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S O L I T A R Y P R O T E S T

Mary Jones

Approved by:

SOLITARY PROTEST

"Alienation, estrangement, disaffection, anomie, withdrawal, disengagement, separation, noninvolvement, apathy, indifference, and neutralism--all of these terms point to a sense of loss, a growing gap between men and their social world."¹ But these terms, which Kenneth Keniston disparages as the current vocabulary of social commentary, are indeed a familiar description of today. The youth on college campuses are especially fluent in the use of the many synonyms of alienation to depict prevalent college attitudes and social values. Even the term "generation gap" seems to cry of separation, estrangement, and alienation between two factions of our society--young and old. What is causing this sense of alienation in the new generation? Is the seeming obsession with breakdown, protest, destruction, and defiance against the "Establishment" causing deeper gulfs of separation between "them" and "us"; or are protest and violence only the climatic manifestations against the deeper, slowly evolving social attitude of estrangement and apathy? Which should be called alienation?

Alienation, as a word to describe today, encompasses a virtually limitless number of possibilities which could classify as types of alienation. To further clarify the specific reference meaning of the term "alienation" requires defining or establishing specifications regarding: 1) **Focus:** Alienated from what?,

¹Kenneth Keniston, "Escape from Alienation," Contemporary Moral Issues, Second Edition, Harry K. Girvetz, ed., p. 549.

2) Replacement: What replaces the old relationship?, 3) Mode: How is the alienation manifest?, and 4) Agent: What is the agent of the alienation?² Though alienation or a lack of connection in one area may generalize to another area, this need not always be the case; and thus the focus--what one is alienated from--must be clearly established in isolating what type of alienation is being discussed. Secondly, whether alienation is an open rejection of societal values, or merely a lack of any relationship at all aimed at replacing the original feeling, should be known. The manner in which rejection is expressed, whether alloplastic (involving an attempt to transform the world) or autoplatic (involving self-transformation) will also help distinguish the type of alienation being discussed. The agent, finally, is the source of the sense of alienation, imposed as in exclusion or rejection, or chosen.

With these four qualifications, many varieties of meanings and questions dealing with alienation can be posed and discussed. This paper will deal with the concept of the "new alienation" type of alienation posed by Keniston as "an explicit rejection, 'freely' chosen by the individual, of what he perceives as the dominant values or norms of his society."³ In showing this attitude to be prevalent among violent college protesters and perhaps even an underlying factor of such behavior, an attempt to isolate some of the roots or underlying causes of this sense of alienation will be

²Kenneth Keniston, The Uncommitted, Alienated youth in American society, p. 454.

³Ibid., p.455.

undertaken. Attitudes which might help repress alienation will also be explored.

Who is the college protester? What is he like? "What protesting students throughout the world share is a mood more than an ideology or a program, a mood that says the existing system--the power structure--is hypocritical, unworthy of respect, outmoded and in urgent need of reform. In addition, students everywhere speak of repression, manipulation and authoritarianism."⁴ This characterization by Kenneth Keniston of the young demonstrator has many common qualities with his characterization of the "new alienation" individual. Keniston further states of the demonstrator, "one of the central problems for student movements today is the absence of any theory of society that does justice to the new world in which we of the most industrialized nations live."⁵ This feeling would definitely be phrased a rejection of dominant societal values and norms. Another author agrees: "The alienation widespread among the young today springs from their refusal to accept the status quo."⁶ This rejection of the **existing society** may be highly idealistic--and most often is--for the protesters tend to be very idealistic and they are often listed among the very liberal and very intelligent students.

⁴Kenneth Keniston, "How the New Generation Got That Way," Philosophy for a New Generation, A. K. Bierman and James A. Gould, Ed., p. 15.

⁵Ibid., p. 19.

⁶Colman McCarthy, "Youth: Alienated, Estranged--or Just Brat-like?" Christian Century Magazine, July 2, 1969, p. 898.

The assumption that student protest portrays that there is something wrong with students or colleges cannot be supported. Michigan State University's experience with campus unrest a few years back could be cited as an example.

Several years ago, in its campaign for national prominence, Michigan State decided to go after National Merit winners. Special scholarships and a hard sell produced almost as many scholars as Harvard, the frontrunner, had. Most of these students were enrolled in special honors programs that provided close student-faculty contact. All things considered, it seemed like a fine idea.

But these students unexpectedly transformed what had been a vast, somnolent, nonpolitical campus into a college with an underground newspaper, an active SDS chapter, visible cultural alienation, a drug culture, and extreme political disaffection--all led by the much-sought-after National Merit scholars. They and their friends even picketed state legislators in nearby Lansing, thus destroying the myth that all the radicals were in far-off Ann Arbor.⁷

The amassing on one campus of many intelligent, liberal, educated students does not necessarily cause campus unrest, it should be pointed out. The social-psychological characteristics of a student body can only create the climate, a state of readiness or unreadiness. But the stage is most often set by a group of very definite character types.

Dozens of research studies have since confirmed the lesson of Michigan State: a "good" student body, as defined by high aptitude scores, intellectual motivation, and plans to complete college and graduate school, makes student unrest more likely. One study of several hundred American colleges and universities showed that about 90 percent of all protests involving the war in Southeast Asia could have been predicted simply by knowing the characteristics of the student body. Students who mark "none" for religion, have

⁷Kenneth Keniston, "Harvard on My Mind," The New York Review of Books, September 24, 1970, p. 6.

high IQs, are intellectually oriented and politically liberal, and who came from educated professional families are likely to "cause trouble," especially if you put a lot of them on one campus...

Conversely, the best way not to have student protests is to congregate in a small college a homogeneous group of extremely pious, dumb, conservative students who view higher education as vocational training and come from politically inactive working-class or lower middle-class families.⁸

Protest-prone students simply simplify the above mentioned characteristics.

Compared with their inactive classmates, protesters turn out to be more independent, more freethinking, less conventional. The vulgar theories of student neuroticism, Oedipal rebellion, boredom, paranoia, hedonism, or family permissiveness as causes of protest all prove to be wrong. But the cliché about student activists being "idealistic" is empirically correct: differences in "level of moral reasoning" distinguish protesters from non-protesters more decisively than any other variable, with the protesters being greatly more "principled" and less "conventional."⁹

Since college protest-prone students rate high on alienation indices, e.g., rejection of conventional values, rejection of happiness as a goal, dislike of conventional social groups, rejection of American culture; perhaps their alienation could be better understood if their reasons for protesting were examined. Many have attempted to answer why there has been so much violent demonstration on United States' college campuses during the past three or four years. But the "cause" of campus unrest is as complex as our society. It is seen in the interaction of the very real issues and the student generation uniquely attuned to perceive and react to these issues.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

Some of the issues today's youth are responding to are new to this generation: no nation in modern history has so brutally devastated a third-rate power as the United States has Indochina; never have we been so involved in as vast nuclear and germ warfare; never before have universities assumed such importance as the research-development-training centers of a society; never before has there been such a widespread alarm over the despoilation of the environment. Still, many of the issues are almost as old as man: inequality, racism, hypocrisy, and poverty. The modern protesting student is hypersensitive to these issues which many in previous generations chose to ignore.¹⁰

Some of the outbreaks have entertained demands for more student voice or for a change in course or administrative policy; but the many unsuccessful attempts of college administrators and boards to eliminate protest by giving in to student demands, if feasible, and in general trying to create as free and as relevant a course offering and university experience as possible, have shown that there are deeper roots to campus unrest than student-faculty ratio and R.O.T.C. credits. Keniston states:

Students do not protest, strike, or occupy buildings because they want to be on faculty committees or in order to cozy up to their professors. In virtually every major disturbance on any American campus in the past five years, they have explicitly objected to the university's collusion with the war in Southeast Asia and/or its insensitivity to or collaboration with the prevalent racism of American society. To maintain that youthful unrest is

¹⁰Ibid., p. 9.

"symptomatic" of something other than the sorry state of the nation is to reveal a motivated deafness to what students have been shouting at the top of their lungs.¹¹

What the students have been shouting is a concern of all the nation. The Scranton Report (The President's Report on Campus Unrest) charged with the responsibility 1) "to identify the principal causes of campus violence;" 2) "to assess reasons for the breakdown in the processes for orderly expression of dissent;" 3) "to suggest specific methods and procedures through which legitimate grievances can be resolved;" and 4) "to suggest ways to protect and enhance the right of academic freedom, the right to pursue an education without improper interference, and the right of peaceful dissent and protest,"¹² --tried to link causes with campus rebellion; but was somewhat overly melodramatic as the opening paragraph of the report portrays:

The crisis of American campuses has no parallel in the history of the nation. This crisis has roots in divisions of American society as deep as any since the Civil War. The divisions are reflected in violent acts and harsh rhetoric, and in the enmity of those Americans who see themselves as occupying opposing camps. Campus unrest reflects and increases a more profound crisis in the nation as a whole.¹³

The whole idea of the almost national disaster--call out the National Guard--emergency type crisis of student unrest as it is loudly exclaimed by the Scranton Report annoys some people. Robert Nisbet,

¹¹Ibid., p.8.

¹²The President's Report on Campus Unrest, introduction.

¹³Ibid.

a sociology professor at the University of California at Riverside,
comments on the Report:

It is not true that the problem of campus unrest has roots in division of American society "as deep as any since the Civil War"; it is not true that Americans see themselves, on this issue at least, as "occupying opposing camps"; and it is not true that campus unrest reflects a more profound crisis in the nation as a whole.

The blunt truth is that academic violence and the disruption of academic freedom on the campus--the only proper subject of the Commission's inquiry--are but six years old in this country; are to be found, in any degree whatever, on only about a hundred, out of 2,500, campuses; have been severe and persistent at hardly more than a dozen campuses, though admittedly major ones, and have been supported by but a tiny number of the nearly eight million students enrolled in institutions of higher learning. And this academic violence and the accompanying assaults on educational freedom, far from reflecting any crisis of the soul for all America, far from reflecting any nationwide division, is attended instead by the greatest single expression of national consensus I have seen in my lifetime: the complete and utter repugnance inspired by vandalism and criminality on the American university campus.¹⁴

A few hold almost the opposite view of that expressed in the Scranton Report, saying that the demonstrations are in no way critical to our society; and some claim that campus unrest is a farce. A pre-med Honors student at the University of Michigan called the demonstrations there a "carnival" and commented,

Disruption and confrontation provide an irresistible attraction in the often boring college grind. A large crowd can be built by the mere possibility of action, particularly police action. Very few

¹⁴Robert A. Nisbet, "The Counter-Culture and Its Apologists: 1, An Epistle to the Americans," Commentary Magazine, December 1970, p. 40.

of the students that attend these rallies have a strong conviction either for or against the radical movement. They are out for the show, and the bigger the show, the better they like it.¹⁵

Again, others would disagree with this student and concur explicitly with Clark Kerr's statement that "the killings at Kent State coupled with the President's invasion of Cambodia, brought on a surge of reaction unparalleled in America's history--and the dissent was strongest among the best students."¹⁶

Where did the fire start which spread to Columbia, to Harvard, to Kent State and Jackson State? Here in Utah, things remained somewhat calm throughout the Kent State episode; but even here at universities which probably lean more toward the "extremely pious, dumb, conservative..." rather than the "protest-prone" general student body characteristics, reaction to Kent State, the Cambodian invasion, and the repercussions of these events was very evident.

Utah State University witnessed the staging of a camp-in on the quad, where protesters held daily speeches to voice their feelings. More speeches given at the amphitheater were followed by a climatic peace march. The involvement in the march from the amphitheater to downtown Logan reached around five hundred.

Several thousands were involved in the convocations at the University of Utah. A school referendum asking to censor Nixon

¹⁵Michael J. Gallagher, "Carnival Revolution," America Magazine, March 21, 1970, p. 297.

¹⁶Clark Kerr, New York Times, October 4, 1970, quoted by Raymond A. Schroth, "Violence and Understanding: Campus unrest and the Scranton report," Catholic World, December 1970, p. 121.

because of the Cambodian invasion and proposing a student strike of classes in protest, came very close to receiving a majority vote by the U. of U. student body. The student association of the University of Utah even initiated a project to raise money to send a few students to Washington, D. C., to lobby there against United States involvement in Cambodia. One University of Utah student responded to Kent State in a rather comic relief protest by sporting a sweat-shirt shortly after the outbreaks bearing the inscription "Don't Shoot"!

Regardless of the myriad opinions of objectives accomplished by youthful demonstrators, the underlying alienation is evident beneath their cries. Attempting to answer, however, why so many of America's youth feel alienated and feel the need to protest against this sense of aloneness in an era where almost all advertising attention, from high fashion to electronic equipment, and most commentary attention is directed toward the young or young at heart, is quite a difficult undertaking. The roots of the new alienation are tied up in and around many facets of our modern society.

Perhaps it is a feeling of non-entity in the vast megalopolis which protesting students are voicing within their pleas to change the world. The city has become the way of life for most of the new generation. Although the "action" may be there, neighbors whose names, faces and attitudes are familiar generally are not. Drifting through a flowing stream of fellow human beings who seem as zombies

simply because they are not known, easily produces the mechanical feeling within oneself: the young sense this and cry to do something to counteract the prevalent attitude that man is not an important identity and that the individual seldom can have a great influence or a big enough impact on society.

The United States early in its history stressed the rights of the individual and the freedoms and importance of each citizen. The historic and legendary heroes of America were men who stood alone; but the sense of American individualism is vanishing rapidly today. The estrangement of non-entity is replacing the expiring American individualism. As well as seeming to lose in the attempt to be an individual, many of our day and age feel that the extensive technological development of the nation will not allow them to do things which increase their sense of individualism. The Brave New World salut to Ford's automation is anathema to them. The young generation particularly decries its powerless role in the complex society surrounding all.

Some of the protest which has coined "the Establishment" as a dirty word is an outcry against the powerless disaffection those who are definitely not "the Establishment" feel. They label the Establishment as the answer to who has the power, and then fight against that vague notion in a very real power struggle. The lack of legal involvement for the nation's youth often earns for the government the label of Establishment. War protesters aptly argue anyone old enough to serve, to fight for and to die for his country

should also be old enough to have a share in government policy, a voice in deciding whether or not the country will be involved in foreign conflicts, and an equal say as to who truly represents the interests of the nation. Yet, it took violent demonstration and massive moratorium marches for Congress to finally concede that the voice of youth should be heard.

The huge government organization often gives the impression of impersonal manipulation which adds to its Establishment image. And government duplicity, especially regarding news information, has totally annihilated a small corner of patriotism from youth's flag. The adamant denial of United States' participation in certain types of warfare in Southeast Asia, for example, at one time later followed by a concession that the practices so vehemently denied perhaps were a part of our involvement, leaves American citizens with a reasonable sense of non-trust toward government policy. This doubting has spread into other areas of the American lifestyle and has generated the phrase "credibility gap." Just how far youth can trust the economic policy setters and the government officials, just how reliable the media reports actually are--credibility is a contemporary concern which demonstrates the disaffection, estrangement, and alienation of the individual relating to the system.

The war in Viet Nam is the cause of much student protest, and must be considered among possible causes of youth alienation. The idea of fighting for Uncle Sam in a war they feel to be unjust

anihilates in many young people any sense of commitment to a government which would support such a war. The burning of draft cards, the election of a prison sentence rather than service in Southeast Asia, or the forsaking of the United States for Canada or Sweden, is considered by some of America's young men as a justifiable stance against the government. The war has caused religious and moral controversy with regard to questions such as, Who is really responsible for occurrences such as that at My Lai? and, Should a Catholic be allowed to classify himself as a conscientious objecter to unjust wars and receive a draft deferment? Dissent between youth and current government policy is most evident in the outcry of youthful protesters against the United States action in Southeast Asia. Unilateral withdrawal from Viet Nam could help diffuse the societal alienation felt by the young generation because of the involvement there.

The attitudes of the status quo, particularly moral and racial beliefs, are being challenged by the youth of today. Many young people freely choose to reject traditional norms in favor of the cry to "Do your own thing." In view of this trend, some have considered recent protest as an existential revolt against what is. Racial and social injustice is felt by many youth to be their responsibility. They are determined that the practices and views observed today will not be a part of the philosophy for "their day." Moral values seem relative in the minds of the supporters of the "do your own thing" doctrine; and their estrangement from traditional

viewpoint causes much alienation between them and the rest of society. Existentialism is propounded by Keniston as a major theme of alienation, as a basic characteristic of the alienated college students he studied. An existential shift by youth from the traditional toward new outlooks, maybe toward the new left, could be explained then in the changed values of the alienated protesters.

Some say that the root of youth's alienation is boredom. The young have all the advantages the older generation has spent years to provide for them; and the youths' lives have become so routine and undemanding that the new left therefore gains their appeal simply as a diversionment because they are bored. But if boredom can be so widespread and so seemingly incurable, perhaps society does need a radical changing as the bored protesters exclaim. Gaining an education, earning a living, having outlets provided for spending increased free time have all become relatively easy for the new generation. Increased leisure time has molded many into the conventionality of conspicuous consumption. As recreation becomes routine, the use of hobby status symbols including things ranging from snowmobiles to boats just slightly larger than the neighbors' in order to occupy one's free time, has become commonplace. This recreation can become as much of a daily grind, occupying the hours after 8:00-5:00 and weekends, as one's occupation. Leisure then seems merely a change in the type of boredom. Modern society should seek an alternative to boredom. War and revolution, while admittedly not boring, are unacceptable solutions; athletics

would be a more sublimating form of aggression. Boredom, with its alienating factors, can be subdued in a society turned on to the excitement of ideas and the enjoyment of meaningful recreation. Apathy need not reign in America.

What should society do to curb alienation? The alternatives most desirable hinge on the attitudes of those proposing changes. The current trend (perhaps even more so) is always a possibility, but outcry against the status quo is inherent in each suggested change. The growing ecological concern among Americans over the preservation of the natural resource base and the quality sustaining of our physical environment stresses an attitude of real involvement in attempt to revert the current trend. Those who think of their responsibility as merely completing the unfinished business the technology of this modern age has begun are violently opposed by those who feel a leftist popular revolution is the only ultimate possible betterment for society. Still, both of these radically conflicting factions seek a state of Utopia to do away with the frustration of their sensed alienation caused by conditions as they are with the status quo.

Many of today's college-age youth seek to alleviate alienation by withdrawing from the current technological society. This withdrawal will often take the form of a disengagement of any sense of commitment or responsibility to society as society is by the modern youth. An irresponsible withdrawal may be sought via drugs and a new identity within the drug culture. The life of Haight-Ashbury

in San Francisco a few years back stressed personal life style simplicity with little concern beyond mind expansion via hallucinatory drugs, psychedelic art and experience, and a small amount of Zen Buddha. There existed there a "lillies of the field" disregard for day to day livelihood which the youth despised as part of the Establishment's method.

Another type of withdrawal might be termed "romantic regression." A longing to simplify ones concerns and routine of life to that of the peasant is a dominant characteristic of the romantic regressive youth. The hippie commune dwellers represent an extreme faction of romantic regression; within the rest of society the same ideal is subtly seen in the bead-craft and handmade jewelry and peasant shirts that are in popular fashion. A revival of Thoreau and of Emerson and a longing for the life typified in Walden Pond shows the dominance of this feeling in our society. A return to nature is feverently sought by the young hoping for solace and communion there.

The alienated seek many avenues to repress and alleviate their alienation. The best societal alternative to the problem of widespread alienation in its many varying forms among the young generation would seem to be found in establishing and furthering the most diverse, open, heterogeneous environment possible. Alienation, at least that felt toward society, is not as apparent in an atmosphere of tolerance and acceptance. When societal attitudes are molded toward acceptance of difference and diversity, and perhaps

continued growth of the society. John W. Gardner stressed the opinion that not only is it necessary for each person to have the right to diversity, but also that society must expect its members to develop individuality and not just in difference but in excellence. There is today a great demand for talent--unique human resources including the capacity to adapt to innovation and change--and this talent should be valued by society. Gardner feels that much talent is wasted because there is not full equality of opportunity. Democracy is paradoxical in its attempt to allow anyone to rise by his merits and at the same time impose restraints upon those who rise. The American love of equality before the law, equality of opportunity, folksy equalitarianism still should be balanced with the furthering of the idea of personal achievement and freedom to excel by personal endeavor. We must work to provide opportunities for individualism at every degree of ability so that everyone can realize his full potentialities, perform at his best, and harbor no resentment toward other levels and types of individuality. If all individuality can be viewed as unique difference and not judged as better or worse, society will gain from the creativity of its members, and each member will be able to grow away from indifference, apathy and withdrawal in regard to his relationship within society.¹⁷

¹⁷John W. Gardner, Excellence, Chapters 10, 11, 12 and 14 develop these ideas.

Individual influence can have an impact in a society respecting individuality. Perhaps this impact will not be cataclysmic, totally earth-shattering to the entire nation; but the more realistic impact each individual can have on his immediate circle of friends and acquaintances will influence the quality of his own life and diminish his sense of alienation. One person is often the driving force behind any action within the community. And individual influence within the family group and neighborhood is almost impossible to avoid and still remain a part of that social primary group. Every person can have a great impact among those immediately surrounding him. And again, an individual's influence might extend to become a very wide influence. A natural aristocracy of intellect or talent was proposed by Gardner to be the logical leadership of a Utopian society. This concept of leadership which Gardner advances stresses heavily individual impact; and if it is placed in the context of a varied, heterogeneous Utopia having the concept also that all of society may reach the level of excellence then optimistically, a unified, unalienated society is headed toward a de Chardin omega-point.

With the many kinds and ranges of excellence it is important that the whole society set high standards of excellence. Excellence must be conceived in ideals of the pluralistic approach to values and the universally honored philosophy of individual fulfillment. Individual fulfillment is a conception of perpetual self-discovery--becoming the person one could be. Education can

be a lifelong process; and society can influence the quality of human experience by bettering the utility of influences such as television, magazines and other media, libraries, museums, etc. Gardner's views on education emphasize this need for excellence. College, he postulates, is just one kind of further education for those whose capacities fit them for that kind of education. There are many ways to further learning besides college. We should not support the opinion that only college graduates are worthy of respect. "Human dignity and worth would be assessed only in terms of those qualities of mind and spirit that are within the reach of every human being."¹⁸ We need greater emphasis on individual differences, on the many kinds of talent, and the many ways of developing these talents. Excellence and not the field of study is to be sought for and valued. When excellence is admired, diversity can be respected.

Finally, commitment can diminish alienation. Gardner demanded of his talent aristocracy a commitment to the highest values of the society. They were to take the responsibility of leadership in their field and also in society to work for the best interest of the whole. Individual happiness is found in striving toward meaningful goals. The United States, as a free nation, should demand a dedicated commitment from each individual citizen for growth and furthering of common aims: peace, freedom, worth of the individual, equality. Free men must set their own goals and standards of

¹⁸Ibid., p. 81.

excellence. They must be competent. Society also must establish goals embracing acceptance and individuality. And if youth can make a commitment to strive for the goals society--their society--should seek, these aspirations can be realized. The lack of willingness on the part of youth to pay the price for commitment is a self-made cause of alienated feelings. But youth can make a commitment; and maybe, just maybe, bring about the death of societal alienation.

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