

We Need Radicals

By HAROLD TAYLOR

Fairly often, late at night around the country, when the regular meetings are over and the celebrities have gone to bed, I have sat with the radical students in their apartments and we have got down to bedrock.

It is quieter then, and there is no need for big denunciations of Amerika or Babylon. At that time of night we are just trying to work out what to do in the morning.

That is the first thing I wish everyone interested in students could know. No matter how the public may have been taught by Mr. Hoover to fear radicals, as if the radicals had an organization as strong, big and politically dangerous as the F.B.I., it is time to advertise the fact that every society has to have radicals if it is to stay healthy, and that it is not a crime to carry ideas across state lines.

A radical in the student movement is simply a student who has gone one stage farther than most of the other students. You have been brought up to believe that the whole country is based on principles of peace and justice, and you discover, for example, that we wiped out the Indians and are now wiping out the Vietnamese simply because it suits our interests.

You become a radical, among other ways, by recognizing that sort of simple fact. But the recognition does not remove you from the mainstream of American youth or American society. It simply puts you with a growing body of Americans of all ages who, whether you call them radicals, liberals or conservatives, are dead set against the war in Indochina, against racial injustice, and the evils of poverty.

The American students who have become politically active on the left have not been led there by nihilists, anarchists and underground bombers. They have been led by the events of American history and their own humanitarian instincts, and at this moment in history they are being forced into opposition to most of what America now stands for.

In the long run there are just two ways of dealing with that opposition and the unrest it generates among American student activists — through educational and social change or through repression. So far we have not tried education.

We have kept the educational and social system in an obsolete state and put modern children into it. When we find that as they become older and more intelligent the children either oppose the system or reject it entirely, for reasons with which it is hard to disagree, we call that a student revolt, call out the National Guard and look for ways to control the revolt instead of ways to change the system.

We remind the students that they

are students, not yet ready for equality as citizens or scholars. We tell them that there are many reasons why the system cannot be changed, that there are many channels open to them for giving advice, making suggestions, sharing decisions, and that there is no excuse for making disturbances on or off the campuses simply to assert their own ideas. Then, only when they actually make the disturbances, do we start to change the system.

That kind of inconsistency has not been lost on the students and they will go on making their disturbances until the system has been very seriously changed.

This is not to apportion blame to the elders and a special kind of innocent wisdom and privilege to the young. It is a matter of simple fact. Student unrest is the natural outcome of forces of social disorder in the society at large, and there are now enough students in a national movement for social and educational reform (1,500,000 in the May strikes of 1970) to make a serious political base on the campuses for progressive social action.

Yet seven years after the Berkeley uprising, the American university and its inadequate system of government and instruction remains substantially the same. The few changes that have been made do not get to the heart of the matter, which is, once more, the role of the student in his own education and his place in his own society.

As for the radical students, it is time to stop talking about them as if they were a separate breed, to be isolated from the rest of the population and condemned for political misconduct. They are a legitimate and continuing part of an existing political system. There will be more of them as the years go by. Since they, along with others, have perfectly sensible things to say, like stop the war, give fair trials, educate the people, feed the hungry, house the needy and stop destroying the planet, they will be listened to.

Then, as more and more are listened to, what has happened in the past will happen again. The madness of young radicals will turn out to have been the beginning of enlightened programs for necessary social change.

It follows that if more people let down their defenses and became more radical sooner, we would all stand a much better chance of getting the changes made which all the non-radicals (the rest of the human race, conservatives and all) keep saying are absolutely necessary.

Harold Taylor, former president of Sarah Lawrence College, is the author of the forthcoming "How to Change Colleges: Notes on Radical Reform" from which this is adapted.