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ABSTRACT

Current sociological theory, in which students are viewed as comprising a "new class," is discussed. "Student consciousness," an analogue to "class consciousness" in the Marxist social change model, is viewed from the aspects of dress, life style, taste, its common fate of dependence on academia and the aggregation of members in and around the academic milieu. These are viewed as forming and validating a consciousness, on the part of students, of themselves as a class whose "mission" it is to reshape society. The specific question to which this study addresses itself is: do students see themselves as change agents and what effect do father's occupational level, student's occupational expectations and mobility expectations, as well as age, race and sex have on students having "class consciousness." Findings indicate that 1/3 of the respondents support the idea that students comprise a meaningful change agent. Social class background does not appear to be a significant factor, though age, race, and future occupational and mobility plans definitely discriminate supporters of the "student consciousness" idea from non-supporters. All findings are carefully presented, and some interpretation given. (TL)

WORKING CLASS STUDENTS AND IMAGES OF SOCIAL CHANGE

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WORKING CLASS STUDENTS AND IMAGES OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Some proponents of the student "counter-culture" have argued that structural change in the total society will largely come about as a result of conflict in colleges and universities which will bring down these training grounds for middle class occupations and values.[1] According to this stance, older models of change such as the Marxist view are obsolete because working people as well as professionals and intellectuals have "sold out" to the establishment and thus resist change. Students, on the other hand, are viewed as the basic components of a "new class", whose resistance to regimentation, refusal to become cogs in a bureaucratic machine and commitment to restructuring the society, will destroy the old order and create a freer, more humane social system. Student activists, in this context, are seen as taking a first step to massive social change when they attack the academic citadels where the professionals and specialists essential to the functioning of the old system are trained (Flacks, 1971).

Although the detailed linkages and mechanisms through which student campus action will effectuate structural change in the larger society have not been specified, there seems to be a recognition that some form of "student consciousness" will be necessary even to begin the process. Here "student consciousness" becomes the analogue of "class consciousness" in the Marxist change model, which requires workers to become aware of their class destinies before they can become instruments for reorganizing the social order. The student culture, with its similarities of dress, life style, and taste as well as its common fate of dependence on academia and aggregation of members in and around that milieu, is seen as the means by which "student consciousness" is created and perpetuated, as well as an indicator of its existence. In like fashion, the aggregation of workers in factories, and their common dependence upon industry for their

livelihood, as well as their modalities of dress, life style and taste were conceptualized a century ago as forming and validating a consciousness of themselves as a class, and thus laying a basis for understanding and eventually carrying out their historic group "mission" to reshape society.

Working class consciousness and student consciousness are thus, in each formulation, a necessary but not sufficient condition for each group to become an instrument of social transformation. An empirical question arises. To what extent do students themselves identify their stratum as a change agent on a national scale? In short, has "student class consciousness" begun to appear? If one were to use the presence of student activism and campus conflict as indicators, the answer might have been yes -- a year ago. The cooling down process which seems to have developed since then, on the other hand, is a counter-indicator. A more serious objection to this measure is the fact that the extent of participation is not necessarily related to the level of commitment to "student consciousness". Behavior in the excitement of action does not imply firm belief, just as withdrawal from the action does not guarantee disenchantment. Furthermore, while demonstrations and confrontations have occurred in many varieties of educational institutions, they have been most frequent and their youthful participants most studied in the more elite schools, with largely middle class and upper middle class student bodies, representing only a relatively small sector of the higher educational system as a whole (Flacks, 1970a; Scott and El-Assal, 1969). Generalizing from data collected in these settings runs the risk of social class bias.

Method

In order to examine the extent to which students see themselves as change agents, it is necessary to inquire about the issue directly, and to do so in the

context of less prestigeful academic milieux,with a more economically and socially variegated mix of students. The questions to be explored are: What is the effect, if any, of working class background and racial category on college students' identification with students as sources of change? Will the children of industrial workers be more likely to identify with the working class as a change agent? Will Blacks be more likely to identify with racial movements? Do the differential mobility aspirations of such students affect their outlook on potential change agents?

These issues are analyzed in a sample of 812 students in a junior college and in a midwestern state university, most of whom are the children of blue-collar or service workers, and many of whom are in a special program geared to the Black youth from the ghetto. Data were collected by self-administered questionnaire, presented to respondents in classroom groups, chiefly those in introductory social science courses and in various New Careers and Project Search Programs.[2]

The dependent variable "student class consciousness" is measured by an item in which respondents are asked to identify which among an array of groups "will be most important in bringing about meaningful social change in the United States." Working people, Blacks, Students, Political leaders, Religious leaders, Intellectuals, Social workers, Rich, Poor, and an unspecified "Other" are the groups included in the total of ten choices. The independent variable of social class background is determined by the occupational level of the father, using the seven occupational status levels in the Hollingshead Two Factor Index of Social Position. Mobility aspirations are measured by the occupational goal of the respondent as well as by his self definition of future social class as compared to his image of parental social class.

To summarize, the dependent variable is "student class consciousness", and the independent variables are father's occupational level, student's occupational expectations, and student's mobility expectations, along with the age, race, and sex of the student respondents.

Findings

A little over half the respondents (53 percent) are female, and over a quarter (27 percent) are Black. Two-thirds (66 percent) are aged 20 or under, as might be expected in a college population, with a quarter 21 to 30, and seven percent over 30. Reflecting the more representative character of the student body, over half (54 percent) have fathers who were manual workers in blue-collar or service occupations, while about a quarter (22 percent) come from families with a white-collar or small business breadwinner, and only 16 percent have fathers who were professionals, executives or large proprietors. In seven percent of the cases, the father's occupation is unknown or not ascertained.

As shown in Table 1, nearly a third of the respondents identify students

(Insert Table 1 about here)

as the most important change agents, with workers referred to by 16 percent and Blacks by nine percent. Twenty percent mention a miscellaneous group such as political leaders, religious leaders, or social workers, or, alternatively, some combination of responses, including the generalized "all groups" as a specific answer, while twelve percent were unable or refused to make a selection, leaving the question blank. In another context, it would be interesting to analyze this group, differentiating those who give bland or establishment answers and those who dodge the issue, on a number of variables. Such analysis, however, is beyond the scope of this paper. Student identification, however, varies markedly with race as shown also in Table 1. Only 23 percent of the Blacks pick students as

important change agents, and they are much more likely than the whites to see the Blacks in this role. Whites, on the other hand, are more apt to refer to workers as change instruments, although only 17 percent give this reply.

There are only three or fewer percentage point differences in adherence to the student-changer ideology by sex, but considerable variation by age (Table 2). Over 40 percent of those aged 20 or under identify students as change agents

(Insert Table 2 about here)

compared to less than a quarter of those 30 or over. The relationship between age and choice of working people or Blacks as changers runs in the opposite direction: the older respondents are more likely to select these groups. Only minor variations in change agent choices appear by level of father's occupation.

This failure of the fathers' work to differentiate images of social change among their children negates the idea expressed at the beginning of this paper that parental social class is related to adherence to the student ethos. However, class and occupational factors are not therefore irrelevant. As shown in Table 3, the status of the students' expected future occupation has a clear

(Insert Table 3 about here)

effect on their choice of change agent. Only 22 percent of those who expect a lower white-collar level career, as compared to 42 percent of those who anticipate major professional or executive status, see students as the most important social changers, and the trend is clearly monotonic increasing through the intervening occupational status levels. On the other hand, although the trend is less marked, there is a monotonic decreasing pattern for the choice of workers and Blacks as future occupational status level rises. For example eight percent of the future professionals select Blacks as against 22 percent of those expecting lower white-collar work. Because of the relationship between race and occupational expectation, the findings in Table 3 were elaborated, controlling for

race (Table 4). The monotonic increasing pattern with respect to student identification holds, that is lower percentages for lower status expectations and higher for higher, in both racial groups. But the pattern is less clear cut

(Insert Table 4 about here)

for the other two social change agents. Blacks select Blacks as change agents in a curvilinear manner: future major professionals and future lower white-collar show the highest choice rate, about 35 percent. Whites, on the other hand, select workers in an analogous fashion, with future major and minor professionals and future lower white-collar more likely to opt for the working people than upper white-collar aspirers. Furthermore, the small N's in several of the categories make the analysis dubious, a fact which is underscored by the failure of the pattern for non-whites to exceed chance expectations, as measured by chi square.

Expected occupation may be viewed as a measure of the individual's image of his future social status. Similarly, the student's estimate of his parental social class, although not as objective an indicator of social position as father's occupation, may be considered a self image measure. Here the model of the relationship with change agent beliefs is curvilinear in part (Table 5).

(Insert Table 5 about here)

Respondents who think their family is middle class are more likely to select students than those who see themselves on either end of the class scale. The pattern with respect to workers, however, is more linear: those who consider their families upper class are slightly more likely to select this change group than those with lower or working class parents. On the other hand, the choice of Blacks as changers runs in the opposite direction: here those with lower class parentage are most likely to make this selection, 17 percent as compared to six percent of the upper class types.

The image of the parents' social class takes on added meaning when it is cross-tabulated with the image of the social class the young persons expect to be in as a result of their occupational careers. This indicates the respondents' perception of their own mobility vis-a-vis their families. Five mobility categories were developed in this way: upwardly mobile, stable upper, stable middle, stable working, and downwardly mobile. When arrayed against selected change agent, these categories again reveal a curvilinear relation for the choice of student (Table 6). Forty six percent of those who fixed themselves as from a

(Insert Table 6 about here)

middle class family and expecting a middle class career -- the stable middle category -- select students as the most important change agent, compared to 36 percent of the upwardly mobile and 30 percent of the downwardly mobile. The reverse pattern, although in fainter outline, emerges with respect to workers and Blacks as change agents. The stable middle class category is least apt to refer to these groups, while the upwardly or downwardly mobile are somewhat more apt to do so. Although the total pattern is likely to have occurred by chance, the student choices as against all other change agent selections have only a 1 in 5 likelihood of being chance events, as measured by chi square.

Controlling for race in examining the relationship between mobility and change agent modifies the original findings (Table 7). Among the Blacks, the

(Insert Table 7 about here)

stable middle category is the more likely to opt for students as changers, but also more likely to select workers for this role. The extreme categories have larger percentages referring to Blacks as social movers; more than a third of the downwardly mobile register this belief. It should be noted however, that

except for the upwardly mobile category, the N's for the non-whites are small, and percentages, therefore, are unstable. Furthermore, the findings of the entire table fall well within the bounds of chance expectations.

Among whites, the pattern of the total sample is more nearly replicated. The stable middle class students are more apt to identify with students, and the upwardly and downwardly mobile are less apt to do so; there is a reverse arrangement with respect to workers as changers, and only a small minority mention Blacks at all. Again, however, the N's are small, and the findings can be interpreted as chance events.

Summary and Discussion

With reference to the questions which originated this exploratory study, it is apparent that a substantial minority of an urban student body -- about a third -- do indeed support the idea that students comprise the most meaningful change agent. This orientation does not appear to be affected by the students' social class background: the children of industrial workers are not too much different from the children of professionals when it comes to opting for students as catalysts in the contemporary American scene. The stance, however, does vary considerably by age, race, future occupational plans and mobility. Older students, those thirty or over, are less likely to mention students, and more likely than other age cohorts to identify with workers as change agents. Blacks are less apt than whites to select students, and are most likely to mention Blacks. Those who expect to end up as major professionals are almost twice as likely to opt for student changers than those who anticipate a lower white-collar career, and controlling for race does little to change this relationship among whites, although among Blacks the pattern is more problematic.

The mobility variables present a somewhat different picture. Those who consider their parents middle class are more likely to choose student changers than those placing their families at either extreme of the class spectrum. Similarly, those who see both themselves in the future and their parents now as middle class are more likely than either the upwardly or downwardly mobile to name students, a relationship which tends to hold for whites when race is controlled, but again seems to disappear among Blacks.

One interpretation of these data is that "student consciousness" is a complex phenomenon, related both to the individual's location in the social structure, but also to a time factor, notably the permanence of the attachment to that structure. For Black students, whose identity and social location are still largely determined by the permanent attribute of their skin color, the racial dimension is as critical as their student role, which is a temporary self definition at best. Indeed Blackness appears to confound the findings on future occupation and mobility, since the relationship between these variables and student consciousness is much weakened among non-whites. For those whose age, past the magic 30 mark, puts them in an anomolous position because the "old student" is an apparent contradiction in terms, the identification with the youth culture is weak; in fact the indications are that it peaks in the late teens, and diminishes thereafter.

Furthermore, the differing ways in which occupation and social class affect selection of students as social changers becomes interpretable from a time perspective. A future orientation to professional or executive status appears to predict to student consciousness, but when these objective statuses are translated into subjective estimates, it is the self-designated middle class youth who are most likely to choose students as changers. And it is among these, the

ones who expect to be middle class in their future careers who evidence the highest percentage of incipient student consciousness. This permanent identification with a social stratum related to white-collar roles produces the highest percentage -- nearly half -- who in relative terms reject workers and Blacks and name students as leaders in effectuating social reform.

Why should future professionals as well as those whose middle class self image is fixed both in the past and in the future visualize students in this way? One suggestion is that the knowledge industry, and the control of technology which it implies, is the link between student and professional roles, as well as an important economic basis for an ever-increasing white-collar class. Oppenheimer (1970) , has suggested that this grouping constitutes a "new working class", whose numbers and common interests are likely to produce concerted actions in the future. Thus belief in students as reformers among this stratum is but a way station toward an ideology in which their permanent social situation as middle class adults becomes the basis for future control over institutional restructuring. In a period when job openings for college graduates are beginning to shrink, identification with student ideologies and activists even carries a side benefit; after all, if the universities are indeed shut down, a source of competition for a scarce resource, employment, is dried up.

It must be pointed out, however, that no data in this study specify respondents' notions of the means by which students will supposedly produce social change. Shutting down universities, while certainly part of the rhetoric, was not necessarily what these middle class oriented students had in mind when they selected their own group as instruments of change. It is possible that many visualize students as remaking the social order by gaining more power for the young in academia, in government, and other institutions of the establishment.

Thus putting some under 30 on boards of trustees and winning the 18 year old vote would be examples of successful student actions. From this perspective a rival interpretation of the findings suggests itself.

Young people mature earlier today than a decade or two ago and know what good things in life they want. They recognize also the wide variety of options now available for breaking out of the traditionalism which formalizes career movement as a slow process, with power at the pinnacle of the organizational pyramid reserved for their elders, while the young are cast at the base and able to advance organizationally only as they mature.

The development of a student consciousness and concomitant activities to change societal structures are covert attempts to quicken the pace of reallocation of resources and redistribution of power, taking from those who hold the reins, the old, and giving it to those who crave it, the young. The jogging of the occupational and work systems by youthful advocates using a variety of means has already had a marked effect on the uses of power in the society along with a weakening of the traditional legitimate means to gain it. There is reason to expect that continued pressure will produce other opportunities for getting ahead quickly. In terms of this explanation, it is no small wonder that students with ideologies and imageries of the professional life with its rewards of power and other goods will favor having their own kind as advocates of change, since such change is expected to hasten the accomplishment of their own objectives.

FOOTNOTES

1. For a sociological explanation of this point of view, see Richard Flacks (1970b).

2. New Careers Programs provide specialized training, mainly for ghetto dwellers, in various paraprofessional occupations, while Project Search is designed to provide higher education for the poor and Blacks who would not otherwise be able to attend college.

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Table 1

Most Important Agent of Meaningful Social Change in the United States, by Race of Student Respondent

Change Agent	Race of Respondent		
	White %	Non-White[a] %	Total %
Students	36	23	32
Workers	17	11	16
Blacks	4	23	9
Intellectuals	7	6	7
Student-Worker Coalitions	4	3	4
Miscellaneous Groups[b]	21	19	20
Unknown	11	15	12
Total	100	100	100
	N = 586	N = 223	N = 812
	$X^2 = 85.83$, df 6, $p < .001$[c]		

a Non-white category contains 217 Blacks and 5 "other".

b Includes political leaders, religious leaders, social workers, and various combinations of these, plus "all" as a specific response.

c Statistical tests of significance are not strictly appropriate because the sample is not randomly selected from an identified population to which findings can be generalized. However, the results can be conceptualized as a random selection from a hypothetical universe of similar results (Morrison and Henkel, 1970, particularly Chapter 4), and as such appropriate statistical tests are included for their heuristic value.

Table 2

Most Important Agent of Meaningful Social Change in the United States, by Age of Student Respondent [a]

Change Agent	Age Group: 20 or under %	21 to 30 %	30 or over %
Students	41	28	23
Workers	16	21	23
Blacks	8	14	15
Others	35	37	39
Total	100	100	100
	N = 469	N = 188	N = 52

$X^2 = 26.50$, df 6, $p < .001$

a Cases listed as "unknown" are omitted from this table and all subsequent tables.

Table 3

Most Important Agent of Meaningful Social Change in the United States, by Status of Expected Future Occupation of Student Respondents

	Status of Expected Future Occupation			
Change Agent	Lower White Collar [a] %	Upper White Collar [b] %	Minor Professional or Administrator [c] %	Major Professional or Executive [d] %
Students	22	32	39	42
Workers	26	19	18	17
Blacks	22	9	7	8
Others	30	39	36	33
Total	100	99	100	100
	N = 50	N = 95	N = 416	N = 108

$X^2 = 28.87$ df 9, p <.001

a Hollingshead Occupational Scale Level 4 and 5
b Hollingshead Occupational Scale Level 3
c Hollingshead Occupational Scale Level 2
d Hollingshead Occupational Scale Level 1
No Level 6 or 7 appeared in the data

Table 4

Most Important Agent of Meaningful Social Change in the United States, by Status of Expected Future Occupation of Student Respondents, Controlling for Race.

Non-White[a]

Change Agent	Lower White Collar[b] %	Upper White Collar %	Minor Professional or Administrator %	Major Professional or Executive %
Students	22	27	28	35
Workers	15	14	10	12
Blacks	37	25	24	35
Others	26	34	38	18
Total	100	100	100	100
	N = 27	N = 44	N = 91	N = 17

$X^2 = 5.42$, df 9, n.s.

White

Change Agent	Lower White Collar[b] %	Upper White Collar %	Minor Professional or Administrator %	Major Professional or Executive %
Students	22	35	42	43
Workers	39	6	21	18
Blacks	4	14	3	3
Others	35	45	34	36
Total	100	100	100	100
	N = 23	N = 51	N = 323	N = 91

$X^2 = 26.97$, df 9, $p < .01$

a Includes 178 Blacks and 4 "others"
b See Table 3 for definition of categories.

Table 5

Most Important Agent of Meaningful Social Change in the United States, by Student Respondents' Image of Parental Social Class

Change Agent	Lower and Working[a] %	Middle %	Upper and Upper Middle[a] %
Students	31	41	34
Workers	17	17	22
Blacks	17	6	6
Others	34	35	38
Total	99	99	100
	N = 239	N = 366	N = 100

$X^2 = 24.49$, df 6, $p < .001$

a These categories combined because of small N claiming "lower class" and "upper class" parentage.

Table 6

Most Important Agent of Meaningful Social Change in the United States, by Student Respondents' Mobility Pattern[a]

Change Agent	Mobility Pattern: Downwardly Mobile %	Stable Working and Lower %	Stable Middle %	Stable Upper and Upper Middle %	Upwardly Mobile %
Students	30	31	46	38	36
Workers	21	19	15	19	18
Blacks	11	16	6	6	12
Others	39	34	34	38	33
Total	101	101	101	101	99
	N = 57	N = 32	N = 160	N = 53	N = 375

$X^2 = 12.26$, df 12, n.s.

Students against all other change agents, $X^2 = 6.97$, df 4, $p < .20$

a Measured by comparing students' expected Social Class with Social Class assigned to parents.

Table 7

Most Important Agent of Meaningful Social Change in the United States, by Student Respondents' Mobility Pattern, Controlling for Race

Non-White[a]
Mobility Pattern

Change Agent	Downwardly Mobile %	Stable Working and Lower %	Stable Middle %	Stable Upper and Upper Middle %	Upwardly Mobile %
Students	21	18	38	b	29
Workers	14	12	19	b	11
Blacks	36	29	19	b	28
Others	29	41	24	b	32
Total	100	100	100	b	100
	N = 14	N = 17	N = 21	N = 2	N = 122

$X^2 = 4.44$, df 9, n.s.
(Stable middle, upper middle and upper combined)

White
Mobility Pattern

Change Agent	Downwardly Mobile %	Stable Working and Lower %	Stable Middle %	Stable Upper and Upper Middle %	Upwardly Mobile %
Students	44	47	46	37	39
Workers	28	27	14	20	22
Blacks	3	0	4	6	4
Others	25	27	36	37	35
Total	100	100	100	100	100
	N = 32	N = 15	N = 138	N = 51	N = 252

$X^2 = 7.78$, df 12, n.s.

a Includes 172 Blacks and 4 "others"
b Percentages not calculated because of small base N