Relevance or revolt?

By EDMUND W. GORDON
(Excerpts by permission of Perspectives on Education, Columbia University. Dr. Gordon is professor of education at Columbia University Teachers College).

If university professors, trustees, and administrators as well as society at large cannot relate to the crises of today then revolt is as inevitable as the night that follows the day. What must be done in order to resolve the issues at hand positively and thus successfully is the subject of this article by Edmund W. Gordon, Professor of Education and Chairman of the Department of Guidance at Teachers College.

The general state of revolt we see among students, among blacks, among the dispossessed cannot be adequately explained by cultural or psychological ideologies.

These rebellions are caused by contradictions in both the socio-economic structure and the value system dominant in United States society.

Not unlike other struggles, the student movementis first and foremost a political movement, whose immediate objectives are to resist the war machine, to counter the racist policies which permeate the society, to reverse the dehumanizing impact of poverty and caste status, and to begin to build a mass base for political action through alliances with other insurgent groups.

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How did the students, so docile and withdrawn in the 1950's, come to play this new role?

An appropriate analysis has been offered by John and Margaret Rowntree in their article, "Youth as Class: the Political Economy of Youth." The Rowntrees argue that youth constitutes an exploited class in our society — perhaps not the most exploited segment, but certainly the largest.

Young people are today faced with three options: the military draft, further schooling, and unemployment or inferior employment. Between 1960 and 1965, the defense-education complex alone absorbed two-thirds of the total increase in the 18-24-year-old potential entrants into the labor force.

At the same time, those in this age group who dropped out of school were faced with an unemployment rate three times higher than those 25 and over. For black youth the unemployment rate ran as high as 35 per cent.

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Our society's need to keep a large segment of its working-age population out of the labor force had led to a tradition of college attendance, which has flooded institutions of higher learning with privileged youth and a growing number of poor and minority youth.

What do these students find there?

Too often the student feels and is actually treated like a machine part being processed for mass assembly. Little interest is taken in his special educational needs or personal feelings.

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Should the student want to change the conditions within the university, he finds in most places that he has no authority whatsoever.

Under these conditions, the designation "student" becomes the society's excuse to deprive a person of his right to decide matters which concern him.

It was only when an increased political awareness of the behavior of educational institutions in relation to other sectors of society became widespread that student groups began to agitate more openly for immediate change.

Most repugnant to students was the role of their schools in the Vietnam War.

Classified and secret research are allowed to appropriate badly needed university facilities and those working on many of these projects must obtain security clearances.

The presence of the military in the form of ROTC units and privileged recruiting also seems inappropriate in academic surroundings.

In addition to this military involement, in recent years a number of disclosures have shaken the faith of students and educators in the cloistered freedom of universities.

The CIA's infiltration of the National Student Association, Project Camelot, and the recent allegations that the National Science Foundation is politically controlled have created a credibility gap between university administrators and students.

Any moral superiority that institutions of higher learning might have claimed has been further discredited by the profit making schemes and union busting activities that have become a part of university fiscal management.

James Ridgeway, in The Closed Corporation, has carefully documented the products — form insecticides to cigarette filters and land speculation — that universities are selling in addition to education.

Ridgeway points out that

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many professors find it hard to resist research or consultant fees and that the more enterpreneurial faculty members organize their own corporations. The most enterprising of these educators have little time for classes and student consultations.

The dynamics and nature of student revolt deserve attention. Like the rest of our society, the student rebellion movements are di-

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—Relevance or

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vided by race. There is a black student movement and a white student movement.

The current white student movement had its inception at Berkeley several years ago. Led on most campuses by the Students for a Democratic Society, the movement has been directed at instituting radical political, economic, and social change within and without the university.

Thus the major foci of have been the Vietnam War, the draft system, ROTC, and, increasingly, the effects of racism on our society.

Since the Berkeley days, the growing awareness by students of their power or the lack of it has been accompanied by an identification with the struggle of black people. An important student publication last year was entitled The Student as Nigger.

As a result of this identification, the two movements have begun to make tentative alliances. White student activists have seen the need to strip the university of its elitist character and open it to youth of all races and economic classes.

The most active students do not stop at the university but lend support to such groups as the welfare rightsmovement, community projects to stop urban renewal (politically dubbed urban black removal) and neighborhoods fighting for community control of schools and hospitals.

As opposed to the white student movement, the black students have only recently begun to organize on white university campuses — largely because until a year or two ago there were not enough Afro-American students on any one campus to generate a movement.

The black resistance movement on Negro college campuses predates the rebirth of the white movements. Black students reintroduced student protest immediately following the Joe McCarthy era.

In most universities, black and other minority grouup students have recently been admitted in token numbers and scattered throughout the campus, diluting their already scarce numbers and creating a terrifying, demanding, and extra-ordinarily lonely experience for individuals accustomed to living in a largely black world, though often not by choice.

The feelings of powerlessness experienced by all university students are exacerbated among these black students. They often see themselves as token integrators carrying the burden of cultural representatives and translators to an enthusiastic but not too understanding audience.

Thus black as well as other minority group students are pressed to unite with others of their own group Regarding integration as a goal not taken seriously by whites at these institutions and achieved at too high a cost, these young blacks identify with the stronger forces in the black community that advocate separation and promote black nationalism.

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The attempt by blacks to achieve some measure of self-determination is in part a function of the revitalization of the Afro-American nationalist movement in this country. Such black leaders as Delaney and Douglass in the 1880's, Marcus Garvey after World War I, and W. E. B. DuBois for the greater part of this century have been among the prominent members of this movement.

Delaney and Garvey were strong advocates of Afro-American nationalism with clear separatist goals. Both of these men argued for the creation of black nations in America or in Africa. Douglass and DuBois, in contrast were integrationists. White strong advocates of black ethnic group development and integrity, they saw the best medium for the development and expression to be in the context of the broader society of the United States.

Neither Delaney, Garvey, nor Douglas, however, considered the problems of black people as being related to fundamental changes in the political economy of this country. DuBois, in his late years, saw the solution to the problems of both black people and other oppressed minorities as related to the capitalist and economic imperialist commitments of this country.

Although his ideas influenced and probably determined the course of the civil rights movement for most of this century, blacks in the United States have generally rejected his position that capitalism at home and economic imperialism abroad are the chief enemies.

The black movement on and off the campus has generally aimed at enabling black people to receive a bigger share of the pie. It has sought to be a part of what is generally seen as a good thing.

On the other hand, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, just before each was killed, had begun to sense the importance of DuBois' message. Both of these murdered leaders had started to talk about the relationship between the plight of black people, economic exploitation of colored peoples at home and abroad, and the increasing domination of our society by the military-industrial complex. More recently, such leaders as H. Rap Brown and Eldridge Cleaver have advocated the necessity for radical economic and political change.

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While a significant minority of black students have followed these leaders in advocating radical political and economic change as the only solution to the problems of black people, in general the black student movement in the United States has emphasized more national-cultural concerns than radical economic-political ones.

The demands of Afro-American student groups have been limited largely to seeking reform within the university structure. Within this microcosm, their goals are often more concrete and realistic than those of the more radical white students.

Black student consideration and participation in admissions procedures, black curricula and tenure for black professors, for example, can be readily met without overturning the structure of the university.

White America seems unaware of the frustration, resentment, and anger that reside in black people today. What seems like rapid progress in civil rights over the past few years has only served to make the black community, particularly the young intelligentsia, more aware of the difference between what is and what could be.

If we cannot respond to the simplistic demands of black students to be included in on a piece of the action, what can we expect to do for that larger and more radical group which threatens to attack the whole establishment?

Actually, our resort to police violence at home in our efforts at dealing with urban and campus revolts is not unlike our nationally sponsored violence in Vietnam.

This similarity in our militaristic response to rebellion at home and abroad is one of the central points at issue. It is not that the content of higher education has suddenly become irrelevant, even though many of our student claim this.

It is out of the contradition born of this misfit that our domestic and international problems stem. Intellectual effort is not being concentrated on problems related to the equitable distribution of goods, services, and resources among the peoples of the world (or even among the people in this country).

Our institutions and intellectual leaders are not devoting their research and intellective energies to problems related to the distribution of power through the democratic participation of all people or even all of our own citizens.

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