

[SDS Home](#)

DEMOCRACY IS NOTHING IF IT IS NOT DANGEROUS

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I see SNCC as the Nile Valley of the New Left. And I honor SDS to call it part of the delta that SNCC created.

A question has been raised in the *New Republic* of Oct. 30 which I think it most appropriate for me to take up here. The question is a familiar one, an old companion of American radicals.

The editors criticize Students for a Democratic Society for being too casual about the prospect of communist infiltration. Our members, they say, "do themselves and their aims a disservice by welcoming communists in their ranks, and by making a virtue out of indifference to the possibility of communists becoming the dominant voice in their organization."

Presidents of SDS – I am the fifth – don't really preside over much. They don't make policy. Least of all do they speak final words in the organization's name. So my attempt to reach into the heart of this concern is my own. And on a matter as perplexing to Americans as communism is, I'm of course doubly cautious. And cautious a third time because the problem is a very hard one.

I will cavil a bit to begin with, for the editorial in question has somewhat misconstrued us. So we "welcome" communists, do we? "Welcome" is of course the loaded word, automatic on these occasions. We welcome small-d democrats and converts to radical democracy, not totalitarians in cloaks – neither red cloaks nor fed cloaks. And the editors surely have an odd view of our simple human pride in values if they think we'd be "indifferent" to the loss of the organization that embodies and sustains those values.

Still, their question is real, even piercing. SDS does not screen, purge, or use loyalty pledges. So along with Senator Dodd, the *New Republic* editors narrow their eyes at us. We are not confused, however. We can perceive the differences between Sen. Dodd and [the *New Republic* editor Gilbert] Harrison. We understand about the strange bedfellows that politics makes. Indeed, this is the whole question, isn't it?

So what answers do we have? What about the problem of "infiltration"?

It must surely be common knowledge that factionalism is the reef of the American left, and that the "infiltration" argument is one of the chief weapons of those who take comfort in its disarray. THE way, that is, to factionize and fractionate the left here is to cry, "Beware the Red Menace that bores from within!" It is by this incantation that "pure" radicals are divided from the "impure," and those among the pure who dispute the categories from those who find them tolerable. It is not news that this happens. And when we are referred to labor's experience with communism in the 1940s – as if that record proved the virtues of exclusionism – it is not news either that we could theorize from the same record that our Establishment unions exist today at the expense of an American left.

And just what are we expected to do, anyway? We say we are democrats and are told that's not enough, for a man may smile and smile, and be a villain. Certainly. He may also be a happy democrat. Our critics must show us the perceptible telltale clues that divide pretense from belief, or how to find the twisting motive in the straight-seeming act. Motives are invisible. And it is so obvious one nearly weeps to say it that to judge the invisible – even, alas, in politics – is a type of sorcery. We judge behavior. Those whose behavior runs athwart the deep SDS commitment to democracy just have no leverage over the democrats of SDS.

And, in any case, SDS retains no detectives.

Further, it is hard to see how a group could be "taken over" unless it has handles of power that can be seized, some "central apparatus" that can enforce orders. SDS has no such apparatus – only a beleaguered hotspot in Chicago – and it is a main hard point with us that it never shall. In all our organizing work, in slums and on campuses, we aim to involve everyone equally and openly in the making of decisions, to break down social machines that bestow power undemocratically and withhold it in the same sorry way. Bureaucracies concentrate and conceal power. We avoid them. Anyone who tries to invade us therefore invades only himself; for the only power available to any of us is the power of good sense and humanity.

But the criticism has entirely missed the real point: "infiltration" is not nearly the problem that "association" is.

What should we do when we find ourselves agreeing on a special issue with "outcaste" groups that we may strongly disagree with generally? Mao Tse-tung wants the U.S. out of Vietnam. And according to the official sources, so does President Johnson. Ho Chi Minh would doubtless like to retire [Defense] Secretary Robert McNamara whom Barry Goldwater the other day suggested should go back to making Edsels. How may Mr. Goldwater and President Johnson cleanse themselves?

The manual of American realpolitik recommends dissociation, exclusion. We are pure, they are not. Our motives are good, theirs ulterior. We pluck out this offending eye, cut off this hand. We march alone. But that would hardly be SDS. Radical democracy, we believe, is exactly that social freedom that can reflect critically upon its own foundations. It exposes itself on purpose in order to be itself. It insists on the equal thinkability of all thoughts. Whoever gives himself to real democracy thereby gives himself to a most demanding experiment – one that never closes except in the defeat one form of which is called "consensus." Is it not clear on the face of the matter that democracy exists so that struggle can exist without death? That it responds to the problems of variousness in fact by requiring variousness?

Of course there is peril for SDS in the democratic commitment – two kinds, in fact. First, the danger that our democratic faith might be outargued from within. I cannot describe the remoteness of that danger. It seems to me galactic. But the other danger is more intense. Our acceptance and trust of others opens up the possibility of short-term cooperation with what the great world condemns as untouchables. This can lead to our prejudgment, thence to our political ostracism, and thence to defeat.

Then how do we justify taking such a stand?

Morally, there is just no choice. Our vulnerability must be total. Is that naive? Yes, I think it is naive. Innocent? To be sure – from love. Is it also fatal? Only if America so decides.

But there is also, I think, a quite practical wisdom in our stand. I doubt it, but perhaps we'd be more tempted if we were shown how exclusion leads to a more democratic distribution of political power. Clearly, it leads to greater acceptance. But acceptance by what but the prevailing power champions whom we should be striving to unseat? Acceptance to what use but the license to survive without sway in an unchanged society? It is not the aim of the New Left to become the love child of the wretched and the Bank of America. The aim is to change society. We choose to remain unacceptable to those who would not have it changed. And we already know that if they cannot red-bait us – and they can do that, as you know, at whim and with no proof – then they will beard-bait, beatnik-bait, now this new depravity, Vietnik-bait; and when all else fails, idealist-bait – as if when it is once shown that you have ideals, your arguments stand refuted in advance.

Compromising to meet the guilt-by-association attack is thus not only unethical, it is also – naive, innocent, and fatal. But from fear this time, not love. And among political deaths, too, there are the quick and the slow, the better and the worse.

There is maybe still a richer reason for our not saying no to anybody.

I see SNCC as the Nile Valley of the New Left. And I honor SDS to call it part of the delta that SNCC created. We are other things, too. But at our best, I think, we are SNCC translated to the North and trained on a somewhat different and broader set of issues. Our best concern comes from SNCC. Some find that concern a bit shocking, but I'll name it anyway. It is to make love more possible. We work to remove from society what threatens and prevents it – the inequity that coordinates with injustice to create plain suffering and to make custom of distrust. Poverty. Racism. The assembly-line universities of this Pepsi Generation. The ulcerating drive for affluence. And the ideology of anti-communism, too, because it smothers my curiosity and bribes my compassion. This ideology decrees for me that I may not love Castro, however shining-bright his anguish, or Gus Hall, however long his sorrow. And I quite likely speak for most all of us in SDS when I refuse that ideology on plain and self-evident principle.

Finally, I would be so bold as to lecture our liberal critics a bit on the subject of democracy.

Even as they counsel us on this matter, we stare their failures in the face. What, after all, is the idea of "political democracy" which they claim to be jeopardized by our radical trust? Is it this quadrennial spasm of the body politic that puts purchasable men in the low places and purchasers in the high? Do they see the fruit of their own generation's political wisdom in this recently paroled Congress, which met with such amazing silence what may be the major crisis of American character, the Vietnam war? SDS, believe me, is by no means smug or even to very hopeful about what it has been able to do so far. But still we are puzzled that they should play schoolmaster on this question. Better for them, perhaps, to observe more and admonish less their sons and daughters. All the old good hopes rest now with them, the young, whose risks are obligatory.

It simply must have been heard in this country, sometime, that democracy is nothing if it is not dangerous.

[SDS Home](#)