infect our movements for a better world

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