

When Students Became Youth and Youth Became Students¹

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Capitalizing on previous research into the construction of youth as a category in twentieth century American politics, this paper provides a new context for understanding the student organizing occurring on white and black college campuses in the 1960s. First, I argue that given the history of African America youth being treated as outside of the developmental timeline established for white youth, the civil rights movement can be understood as a fight for access to 'appropriate' developmental time. Second, I argue that the student movement occurring on the campuses of historically white colleges and universities upset the traditional notion of student as a relatively safe identity for young people who would otherwise be viewed with suspicion.

Introduction

The story of student activism in the 1960s and the two primary organizations, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), has been well documented. Increasingly, even smaller, traditionally less known components of the student movement have received academic treatment including the Prairie Power Movement, the Southern Student Organizing Committee, and Young Americans for Freedom.² These works have traditionally focused on one of three themes: (1) the internal politics of the organizations,

¹ Please note that this is a work in progress, prepared for presentation at the 2013 WPSA Conference in Hollywood, CA. Please do not circulate or cite without written permission from the authors. That said, I welcome your feedback on these ideas. I can be reached at arank@uw.edu.

² For a discussion of SDS see Alan Adelson, *SDS* (New York: Scribner, 1972); David Barber, *A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why It Failed* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008); Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987); Kevin Mattson, *Intellectuals in Action: The Origins of the New Left and Radical Liberalism, 1945 – 1970* (University Press: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002); Jim Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987). For a discussion of SNCC see Iwan Morgan and Philip Davies, eds., *From Sit-Ins to SNCC: The Student Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012); Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *A Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998). For a discussion of Prairie Power Movement see Robbie Lieberman, *Prairie Power: Voices of 1960s Midwestern Student Protest* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004); Robert Pardun, *Prairie Radical: Journey Through the Sixties* (Los Gatos, CA: Shire Press, 2001); For a discussion of student organizing in the south and particularly of the Southern Student Organizing Committee see Gregg L. Michael, *Struggle for a Better South: The Southern Student Organizing Committee, 1964-1969* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Jeffrey A. Turner, *Sitting In and Speaking Out: Student Movements in the American South 1960-1970* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010); For a discussion of Young Americans for Freedom see Rebecca E. Klatch, *A Generation Divided: The New Left, The New Right, and the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

(2) the impact of their activism on students' later lives, and (3) the ideology of the organization or its main participants. At its broadest, the time period considered by these texts ranges from 1945-1970. This truncated timeframe limits the ability to understand how student movements fit into the broader treatment of youth throughout the 20th century.³ My dissertation, *Developing Inequalities: The Social and Political Construction of "Youth" in Twentieth Century America*, explores the way in which social and political elites of various eras construct specific notions of youth and then legislate in response to those constructions. Using an American political development approach, my work situates the student movements of the 1960s in a broader story about youth in twentieth century America. This paper, "When Students Became Youth and Youth Became Students," argues that (1) the civil rights movement (CRM), particularly the efforts of students at historically black colleges and universities, can be understood as an effort to gain access to the development model denied to them throughout American history and (2) the white student movement spurred by the CRM shook elite understandings of educational institutions and resulted in the language previously reserved for young people outside of educational institutions being attached to students.

I begin by providing a brief review of the elite construction and treatment of young people during the Progressive Era through the post-World War II era. Reviewing both the particular fears attached to young people as well as the divided expectations of young people according to race establishes the critical role elites saw education institutions playing in linking young people to the American state. I then turn to a discussion of previous work on development, manhood, and masculinity within black America. Finally, I explore the way in which activism in

³ One text, Willis Rudy, *The Campus and a National in Crisis: From the American Revolution to Vietnam* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 1996) places campus activism in a longer historical context but focuses specifically on campus activism related to military conflict.

the 1960s can be understood as an effort of black Americans to fit themselves into developmental time while white student movements upset previous understandings of the stabilizing role of education.

Elite Construction of Youth in Early and Mid-Twentieth Century America

The Progressive Era

The Progressive Era gave rise to the first concerted effort of American reformers to construct youth into a class meriting special forms of protection particularly with regard to labor. From America's inception, children had worked from a young age on family farms and at family businesses as parents viewed work as a necessary component of morality. By the late Gilded Age, however, the conditions of work changed. With the rise of mass industrialization, factories became increasingly automated and required high numbers of workers to keep production rates up. Most factory jobs failed to pay adequate wages to adult earners and frequently reserved jobs for adults who could bring their children to perform additional labor. The work performed by children added necessary funds to the family coffers.⁴ While these market conditions created in unions a desire to stop child labor as a means of protecting breadwinner jobs, much of the activism focused on a distinct motive: the desire to avoid race degeneration.

A popular understanding of development in the early 20th century, the theory of race degeneration pulled from the theory of recapitulation. Recapitulation theory argued that all people start out at a primitive, savage state and develop into fully civilized adults. Not all people

⁴ Edith Abbott, "Early History of Child Labor in America" in *Selected Articles on Child Labor*, ed. Edna D. Bullock (Minneapolis, MN: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1911), 6. Originally published in the *American Journal of Sociology* 14 (1908): 15-37. In her history of the earlier days of industrial child labor Abbott observes that by the turn of the century "the policy of keeping children at work becomes less and less a question of moral principle, even in New England. It is not so much the virtue of industry about which men are concerned but the fact that child labor is a national asset which may be used to further the material greatness of America" (20).

would reach the stage of being fully civilized, however. Many, particularly non-whites, would not be capable of reaching full civilization. And, whites, despite being capable could have their development arrested at any stage along the line. Race degeneration would reflect a loss of capacity to reach the higher, and for whites appropriate, level of development. Other authors refer to race suicide in place of race degeneration.

These fears appear repeatedly in the writings of anti-child labor activists who distinguish between the Anglo-Saxon children and the children of German, Russian, and Irish immigrants who settled in America's urban areas. Lenora Beck Ellis, writing in 1902, characterized the fight against child labor as a "movement to preserve Anglo-Saxon children, and the great countries they stand for, from premature blight and decay."⁵ Felix Adler points out the particular danger of child labor as an institution that recruits not just "the children of foreign immigrants, but for the most part the offspring of the purest American stock of this continent; and some of these children as eye witnesses attest, were at their work even more than twelve hours, as much as thirteen and fourteen hours a day."⁶

In other works, writers attest to the negative consequences of factory work on white children. Albert Beveridge writes, "these young men and young women, who as children are overworked, through their veins running the poison of an unthinking hatred, become the fathers and mothers of degenerate children. These go to work at the same system that made their parents

⁵ Lenora Beck Ellis, "Movement to Restrict Child Labor" in *Selected Articles on Child Labor*, ed. Edna D. Bullock (Minneapolis, MN: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1911), 17. Originally published in the *Arena* 28 (1902): 370-8.

⁶ Felix Adler, "Child Labor in the United States and Its Great Attendant Evils" in *Selected Articles on Child Labor*, ed. Edna D. Bullock (Minneapolis, MN: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1911), 18. Originally published in the *Annals of the American Academy* 25 (1905): 417-29.

incapable of having perfect children, made them the ancestors of a race of degenerates.”⁷ These arguments of degeneracy also filtered up into state-wide political language with the governors of Wisconsin and New York both noting the degenerate cycle taking place in families supported in part through child labor for successive generations. And, according to Owen Lovejoy (1906), “the vicious and ignorant, the physically unfit and the discouraged are not deterred by any such consideration, but, regardless of consequences, continue to propagate their kind and swell the proportion of those who will be from birth to death a heavy liability against society.”⁸ Reformers foregrounded the need to protect the race and nation because “through connecting their cause to such heightened aims, reformers wrote their own legitimacy, giving linguistic attacks on working families a level of authority they might otherwise have lacked.”⁹

While the works of Lovejoy, Beveridge, and Ellis attest to the concern of racial degeneracy, other writers argue that child labor spurred by industrialization placed white children in a position more oppressive than formal slavery. Elinor Stoy writes, “The life of the little negro children was free, and they were fed, housed, clothed, - there was for them no anxious care about tomorrow. The black children were never put to work under such conditions as we find among the white children who toil in these mills, mines and factories, as is done with these children in the great cities of our Christian land.”¹⁰ Particularly disturbing is Spargo’s claim in *Bitter Cry of the Children* that “Children have always worked, but it is only since the reign of the machine that

⁷ Albert J. Beveridge, “Child Labor and the Nation” in *Selected Articles on Child Labor*, ed. Edna D. Bullock (Minneapolis, MN: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1911), 178. Originally published in the *Annals of the American Academy* 29 (1907): 115-24.

⁸ Owen Lovejoy, “Child Labor and Family Disintegration” in *Selected Articles on Child Labor*, ed. Edna D. Bullock (Minneapolis, MN: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1911), 81. Originally published in *Independent* 61 (1906): 748-50.

⁹ James D. Schmidt, *Industrial Violence and the Legal Origins of Child Labor* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 62.

¹⁰ Elinor H. Stoy, “Child-Labor,” *The Arena* 36, no. 205 (1906): 584.

their work has been synonymous with slavery.”¹¹ Of course, Spargo would have been well aware that black children had, indeed, labored as slaves in the antebellum south. His claim that only industrialism turns children into slaves implies that for black children hard labor was appropriate in a way it would never be for white children. The statements of Stoy and Spargo suggest that for black children work continued to be acceptable, despite the legal end of slavery, while for white children such work was absolutely inappropriate.

When passing federal anti-child labor legislation (or at least passing a version that was not struck down by the Supreme Court) proved difficult, reformers tried a new tack: passing compulsory education legislation. Not only did this address child labor issues without requiring child labor legislation it provided an answer to the popular objection that children barred from the factory floor would have little to do but run wild in the streets. As Felix Adler points out, “It is not enough to shut the children out of the factory, we must also bring them into the school and compel parents, if necessary to send them to school; the movement for compulsory education everywhere goes hand in hand, and must go hand in hand, with the child labor movement.”¹² The National Child Labor Committee produced materials for school districts in the effort to recruit children out of the factory and into the classroom and to track children in attendance.¹³

The benefit of binding together anti-child labor and compulsory education legislation was not lost on state politicians. North Carolina Governor Thomas Bickett, argued in his 1919 Biennial Message that “the weakness of child-labor legislation has been that it has dealt with the subject only in a negative way. It has declared that the child shall not work, but has not

¹¹ John Spargo, *The Bitter Cry of the Children* (New York: Macmillan, 1906), 127.

¹² Adler, “Child Labor in the United States,” 25.

¹³ Elsa Denison, *Helping School Children: Suggestions for Efficient Cooperation with the Public Schools* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1912).

concerned itself with what the child shall do...the law should be primarily a part of the educational policy of the State and only in an incidental way a child-labor law.”¹⁴ In 1921, Governor Emanuel Philipp of Wisconsin noted that “the casual connection between child labor and lack of education can be broken only by keeping children in school, while the schools are in session.”¹⁵ Schools had the added benefit of not only keeping Anglo-Saxon children out of schools but also provided an opportunity to pass on the “appropriate” American values to the children of immigrant families.

The Great Depression, New Deal, and G.I. Bill

With the onset of the Great Depression, concerns shifted dramatically and fears focused in on not what happened when young people work too much but what happens when they do not have the opportunity to work at all. From the Gilded Age to the onset of the Great Depression significant changes occurred in the lives of young people. Compulsory education laws in all 48 states kept those younger than 14 out of work, helping to drive the labor rates for those aged 10-15 down to five percent by 1930.¹⁶ While in 1920 only 2.2 million young people made it to high school, by 1930 that number had doubled.¹⁷ Indeed, throughout the 1920s, young people, even those on the lower end of the class range, felt reasonably good about their chances in life.¹⁸ Many were getting a higher level of education than their parents had dreamed of, the job market was wide open, and by the age of sixteen many boys were thinking seriously about marriage.

¹⁴ R. B. House, ed., *Public Letters and Papers of Thomas Walter Bicket* (Raleigh, NC: Edwards & Broughton Printing Company State Printers, 1923), 31.

¹⁵ Wisconsin Senate, Governor’s Message. *Journal of the Senate* (1921), 42.

¹⁶ Kathleen Morgan Downe and Patrick Huber, *The 1920s* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), 35.

¹⁷ Downe and Huber, *The 1920s*, 31.

¹⁸ These national numbers obscure some regional variation. Particularly in the south, rates of child labor remained high while education remained lower largely as a result of the region’s high concentration of subsistence level farming, poorly structured school systems, and a lack of the type of bureaucratic oversight that arose in the north.

This changed during the last week of October 1929. In the wake of the stock market crash, the conditions of millions of families deteriorated rapidly.

The plight of young people, boys in particular, became a subject of academic and popular writers. Texts such as *Youth: Millions Too Many* and *The Lost Generation: A Portrait of American Youth Today* revealed that youth, reasonably according to some authors, did not believe that the virtues that guided American success stories, thrift and industriousness, could solve their problems. The detachment of millions of young people from ideological and behavioral norms is disconcerting but alone would likely have been limited to a source of dismay. The abnormal situation of youth, beyond creating a sense of discomfort and fear, left citizens and political elites afraid of two possible and frankly opposed outcomes: bums and revolutionaries. The first would result in thousands of young people vacating their rightful place as American citizens in favor of a life of vice and disengagement. The second would result in a significant change in what American citizenship signified. Either outcome suggested the end of the American political project as it was then understood and valued. The government responds with two programs designed to reattach young people, men in particular, to the virtues of American citizenship: the Civilian Conservation Corps and the National Youth Administration. These two primary youth programs reveal three criteria New Dealers saw as critical for American citizenship: a strong sense of individual worth, a connection to community, and a frontier experience. Through these values, connections, and experiences, the New Deal programs hoped to create young citizens "with a vigorous capacity to work out a snarled situation," not through revolution but through faith in, understanding of, and commitment to the American process.¹⁹

¹⁹ George S. Pettee, "The Appeal of Totalitarianism" in *American Youth: An Enforced Reconnaissance*, eds. Thatcher Winslow and Frank P. Davidson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940), 122.

Both programs received praise from the media and other observers for their efforts to instill a sense of self into American youth. And, the fears of young people went largely underground as the United States became preoccupied with events across the Atlantic. Indeed, by 1941, almost all those of age to be eligible for youth programs were also eligible for the draft. As young people went off to war, they became symbols of hope for America's future as opposed to reason to fear its demise. That said the success of the G.I. Bill combined with the limited attention paid to youth-specific New Deal programs make it easy to forget that before they left for war theaters and before they returned from them, young people were a locus of fear for many elites concerned for America's political and social stability. Yet, writing from the years prior to and during the Second World War reveals a clear fear that the youth-related problems facing American during the Great Depression would only worsen after America's participation in another World War. In *Youth: Millions Too Many*, written a year prior to America's entrance into combat, Bruce Melvin, director of three major studies of youth commissioned by the Works Progress Administration, avers that "following the close of a war the problems of young people [that] are discussed in this book would be many times more intense than are here portrayed. If indeed war comes to America, multiply several times the conditions shown here and you will have conditions within a short time after the guns cease their firing."²⁰

Striking parallels exist between these concerns and those in the New Deal Era: specifically, young people were expected to lack community commitments and face an overwhelmingly discouraging labor market. As a result, the generation ran the risk of becoming disillusioned with the American economic and political ways of life and thus susceptible to revolutionary ideas. And, if elites considered this process both plausible and scary when young people were on campuses and in hobo jungles it could only be more frightening when the

²⁰ Bruce Melvin, *Youth: Millions Too Many* (New York: The Association Press, 1940), 29.

potential revolutionaries were returning from foreign soil well-trained in the use of fire arms. Facing pressure from the media and veterans groups as well as their own desires to avoid an economic downturn similar to what followed World War I, political elites became increasingly aware of the need both create and pass legislation before demobilization began. Their efforts would result in the G.I. Bill, particularly Title II.

As the preceding discussion indicates, the role of youth of color changes in this era of American history. Once fear shifted to the complete disconnection of white youth from the American project and the focus became reconnection to liberal citizenship non-white, and particularly African American youth, moved out of the picture. Youth of color have never been expected to be or desired as part of the state in the fullest way. As African Americans were not considered eligible for full membership in the American citizenry, they had no place in conversations about creating connected citizens. Thus, the 1930s and 1940s reveal the inverse of the condition of the 1920s for youth of color: just as young people are always already capable of work they are never considered fully capable of citizenship.

Development, Manhood, and Masculinity

As the discussion of youth in early to mid-twentieth century America reveals, the construction of youth as a category splits white youth from youth of color.²¹ That said, the ability to develop fully into autonomous adulthood has consistently been withheld from African Americans. Removing full manhood from the grasp of adult male slaves was an established component of the slavery system in early America. In *Dismantling Black Manhood: An*

²¹ For the context of this paper I am particularly concerned about the division between black and white youth as the categories were understood in 1960. The broader project explores the way in which youth within immigrant communities effectively became white through civics programming in schools as well as the G.I. Bill.

Historical and Literary Analysis of the Legacy of Slavery (1997) Daniel P. Black identifies a three prong strategy employed by captors to destroy black manhood: (1) physical abuse, (2) removal from role as husband and (3) “loss of their right to usher sons into manhood.”²² Black traces the concept of manhood and the way in which it is withheld from black males through 18th and 19th century slave narratives. As the narrative of the life of one slave, Gustavus, notes “[a]lthough he is now an adult, he sees that he is no closer to manhood than he was as a child. In fact, in one sense, he remains a child for life, for he is never afforded the opportunity to function independently of white men.”²³ Tellingly, Black observes that in his slave narrative, Northup “speaks of manhood always in relation to what the captor would or would not allow.”²⁴

Black males continued to be blocked from meeting the traditional standards of manhood even after the end of slavery. In his study of manhood in America, Michael Kimmel identifies three forms of American manhood: genteel patriarch, heroic artisan, and the self-made men. The model of manhood dominant in capitalist America, the self-made man (SMM), must constantly be proven through economic success.²⁵ The public sphere does not serve as a place of comfort but a gauntlet to be run. As a result, the SMM experiences considerable anxiety over status and invests meaning in his role as head of a household and the comforts he finds there.²⁶ To the degree that developing from a boy who was cared for into a self-made man capable of caring for others through his economic autonomy constitutes the appropriate development, this identity remained out of reach for men of color. The model of the male breadwinner as “a source of

²² Daniel P. Black, *Dismantling Black Manhood: An Historical and Literary Analysis of the Legacy of Slavery* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 85.

²³ Black, *Dismantling Black Manhood*, 78.

²⁴ Black, *Dismantling Black Manhood*, 104.

²⁵ Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 17.

²⁶ Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 40.

masculine pride and identity” required that the money earned be enough to support a family.²⁷

While the prevalence of child labor suggests that this goal remained out of reach for many by the turn of the twentieth century, the man’s wage was considered a reasonable goal for men to strive for and a key support for union organization in support of child labor laws. The same assumptions did not hold true for black males as they were considered to require less money due to their being accustomed to lower standards of living. Additionally, it was widely accepted that all members of a black family would work making the idea of paying a breadwinner’s wage to an adult black male a curiosity.²⁸

Ultimately then, I approach my research of student activism in the 1950s and 1960s with the following understandings about development. First, elites consistently relied on the education system to protect white youth and thus the broader political structure from various ills. Second, the traditional models of manhood were consistently withheld from African American men throughout the course of American history and, to the degree that the ideal womanhood depended on being linked to a breadwinner, women were limited in their ability to achieve traditional standards of success as well. Third, an understanding of the way elites employ or fail to employ the language of race in discussions of youth reveals that, in comparison to white youth who are expected to travel a clear, linear path from childhood which merits protection through to adulthood which requires a clear connection to the American state through a particular set of skills and values, no developmental path exists for African American youth. Rather, the words and decisions of elites suggest that they are always already capable of work and at the same time will never be capable of citizenship. African American youth live outside of developmental time. In the next section I turn to a discussion of how the civil rights movement, and particularly the

²⁷ Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 75.

²⁸ Glenn, *Unequal Freedom*, 82.

activities of students with the civil rights movement, can be understood as an effort to access appropriate developmental time.

Civil Rights as Access to Developmental Time

While recognizing the limitations of a developmental approach that includes only one gender, I argue the role of masculinity and manhood in the civil rights movement was not just about demonstrating power through masculinity but also an effort on behalf of black males to fit themselves into the developmental markers that characterized white manhood. Scholars of the intersection of race and gender during the civil rights movement point to the way in which markers of masculinity, including breadwinner status, were a serious part of the conversation. In *I am a Man! Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (2005) Steve Estes focuses specifically on masculinity and gender relations as opposed to development but his work has obvious parallels to the model of manhood presented by Kimmel. At the beginning of the CRM manhood was defined thusly: “A man was the head of his household: he made enough money to support his family as the primary if not the only breadwinner. He also had a political voice in deciding how his community, his state, and his country were run.”²⁹ During the Memphis sanitation workers strike, strikers held signs reading “I am a Man!” and constructed their efforts as specifically about “men’s rights rather than the broader construction of human rights... White men and women had referred to black men and Memphis and throughout the South as “boys” since slavery. This verbal infantilization paralleled the physical emasculation of black men in

²⁹ Steve Estes, *I am a Man! Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 7.

slave beatings, Redemption-era lynchings, and twentieth century KKK retaliations for civil rights activities.”³⁰

Student activists worked to fit themselves in to developmental time against not only the assumptions of the broader white community but also in the paternalism of many historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). In this way, the student protests that occurred at black and white campuses take on a different sheen despite both occurring largely in the wake of Freedom Summer and commonly being referred to as fights for free speech issues on campus. “[B]lack students saw demands for more campus power as part and parcel of an emerging consciousness of and pride in racial identity. Put more simply, on historically black campuses, a revolt against the university president’s rules and regulations was often a revolt against Uncle Tom.”³¹ HBCU activists distinguished “Negro Universities” that were viewed as under the control of whites at some level and the “Black University” they preferred. “[A] Black University would connect students to African American culture, imbue them with a social responsibility to aid or lead the black masses, and be a chief institutional participant in the BPM.”³²

White Student Activism

Previous scholarship establishes the significant influence of the CRM on the white student activism of the 1960s. Indeed, the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley, largely considered the first mass student action of the 1960s, included among its organizers twelve white students who participated in Freedom Summer. The Scranton Report, written by the Presidential Commission on Campus Unrest, suggests that what has happened in youth culture by the end of

³⁰ Estes, *I am a Man!*, 140-141.

³¹ Turner, *Sitting In and Speaking Out*, 143.

³² Ibram H. Rogers, *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965-1972* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2012), 112.

the 1960s results from young people bringing “their parents’ high-minded ideals to bear upon American society in a thoroughgoing way” and in doing so “their vision of that society changed radically.”³³ Despite the view of student activism during the 1960s as predominately liberal or radical, in *A Generation Divided: The New Left, The New Right, and the 1960s* (1999) Rebecca Klatch notes the similarities between liberal and conservative student activities – including both groups being motivated by the gap between ideals and reality. “[F]or YAFers the gap between ideals and reality was most blatant in the thwarting of individual freedom because of the threat of communism and expansion of the state. For those in SDS, on the other hand, the most conspicuous gap separated the ideal of universal freedom and equality from the system of racial inequality that was intransigent to change.”³⁴ Over the course of the 1960s students at a variety of campuses became involved in protesting issues with most students mobilizing in response to what they saw as the overreaching of campus authorities. Despite evidence that adults were disappointed in the quiescent nature of 1950s college students, they were quickly overwhelmed by the activism of the 1960s and by June 1970 citizens listed “campus unrest” and the “nation’s main problem.”³⁵ As the activities of students during this era have already been well-documented, I will not review them here. My interests rest more in considering the way in which the language used by elites to describe student protesters begin to mirror the language used in stating the fears of potential revolutionaries in the wake of the Great Depression.

The reasons given for the sudden spike in campus activism by those struggling to understand the intense battle playing out on numerous campuses are surprisingly similar to the

³³ *The Report of the President’s Commission on Campus Unrest* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970), 72.

³⁴ Rebecca Klatch, *A Generation Divided: The New Left, The New Right, and the 1960s* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 32.

³⁵ Kenneth Keniston, “Prologue: Youth as a Stage of Life” in, *Youth: The Seventy-fourth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education Part I*, eds. Robert J. Havighurst and Philip H. Dreyer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), 6.

fears that circulated around young tramps during the Great Depression. Many citizens considered “campus unrest to be an aberration from the moral order of American society” and suggested three possible causes.³⁶ First, student activism stemmed from the actions of “outside agitators and subversive propagandists.”³⁷ Second, the fervor with which students approached protest stemmed from “pressing and unresolved issues.”³⁸ Third, the willingness of students to engage in protest activities reflected “an increasing disrespect for law and...a general erosion of all stabilizing institutions.”³⁹ The concerns leveraged against tramps were similar: they were outside social institutions making them perfect prey for those agitators who hoped to prey on young people’s perception of similarly persistent difficulties in the American social structure.

For others, notably then Vice President Spiro Agnew, the threat no longer came from outside agitators. The following are two statements made by Agnew about students:

“[O]n the eve of our nation’s 200th birthday, we have reached the crossroads. Because at this moment totalitarianism’s threat does not necessarily have a foreign accent. Because we have a home-grown menace, made and manufactured in the U.S.A. Because if we are lazy or foolish, this nation could forfeit its integrity, never to be free again.” – Pennsylvania Republican Dinner, October 30, 1969

“Confrontation is not novel to its citizens, only its form is new. We have faced dictators before...only they had foreign accents. Now we face an enemy within, and, as Abraham Lincoln said: “If destruction be our lot we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen we must live through all time, or die by suicide.” – Trunk and Tusk Club, February 27, 1970

While obviously playing on Cold War language, the statements also tie directly to the fears of young people that percolated during the Great Depression that, left to their own devices, young Americans would readily create the type of youth movement that support revolutions in Italy, Germany, and Russian in the wake of World War I. Yet, the primary solution leveraged by

³⁶ *Report of President’s Commission, 53*

³⁷ *Report of President’s Commission, 53*

³⁸ *Report of President’s Commission, 54*

³⁹ *Report of President’s Commission, 54*

policy makers during the 1930s, ensuring that young people stayed in or returned to school, could not be leveraged now as the young people Agnew spoke of were already in school. Ultimately, then, rather than being a place for protection of American ideals, colleges were increasingly viewed as a battleground and became drawn into conversations surrounding law and order and criminality.

Conclusion

The student activism of the 1960s stands as the high watermark of youth organizing in American, at least in our collective national memory. Yet, this activism and more importantly the political systems surrounding it are part of a larger arc in American history. In tying the activism on both historically black colleges and universities and historically white colleges and universities to a broader story I demonstrate the way in which neither case was the aberration it seemed. On historically black campuses, activism represents an effort to enter a developmental timeline long denied while those active on historically white campuses seemed to fulfill fears of American youth that had percolated among elites for years.