

A FORGOTTEN HISTORY:
THE 1930s STUDENT MOVEMENT

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On a frigid night in early November just four days prior to the 1932 presidential election, in the throes of the Great Depression, hundreds of socialist college students waited in line for hours outside Madison Square Garden. The students made their way past some 300 policemen as well as rivaling communists, who were distributing anti-socialist literature, and into the famous arena for a political rally. The Garden was suffused in red—red flags, red handkerchiefs, and red armbands, representing the idiosyncratic socialist color.¹ And there was a buzz of anticipation for a lesser known candidate, Norman Thomas, a socialist, to take the stage. Amid the band music and synchronized cheers led by students from Columbia University, NYU, and City College, Thomas appeared in front of the crowd totaling over 20,000. At the center of the stage, Thomas shouted his familiar slogan, “Vote your hopes, not your fears.”² He knew this was his last dramatic attempt to get students to rally behind the socialist ticket and to convince Americans that socialism was the only solution for what he believed was a collapse of the capitalist system. Student protestors responded by chanting, “Columbia professors may write Roosevelt speeches but Columbia students vote for Thomas.”³ Indeed many of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s close advisers in his brain trust taught at Columbia. And so, on Election Day, where nearly two thirds of Columbia students voted, Roosevelt drew only 221 votes, while Thomas attracted 421 votes.⁴ The students who advocated for Thomas, campaigned for Thomas, and voted for Thomas—these were the students who helped mobilize the first mass undergraduate political protest in the United States.

¹ *The New York Times*. “20,000 Hail Thomas at Rally in Garden”, 4 November 1932, 1.

² “20,000 Hail Thomas at Rally in Garden,” 1.

³ “20,000 Hail Thomas at Rally in Garden,” 1.

⁴ Robert Cohen, *When the Old Left Was Young: Student Radicals and America’s First Mass Student Movement, 1929-1941*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1993), 74.

AN INTRODUCTION

The year 1932 signified a tremendous rise in political activism across college campuses. Preceding the Great Depression, students were disenchanted by the unfair distribution of power. Many were drawn to the socialist presidential candidate, Norman Thomas, whose teachings countered the traditional wisdom that all Americans were governed by a model political system. Thomas's 1932 campaign was popularized on campus by the League for Industrial Democracy (L.I.D.), whose agenda focused on issues such as abolishing The Reserve Officers' Training Corps (R.O.T.C.), granting federal aid to education, promoting racial equality, and attaining collective bargaining rights. Formerly the Intercollegiate Student Society (I.S.S.), the L.I.D. was not exclusively a student organization, though students comprised a majority of the membership. By 1933, the collegiate faction of the L.I.D. formed the Student League for Industrial Democracy (S.L.I.D.) Although statistically socialist students were underrepresented on campus, they became the first social group to form a mass grassroots protest challenging the ideology of American capitalism. Student activism was prevalent around the country, but the earliest site of protest was in New York City, and consequently, received the most national attention. College students who were dismayed by capitalism in the 1930s helped orchestrate the first modern student movement that did not reoccur for another three decades. The culmination of the L.I.D.'s organizational approach, Thomas's charisma, and the economic downfall unearthed a moment that transformed American student politics by pioneering protest tactics that served as an archetype for future political student rallies.

Since the 1930s, the history of American student activism during the Depression era has been silenced. One of the goals of this paper is to illustrate their agenda, which included

promoting academic freedom, creating federal job programs for the youth, and challenging American capitalism. To fully understand the root of student protest, it is imperative to illuminate the forgotten message of student activists in the 1930s. Their social movement tactics of challenging academic confinement and the principles of American capitalism spearheaded the trajectory of social protest in the U.S. that would not emerge again in force until the Vietnam era. Undergraduate activists in the 1930s were instrumental in changing the American political landscape by voicing marginalized socialist beliefs during a period encompassed by economic uncertainty and social strife.

METHODOLOGY

There is an extreme dearth of scholarship on the 1930s student movement. James Wechsler in 1935, Ralph Brax in 1981, and Robert Cohen in 1993 are the only authors who have devoted entire works focusing on Depression era student activism. Wechsler, a 1935 Columbia graduate, later became a leader in the American Student Union (A.S.U.) His *Revolt on Campus* hones in on the first part of the movement, but is written from a limited perspective by focusing on the student organizations in which he was a participant. Brax's *The First Student Movement: Student Activism in the United States during the 1930s* captures the general tenor of collegiate activists, but only a few copies are circulated. Cohen proves to be the most recent comprehensive history of the movement.

Cohen adeptly portrays the 1930s student movement, which he argues, stemmed from a political awakening on college campuses as a result of the financial downturn and the looming prospect of another world war. Ultimately, by the late 30s, the movement mobilized at least a half million collegians in anti-war strikes. Although Cohen primarily focuses on the

climax of the movement in the mid-30s, I will use Cohen's research on the rise of the student movement. One of the objectives of this paper is to extend Cohen's work by having a dialogue with the limited scholarship that does exist. Social movement scholars of the 1960s often fail to attribute the origins of the movement to the work done by students of the 30s. Therefore, by expanding Cohen's research, we will be able to correlate the two movements by understanding the origins of Vietnam protest tactics.

Social movement theory also guides the material cited in this paper in an effort to legitimize the students' efforts. This paper incorporates firsthand accounts of students who participated in the movement through *Revolt* and *Student Outlook* articles, the L.I.D.'s monthly magazines. The articles were accessed through the Franklin D. Roosevelt archives in Hyde Park, New York. Through combining primary and secondary sources, this paper provides a rich, original lens into the participants and critics of the 1930s student movement.

THE HISTORICAL MOMENT IN CONTEXT

Hal Draper, a member of the League for Industrial Democracy, argues that the youth was the social group most significantly impacted by The Depression. Family incomes were decreasing, school budgets were reduced, and tuition fees were inflated. Students were unable to find summer or part-time jobs. The plummeting economy was affecting students even with the most sheltered backgrounds since, as one 1932 *Revolt* editorial states, "The sacrifices involved in securing a college education are now less handsomely rewarded."⁵ The youth, in this case, are defined by college students, often hailing from white privileged, upper class backgrounds.

⁵ "Why students are Turning to Socialism," *Revolt*, Vol. I, No. 2, December 1932, 3.

During the expansion of capitalism at the turn of the century, college curriculums were largely tailored to train students to become engineers. Initially, there was an appeal to pursue careers as civil engineers, yet as the industrial age progressed there became a greater demand for chemical, electrical, and mechanical engineering. "The role of colleges in the period of capitalist expansion was to produce competent men for jobs already created," the *Revolt* editorial argued, "and the occasion for critical social thinking was slight."⁶ Engineering schools reinforced the creed of capitalism, yet schools of business administration also emerged to match the rise of industrialism.

Through *Revolt* articles, students in the L.I.D. argued that the early 1930s should signify a shift of purpose for higher education. "Educated for jobs that do not materialize," will result in students will becoming "resentful toward the existing order and will use the learning they have acquired to overthrow it."⁷ Members of the L.I.D. predicted that students would draw from personal experience to recognize the ever-present class struggle produced by capitalism. Students advocated for distributing roles of people in power who controlled the production of goods. Students who were prepared to fight against the capitalist crusade turned to the L.I.D., since they felt the organization spoke to the ill-fated circumstance of the working class. The L.I.D. served as a vehicle to encourage strike campaigns, publish pamphlets, implement courses studying the Socialist movement, and ultimately end class divisions.⁸ In the early 1930s, students revealed fierce resentment towards the country's downward spiraling economic trend.

A satirical political cartoon that appeared in the December 1933 issue of *The Student Outlook* helped capture the sentiment of the merit of a college degree among students who

⁶ "Why students are Turning to Socialism," 17.

⁷ "Why students are Turning to Socialism," 17.

⁸ "Why students are Turning to Socialism," 17.

were engaged in the protests. The cartoon, reprinted from the *World Telegram*, was entitled “Getting Nowhere by Degrees” with the subheading “News Item: College alumni, unemployed brain trust, off for capital in cap and gowns, with diplomas, on job crusade.”⁹ The image shows six slides of superlatives given to a graduate trying to unsuccessfully find use for his degree. In one slide, the bottom reads, “most scholarly,” and the graduate is trying to use a Phi Beta Kappa key to gain entrance into a house. The slide for “best all around athlete” depicts the graduate winded from sprinting to fifteen offices to try to find a job. Another says “most talented” and shows the graduate singing for money on the street. The last slide reads, “most popular,” and the graduate is dressed up as a cheerleader, chanting demands for a job outside the White House. The slides depict the graduate attempting to attain a job in unconventional ways by using his college experiences. Social movement theorists Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward reaffirm that “sharp economic change obviously disturbs the relationship between what men and women have been led to expect and the conditions they actually experience.”¹⁰ Students were conditioned by societal norms, to believe that their degrees would lead to jobs; however the realities of the Great Depression altered those truths. The collapse of the stability of higher education—which implied students no longer were attaining prestigious jobs—helped foster political protests.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF STUDENT ACTIVISM

Student activism did exist prior to the 20th century, but it paled in comparison to the surge in the 1930s. The first student societies that challenged the inflexible curriculum were debate clubs in the mid 1700s. However, until the decade after the Civil War, social clubs

⁹“Getting Nowhere With Degrees,” *The Student Outlook*, Vol. 2 No. 2, December, 1933.

¹⁰ Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Pantheon) 10.

were closely tied to the policies and religious initiatives of administrators, and students were rarely concerned with issues beyond the college.¹¹ A shift occurred by the turn of the century, when campus groups became more conscious of societal issues at large and demonstrated a strong attempt to rally student interest in social and political issues.¹² But during World War I, student activity on campus was stagnant largely due to the first Red Scare, from 1919 to 1920.¹³ The years spoke to the tremendous Anti-Communist feelings in the U.S., primarily due to the fear over of the U.S. becoming an anarchist state. Americans also dreaded the potential for Bolshevism, a faction of the Marxist Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, to spread to the U.S. The American Labor Movement also heightened the hysteria because it seemingly produced radical political thought. As a result, the Scare fostered a feeling of suppression on campus since students were afraid of being deemed un-American, or worse—Communist.

It was not until the 1920s, when an increased student control of campus groups and a rejection of administrators' guidance caused students to rally fellow undergraduates to oppose World War I. However Walter Lippmann, one of the first members of the S.L.I.D., wrote in his acclaimed book *A Preface to Morals*, "What distinguishes the generation who have approached maturity since the debacle of idealism at the end of the War is not their rebellion against the religion and the moral code of their parents, but the disillusionment with

¹¹Rodolph Leslie Schnell. *National Activist Student Organizations in American Higher Education, 1905-1944* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, School of Education, 1976), 8.

¹² Schnell, 10.

¹³ During World War I, it was difficult to organize socialists to fight against capitalism. The passage of the Espionage Act in 1917—initially outlawing any obstruction to American military operations—repressed socialism and freedom of speech nationwide. The campaign against political radicals helped create the paranoia that reinforced the First Red Scare. While the first Scare was centered on workers' rights and political extremism, the Second Red Scare, from 1947 to 1957, was defined by the hysteria of communists filtering into American society and the federal government.

their own rebellion.”¹⁴ The youth who rebelled in the 1920s were often revolting without a committed belief in what their actions represented. “It was the collegiate work of the L.I.D.,” Rodolph Leslie Schnell argues, “that provided the rebirth of radical student organizations.”¹⁵ The League for Industrial Democracy revolutionized student activism in a way that had not previously occurred on college campuses. They were pioneering protest tactics, but were not fully conscious of their impact yet.

AN ALTERNATIVE PARTY

Off campus, by the turn of the century there was an undoubted influx in socialist support among the general population in the U.S., which the press often referred to as “The Rising Tide of Socialism.”¹⁶ By 1910, the first socialist candidate was elected to Congress, and the following year, 73 Socialist mayors had been elected. At one point, the Socialist Party had over 100,000 members with 1,200 different officeholders and the socialist newspaper, *Appeal to Reason*, had a half a million subscribers.¹⁷ “Socialists moved out of the small circles of city immigrants,” historian Howard Zinn argues, “and became American.”¹⁸ The appeal of socialism was largely due to the fervor and eloquence of the Party’s leader, Eugene Debs. Best known as an American union leader, he also helped found the International Labor Union and the Industrial Workers of the World. By running for president five times on the socialist ticket, the last in 1920 from his prison cell, he became the most renowned socialist in the U.S. for years to come. Debs saw the working-class as the best

¹⁴ Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1929), 17.

¹⁵ Schnell, 67.

¹⁶ Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States: 1492-present* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 353.

¹⁷ Zinn, 340.

¹⁸ Zinn, 340.

vehicle to free themselves from the class divides that capitalism perpetuates. After Deb's death in 1926, Norman Thomas was officially appointed the party's leader.

The allure of socialism pervaded cultural references as well. In the early 20th century, writers such as Upton Sinclair, Jack London, and Frank Norris advocated for the socialist cause. Sinclair's acclaimed *The Jungle* was originally published in *Appeal to Reason*. Sinclair viewed socialism as a means to restore the problems created by capitalism. When Jurgis—the protagonist and a Lithuanian immigrant working in a slaughterhouse—encounters socialism, the system is portrayed as the answer to Jurgis's anguish regarding the unjust immortality caused by capitalism. In *The Jungle*, Sinclair explains that to understand the competitive wage system, Jurgis must understand the benefits of socialism. "All over the world two classes were forming, with an unbridged chasm between them," Sinclair writes, "the capitalist class, with its enormous fortunes, and the proletariat, bound into slavery by unseen chains."¹⁹ Sinclair explains that socialism should be viewed as an alternative to capitalism, which stunts freedom. Such texts that reveal the horrors of capitalism and portray socialism as redemption, help explain why so many students turned to the Socialist Party.

The expansion of socialism was a direct rejection of capitalism. As industrialists sought to cut costs, Frederick Winslow Taylor expedited industrial efficiency by making workers interchangeable and by making tasks more remedial. The process of scientific management was dubbed Taylorism, which further divorced the worker from the final product, increasing class disparities. The system treated workers as objects used by those in power produce goods as fast as possible using any means necessary. The introduction of Taylorism yielded inhumane working conditions by promoting a system that devalued workers rights. According to the students who participated in protests, supporting socialist

¹⁹ Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*. (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1906), 373.

initiatives was their way of rejecting systems like Taylorism, which exemplified the horrors of capitalism. By the 1930s, many students turned to Socialist Party, which they had not done previously, because the rise of the Labor Movement illuminated the realities of capitalism.

AN EFFORT TO CHALLENGE THE ACADEMY AND ACADEMIC TRADITION

The student movement during the Depression era plays a crucial role in American history. The academic confinement students were fighting against helps explain the rise of the discipline of American Studies, since the 1930s also signified a decade that challenged traditional beliefs in academia. The discipline of American Civilizations emerged in the early 1930s as a rejection of conventional methods of teaching the social sciences in higher education. American Civilization, later to be named American Studies, describes an academic movement devoted to the interdisciplinary approach to studying American culture. It represents a paradigm shift as the discipline called for an expansion of traditional academic fields, such as English or History. The development of American Studies reinforces the academic unease represented through the 1930s student movement, given that the discipline challenged the singularity of existing fields. The student movement was a critique of American capitalism, and similarly, American Studies challenges the concept of American Exceptionalism. Therefore, American Studies scholarship can be used as a lens into the debate of social groups and cultural movements, such as the student movement of the 1930s.

The financial climate of the 1930s indicated a call for change on a political level, but also inside the classroom. The *Encyclopedia of American Studies* asserts the economic downfall of the 1930s “stimulated new and recently established academics” to “inspect the social processes, values, and patterns of thought that had led to the crisis and to examine the social and cultural traditions and contemporary resources possessed by the nation that might

lead the nation out of the crisis.”²⁰ The same critics, who fought for American Studies to be accepted as a serious academic field, echoed the discontent of the undergraduates in the student movement. The appeal for American Studies as an alternative discipline can be exemplified by the students who comprised the largest student uprising until that point.

American Studies scholars Lee Artz and Bren Ortega Murphy’s argue that the nature of capitalism and the economic mood in the 1930s yielded frustration, which was proven by students’ effort to challenge the free market system. Artz and Murphy contend that U.S. history can be measured by capitalist-class hegemony.²¹ Hegemony occurs when individuals are aware of their conditions yet consent to their social position in society. Therefore, capitalist-class hegemony refers to the hegemonic social divisions evident in the hierarchal nature of American society. Artz and Murphy use the term capitalist-class hegemony to help explain the detrimental consequences of American capitalism. A “capitalist society” they argue, “is characterized by highly industrialized productive forces producing goods collectively with stratified social relations that distribute benefits, rights, and responsibilities hierarchally.”²² They also clarify the sudden distrust Americans had in their government in the 1930s. “As the dominant capitalist hegemony fractured, alternative ideas appeared,” Artz and Murphy argue, “without jobs, security, or opportunity, the so-called American way of life was not very appealing.”²³ At times of unease, it is natural for citizens to question any existing political system. As a result, socialism emerged as an alternative political party. The undergraduates in the student movement of the 1930s understood the implications of an

²⁰ *Encyclopedia of American Studies*, ed. Miles Orvell (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), s.v. “American Studies: An Overview” (by Michael Cowan), <http://eas-ref.press.jhu.edu/view?aid=524> (accessed September 27, 2010).

²¹ Lee Artz and Bren Adair Ortega Murphy. *Cultural Hegemony in the United States* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000), 34.

²² Artz and Murphy 220.

²³ Artz and Murphy 24-25.

economic downfall and were responding to their prediction of the demise of capitalism. The rebellious ideology of the 1930s student movement is ingrained in American Studies theory, but is often not referenced in American Studies scholarship.

It's not that American Studies scholars neglect the 1930s as a crucial moment in the cultural history of the U.S., but many do fail to recognize students' contribution. American Studies scholar Michael Denning defines the Popular Front of the 1930s as a cultural social movement. He acknowledges that the age was the first time in American history that the "Left—the tradition of radical democratic movements for social transformation—had a central, indeed shaping, impact on American culture."²⁴ However, students comprised a large facet of the Left in the 1930s, and throughout Denning's *The Cultural Front: the laboring of American culture in the Twentieth Century* he never recognizes students' involvement. The disregard of the student movement is not exclusive to Denning or the field of American Studies. Rather, the oversight is a symptom of majority of historical accounts of the 1930s. To illuminate the 1930s student movement would help American Studies scholars better understand the cultural impact students' had on the Left, the Labor Movement, and social movement protest tactics at large.

DISCONTENT ON CAMPUS

One of the most revealing examples of students' discontent with the confines of academia was reflected through college administrators' restriction of student collegiate newspaper editors. Administrators often intimidated students to not produce articles that challenged the college. While restlessness regarding the financial crisis was evident across

²⁴ Michael Denning. *The Cultural Front: the laboring of American culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1998), 3.

the country, the feeling manifested at schools in New York City, which was the first site of students' meaningful dissatisfaction with the current intellectual scene.²⁵ Throughout the 1920s, administrators feared any poor representation of their college, and thus controlled collegiate paper columnists and editors regarding articles they were permitted to circulate. In 1926, Felix S. Cohen, later to write for the *Revolt*, was forbidden to write anything on the subject of the R.O.T.C.²⁶ The censorship was a direct result of the administration's fear of radical thought, and they were quick to discourage any writing that threatened their power. On the subject in a later *Revolt* article, Meyer Liben wrote, "People in authority" were "finicky and fearful of having their dignity ruffled."²⁷ In 1931, the editor of *The Campus*, the City College of New York (CCNY) paper, was suspended for essentially criticizing the Dean of the Business School. The same year, the Administration not only pulled final funding for the paper, but started their own paper, *The Faculty Bulletin*, which was to be distributed without cost to rival the student paper. President Robinson deemed the paper the only official source of College news and condemned student papers since he claimed they were not widely circulated.

The Alumni Association promised that they would reinstate financial support for *The Campus* if the editorials were "softened," since the Association even admitted that they wanted the student paper to "play ball" with the Administration.²⁸ To fill the position of the Acting Editor-in-Chief, the Association chose a student who had served on the business board of the staff for seven weeks and was noticeably under qualified. He admitted he was a novice regarding editorial work and in fact said he did not want the position. For the new

²⁵ Eileen Eagan. *Class, Culture, and the Classroom: The Student Peace Movement of the 1930s* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), 40.

²⁶ Meyer Liben, "Undergraduates Fight for Editorial Freedom," *Revolt*, Vol. I, No. 1, October 1932, 15.

²⁷ Liben, 15.

²⁸ Liben, 15.

Editor to be inducted, they needed approval from the staff. When the staff crushingly rejected the nomination, the Board of Directors repealed the right for staff members to be able to appoint any member of the paper. In turn, 24, later to become 32, staff members resigned. Students felt "that no paper at all was preferable to one which tempered its editorial policy to suit financial exigencies and over which they had not the final control."²⁹

The students' decision to resign was calculated, given that the student editorial boards and both the administration and the board controlled by alumni were quarreling for over 25 years. Although the censorship was heightened in the years approaching the 1930s, students could no longer tolerate administrators' oppressive use of legal powers. Richard Flacks, a sociologist of Leftist social movements, argues voices in the minority hold the capability for a mass historical intervention. Although students "may be subordinated and unable to make decisions that will initiate plans" Flacks says they are "in a position to frustrate plans."³⁰ By the early 1930s, there was a dramatic shift in the relationship between students on campus and American society at large.

When enough discontent is channeled into an organized a single event, it can spur a movement. The most meaningful action occurred on April 1, 1932, when students went on strike in response to the expulsion of Reed Harris, the *Columbia Spectator* editor-in-chief. Columbia was largely comprised of privileged, upper class white males, as Columbia did not become co-ed until 1968. Harris, however, was known for challenging collegiate and societal issues by discussing anti-Semitism at Columbia or questioning the existence of the R.O.T.C. on campuses nationwide. Harris approached the most taboo topic, according to administrators, when he demanded an investigation of the dining halls. In the editorial that

²⁹ Liben, 15.

³⁰ Richard Flacks. *Making History: the Radical Tradition in American Life*. (New York: Columbia UP, 1988), 6.

led to his expulsion, he argued the purpose of the halls was for students, but the college was manipulating the services for profit.³¹ The day following his expulsion, Dean Herbert E. Hawkes, who expelled Harris, released a statement, appearing on the front page of *The New York Times*:

Materials published in *The Columbia Spectator* during the past few days is a climax to a long series of discourtesies, innuendoes and misrepresentations which have appeared in this paper during the current academic year, and calls for disciplinary actions.³²

In response, the Columbia Chapter of the L.I.D., comprised of 60 students, made a declaration a day prior to the strike stating:

We believe that the expulsion of Reed Harris from Columbia because of items contained in *The Spectator* is a clear violation of the principles of academic freedom. We therefore protest against this misuse by the college authorities of their disciplinary powers.³³

Three days after the expulsion, four thousand students picketed outside the college library while professors lectured empty classrooms;³⁴ there was a 75 percent decline in class attendance.³⁵ The upheaval on campus caused administrators to reinstate Harris. Students were displaying feelings of discontent for a common cause. "When a single episode of collective action," della Porta and Diani argue, "is perceived as components of a longer

³¹ James Wechsler. *Revolt on the Campus* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973), 111.

³² "Students Will Fight Expulsion of Harris; Suit to Reinstate Him at Columbia Likely." *The New York Times*, 3 April 1932, 1.

³³ "Protest for Harris at Columbia Today." *The New York Times*, 4 April 1932, 1.

³⁴ Wechsler, 115.

³⁵ Columbia 250, "Columbia College Student Life: The Curriculum and the Extra-Curriculum, 1754-2004," 250 *Events Symposia* (2004). http://c250.columbia.edu/c250_events/symposia/history_studentlife_timeline.html.

lasting action,” a social movement can occur.³⁶ Therefore, a feeling of oppression compelled the students to protest. Through their act of immense frustration, students felt linked through ties of solidarity, fueling a social movement. Students started to realize their potential when thousands rallied together for more academic freedom, which ultimately helped spur a mass movement.

Students viewed the school’s action as a triumph and solidified the sentiment that students could protest for their rights through campus activism. James Wechsler, a 1935 Columbia graduate and former editor-in-chief of the *Daily Spectator* later argued, “The Columbia strike of April, 1932,” had “established the place of the student movement and the paths of procedure for it to follow, arousing students in other areas to the imminence of parallels on their own campuses and outlining the strategy of counter-attack.”³⁷ Once students began to realize the power of their mass numbers, their social movement tactics in the early 1930s such as class strikes were emulated throughout the movement.

According to della Porta and Diani, a social movement occurs when actors—the sociological term for activists—form a collective identity that can be recreated in future protests.³⁸ The student movement grew largely because affluent undergraduates turned to the protest for a sense of community. As a result of their privileged background coupled with the economic downfall, these students often felt isolated since they struggled to relate to students who faced the working class dilemma. Robert Cohen notes that the movement helped to overcome feelings of seclusion by providing a new community, which connected students

³⁶ Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani. *Social Movements: an Introduction*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 23.

³⁷ Wechsler, 120.

³⁸ della Porta and Diani, 26.

from varying classes.³⁹ The collective identity created a sense of self worth and the idealism associated with social equality. Students at Columbia had fostered a social movement by creating a sense of solidarity that was perpetuated well after the strike ended. Therefore, the sense of community helped set the precedent for future collegiate protests by fostering tactics and rhetoric that would be mirrored throughout the remainder of the decade.

THE BEGINNING OF THE LEAGUE FOR INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY

The League for Industrial Democracy (L.I.D.) became a major player in the student movement because of their response to the throes of the Great Depression, which caused students to question the capitalist system. Though not directly tied to the Socialist Party, the L.I.D. was a descendent of the Intercollegiate Socialist Society (I.S.S.), established in 1905. Jack London was one of the founders of the I.S.S. and the organization's first official president. He explained that his views on socialism were shaped by his interactions with those from lower socioeconomic classes. London's infamous slogan was to declare war "on the passionless pursuit of passionless intelligence."⁴⁰ He was considered by some to be the American Karl Marx.

Those who follow Marx and Frederick Engel's school of thought believe unanticipated economic adversity fosters antagonism, and thus they tend to argue that protest is more likely to surface in times of economic strife. Many historical scholars believed that the I.S.S. had not participated in a tremendous amount of civil strife prior to the turn of the century because the economy was relatively stable, compared to the 1930s. Students were not

³⁹ Robert Cohen, "Activist Impulses: Campus Radicalism in the 1930s." Excerpted in *The New Deal Network* (1996). The Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute (FERI) and Robert Cohen, <http://newdeal.feri.org/students/essay04.htm>.

⁴⁰ Helen Fisher, "Socialism in Our Time," *The Student Outlook*, Vol. I, No. 3, February 1933, 8.

as engaged in protests because they were not as personally affected by the state of the economy. By 1918, the I.S.S. only reported eight active college chapters, half of which were on all female campuses.⁴¹ Since the term socialism had become stigmatized during the Red Scare, there was a call for change and the I.S.S. adopted its new name—The League for Industrial Democracy—in 1921. Norman Thomas became the co-director of the L.I.D. a year later. The name alteration signified a change in focus. In the early 1920s, the L.I.D.'s agenda was defined by their work to promote not only socialism, but also industrial democracy. The term industrial democracy connotes sharing responsibility between workers and authority figures to place workers in the position to make decisions. Consequently, the L.I.D. became further entwined with the American Labor Movement.⁴²

The revolutionary socialists Marx and Engels had an undeniable influence on the L.I.D. Joseph Lash, later a secretary of the L.I.D., wrote in his personal diary in July 1932, "I will murder the next person who speaks to me of 'proletarian culture,' and proceeds to complain that it's just 'talk.'" When Lash refers to the "proletarian culture" he is drawing from Marx and Engels' *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Marx and Engels define the "proletariat," as the current working class, which developed "a class of labourers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital."⁴³ Marx and Engels describe proletariats as commodities, similar to other facets of commerce, and thus are subject to extreme competition. The proletariat is "swamped in the competition with the large capitalists," they argue, "partly because their specialized skill is

⁴¹ Schnell. 56.

⁴² The author is aware of the correlation between the rise of the Labor Movement in the 1930s and the L.I.D.; however, it is not the premise of the paper's argument.

⁴³ Karl Marx, and Frederick Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party." *Marxists Internet Archive*. Progress Publishers, 2010. Web. 28 Feb. 2011. <http://www.marxists.org/>, 18.

rendered worthless by new methods of production.”⁴⁴ In addition, the lower-middle class ultimately becomes proletariats, in part because their limited capital is not enough to match the innovations of modern industry.

Lash’s frustration regarding Americans’ reference to the proletarian culture indicates that, according to many members of the L.I.D., Americans were acknowledging class disparities but fail to take action. Although the L.I.D. was very much founded on Marxian theory, it is evident that students in the L.I.D. were wary to not completely rely on Marx and Engels’ work. In a *Revolt* article, Marx was referred to as “a kind grandfather,” but “a poor doddering, bewhiskered fellow.”⁴⁵ The L.I.D. could not ignore that Marx and Engels helped pioneer the socialist political movement, but the L.I.D. was keen on forging their own anti-capitalist cause. To understand the complexities of Marxism, it is crucial to hear all opposition to capitalism, which includes American undergraduates.

The activists in the League for Industrial Democracy had a multi-dimensional approach to promote their message of challenging American capitalism. Since most of their activities took place on college campuses they relied on the radio and magazine and pamphlet publications to reach other students. Although the L.I.D. had its strongest representation on campuses, members of the L.I.D. felt that the universities were a microcosm of American society at large. “The universities of large cities are a cross section of our social life,” which was indicated through the L.I.D. distributing the most widely used pamphlets in the country.⁴⁶ The purpose of the L.I.D. was to “build a new social order” through “the combination of thought and action, an understanding of what is the strength of capitalism and

⁴⁴ Marx and Engels, 18.

⁴⁵ “What the L.I.D. Stands For,” *Revolt*, Vol. I, No. 1, February 1932, 6.

⁴⁶ “What the L.I.D. Stands For,” 6.

its weakness in order to bring about Socialism in our own life time.”⁴⁷ Their most effective means of disseminating such platforms was through their internal publications.

The L.I.D.’s magazine, *The Student Outlook*, helped students understand Thomas’s mission. Originally named the *Revolt*, which was first published in 1932, the L.I.D. changed the name of the magazine to *The Student Outlook* after only two editions because its less contentious nature. Helen Fisher wrote in an early edition of the revised magazine, that *The Student Outlook* took the place of the *Revolt*, because the latter had been “found to be a bad selling name.”⁴⁸ In personal diary entries, Lash describes the prospect of a 16-page issue of *Revolt* to be first published in the fall of 1932. In meetings, the L.I.D., who would financially back the magazine, advocated for an exclusively student magazine, whereas Lash wanted an extensive socialist magazine to be released every month. Lash’s push for a magazine honing in on socialism spoke to students’ commitment to promoting socialist ideals. Ultimately, it became a national magazine for students. *The Outlook* urged students to rally the campus against poor working conditions, infringement of civil rights, and the rising cost of tuition. The magazine also promoted adding new courses to scrutinize the financial aspect of the Depression. *The Outlook* helped spread Norman Thomas’s ideas, as he was a frequent contributor to the magazine as well as students in the L.I.D.

The L.I.D. was one of several students groups in the 1930s to contribute to the mass movement, yet the groups often clashed over critical issues. In the fall of 1932 the Young People’s Socialist League (Y.P.S.L.), in addition to the L.I.D., endorsed Thomas as the socialist presidential candidate. The National Student League (N.S.L.), however, did not

⁴⁷ “What the L.I.D. Stands For,” 6.

⁴⁸ Helen Fisher, “Socialism in Our Time,” *The Student Outlook*, Vol. I, No. 3, February 1933, 8.

view electoral politics as a mechanism to bring about radical change. Thus, the L.I.D. gained the momentum they had lost when the N.S.L. initially surfaced.

Although the L.I.D. is rightfully lauded for their major contribution to student activism in the 1930s, it was largely the radical N.S.L. who made New York City the site of collegiate activism in the 1930s. The L.I.D. rivaled the N.S.L, and though both focused on building a mass student protest movement through combative activism, they disagreed over the primary focus of their agenda. When the N.S.L. emerged in 1931, they orchestrated the first student protests in the age of the Depression.⁴⁹ “Coming at a time when nationally militant political protest did not yet exist on campus,” Cohen argues, “the N.S.L.’s founding in New York attested that the city’s student activists were ahead of their time and of the rest of American undergraduates on the road to mass protest.”⁵⁰ The N.S.L. may have spearheaded the student movement in New York, but it was the L.I.D. who ultimately brought the movement to the national sphere. After all, the L.I.D. ultimately became the Students for the Democratic Society (S.D.S.), the leading student group in the 60s, not the N.S.L. The L.I.D. did not initiate the movement, but they should be credited with the legacy of 1930s student activism since they directly led to the future of student protests.

THE LEAGUE FOR INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY AND NORMAN THOMAS

By the early 1930s, socialists in the national sphere congregated into what became known as the Popular Front in response to the growing economic crisis. “The Popular Front” was a “direct political and cultural response to the rise of fascism, the persistence of racism,

⁴⁹ Cohen, 22.

⁵⁰ Cohen, 22.

and the urgency of industrial unionization.”⁵¹ The League for Industrial Democracy responded to the financial climate by demanding federal aid to education, government job programs for youth, workers rights, and racial equality. L.I.D. leader Joseph Lash affirmed Norman Thomas’s influence, arguing “the development of L.I.D. groups on some of the Eastern campuses,” was a direct result of “the visits of Thomas”.⁵² By 1932, Thomas had caught the imagination of the youth. “For a protest movement to arise out of these traumas of daily life,” Piven and Cloward argue, “people have to perceive the deprivation and disorganization they experience as both wrong, and subject to redress.”⁵³ Thomas would be able to correlate the poor economy with the student experience.

Thomas’s presence at universities during his 1932 campaign invigorated students to form an expansive political protest on campus that had not previously occurred. The L.I.D. advanced Thomas’s campaign to the national sphere, and in turn, Thomas’s campaign energized the L.I.D. by increasing the likelihood of the success of their goals. Thomas’s 1932 campaign helped build the L.I.D.’s youth organization by attracting “a considerable number of students,” Hal Draper admits, “including myself.”⁵⁴ Voices, such as Draper’s are often overshadowed by activists in the 1960s. However, understanding Thomas’s appeal to students such as Draper helps scholars deconstruct the root of later student activism. Leadership and the political climate lead to protest, and though they differed in both decades,

⁵¹ Encyclopedia of American Studies, ed. Miles Orvell (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), s.v. “Socialism” (by Francis Shor), <http://eas-ref.press.jhu.edu/view?aid=538>.

⁵² Joseph Lash, “The Student Movement of the 1930s: Joseph P. Lash, Interview,” (1935). Excerpted in *The New Deal Network* (1996). The Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute (FERI) and Robert Cohen. <http://newdeal.feri.org/students/lash.htm>.

⁵³ Piven and Cloward, 12.

⁵⁴ Hal Draper, “The Student Movement of the Thirties: A Political History,” in *As We Saw the Thirties: Essays on Social and Political Movements of a Decade*, ed. Rita James Simon (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1967), 157.

they were prevalent. In the 1960s it was the Vietnam War whereas in the 1930s, students were rebelling against the economic conditions.

Thomas promoted the message that student radicals should view the poor economy as a foundation for revolt in 1932. In response to the harsh economic conditions, Thomas said, "the chance for citizens to speak out as voters came with the presidential campaign of 1932."⁵⁵ Thomas's ability to illuminate the bleak economic future for students had a direct result on the beginning of student protest. Ted Robert Gurr's "relative deprivation" theory of civil strife reinforced the idea that if people have been guided to expect tangible results that they do not receive, then they are apt to express frustration.⁵⁶ Students attended college and expected that their degree would carry weight after graduation. But with the Great Depression, their expectations were not going to be met. According to Gurr's theory, "social protest is not only due to deteriorating life conditions," sociologists Iain Walker and Heather Jean Smith argue, "but also to pessimistic views on the future."⁵⁷ In 1932, students were acutely aware that a college education would not guarantee work post graduation.

However, Thomas's moral message often better resonated with students. In '32 he also argued it was "not merely the economics of capitalism but the psychology native to an acquisitive society," which "shows signs of the decadence of the times."⁵⁸ Students were drawn to Thomas, not solely due to the economic downturn, but because they felt compelled to have a voice. "I joined the fight not because of any developed social convictions," Lash

⁵⁵ Thomas, "The Thirties in America as a Socialist Recalls Them," 109.

⁵⁶ Piven and Cloward, 10.

⁵⁷ Iain Walker and Heather J. Smith. *Relative Deprivation: Specification, Development, and Integration*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 127.

⁵⁸ Norman Thomas, "Why I am a Socialist," (1932). Transcribed from the League for Industrial Democracy Pamphlet, 2nd. Ed. *Internet Archive* (2001). http://www.archive.org/details/WhyIAmASocialist_327.

explained, “but because of a sense of justice and right”.⁵⁹ By 1932, Lash helped organize Thomas’s campaign on college campuses and publicized the job crisis by founding the Association of Unemployed College Alumni. The L.I.D. viewed Thomas’s campaign “as a way of popularizing socialist ideas on campus,” Cohen says, “and they were passionate in this political crusade.”⁶⁰ The student L.I.D. advanced Thomas’s campaign to the national sphere, and in turn, Thomas’s campaign energized the L.I.D. by increasing the reality of their goals. Resurfacing Thomas’s message will help change how scholars view the political tenor of the 1930s by adding another dynamic.

NORMAN THOMAS IN POLITICAL CONTEXT

In the early 1930s, unlike majority of adults, students turned to Norman Thomas for answers to the evils of capitalism, perhaps because the mainstream public was more accustomed to the two-party system. Although the two-party system was seemingly stable in 1932, a third-party movement was well underway. “No one had expected that in a nation so wedded to the two-party system,” Cohen explains, “college youth would break with that system and opt for a socialist candidate in such substantial numbers.”⁶¹ In August 1932, newly retired Columbia professor John Dewey prepared an open letter to convince American voters to consider the third-party movement. The letter, signed by 500 economists from around the nation, stated that the Republican and Democratic parties were unable to offer a feasible platform for the state of the economy and “only a new party can restore the agencies

⁵⁹ Joseph P. Lash, “Autobiography of Joseph Lash,” (1935). Transcribed in *The New Deal Network* (1996). The Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute (FERI) and Robert Cohen. <http://newdeal.feri.org/students/slides22.htm>.

⁶⁰ Cohen, 77.

⁶¹ Cohen, 77.

of the government to the services of the people.”⁶² According to Thomas, the two major parties were “interchangeable,” and neither offered effective recovery platforms.⁶³ Voting rights historian Alexander Keyssar in fact agrees that in the 1930s, these were “two parties that were not all that unlike each other.”⁶⁴ There was an implicit understanding that perhaps a lack of political choices, combined with the demise of capitalism, led students to embrace an unconventional option.

Dewey understood that students were more apt to accept Thomas and the initiatives of the L.I.D. compared to older generations, yet was still determined to expand such beliefs to the general public. In his *Address of Welcome to the League for Industrial Democracy*, eight years after he composed the letter for a third-party movement, he explained that the L.I.D. resonated better with college students because in a democracy, education and politics were inherently linked. He relayed that the L.I.D. believes democracy is an “educational enterprise” which “rests upon faith in public opinion and upon faith that the democratic process will result in the growth of a public opinion which is capable, enlightened and honest.”⁶⁵ Dewey admitted that college students’ uncertainty about job availability upon graduation triggered immense insecurity regarding democracy. Therefore, he called upon the L.I.D. to explain to Americans that education will mitigate such anxieties about democracy. “What young men and women need above all else is a sense of unrealized possibilities opening new horizons,” Dewey explained, and it is the duty of, “the L.I.D. to bring to the attention of youth in our colleges, thereby giving them the sense of something fine and great

⁶² “Third Party Urged by 500 Economists.” *The New York Times*, 8 August 1932, 4.

⁶³ Norman Thomas, “The Thirties in America as a Socialist Recalls Them,” in *As We Saw the Thirties: Essays on Social and Political Movements of a Decade*, ed. Rita James Simon (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1967), 109.

⁶⁴ Alexander Keyssar. *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 186.

⁶⁵ John Dewey. “Address of Welcome to the League for Industrial Democracy.” *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*. Ed. Jo Ann Boydston. Vol. 14:1939-1941. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1988. 263.

for which to live.”⁶⁶ Students were more eager to accept the L.I.D.’s message of fostering a creative effort, since it took years before the sentiment to take hold among the general public.

Students’ acceptance of Thomas largely reflected the “intellectual class,” since only the top tier of society was able to partake in higher education at the time.⁶⁷ Therefore, students who attended college were more likely to support Thomas than those who did not have the opportunity. Though not always palpable in the polls, the sentiment of accepting an alternate party slowly permeated throughout the country, and at times, evident among an older demographic. A 1932 *Revolt* article asked for Walter Lippman’s prediction of socialism as an emerging political faction to be seriously considered. Lippman believed “the measure of response among the masses and the large activity of the Socialist Party points to a powerful, growing and influential party.”⁶⁸ Although Lippman did identify himself as a socialist, his prediction regarding the future of the party spread to other facets of American society as well.

In a letter to the editor to *The New York Times*, five days prior to the election, Victor Vernon, a politically engaged citizen who ordinarily identified himself as a Republican, wrote that Thomas was correct in his assertion that capitalism was ill-fated, and questioned the true difference between the two major parties. Vernon stated that there was indication that 3 million Americans would vote for Thomas and the majority derived from those educated in society.⁶⁹ Therefore, Vernon could assert that “a real effective third party is in the making and in that party, now drawing on college graduates and the business men and leaders of tomorrow, lie a real new deal, a fair and promising one for the American

⁶⁶ Dewey, 263.

⁶⁷ Vernon Victor, “Mr. Thomas Gaining: Intellectual Trend to a Third Party is Seen Gathering Strength.” *The New York Times*, 3 November 1932, 20 (Proquest).

⁶⁸ “Strange Career of Walter Lippman,” *Revolt*, Vol. I, No. 2, December 1932, 22.

⁶⁹ Victor, 20.

people.”⁷⁰ A growing approval of a third-party movement emerged as many students predicted an imminent collapse of capitalism because of the financial climate. Two days before the election, a *New York Times* contributor wrote, “it is natural that in hard times minority groups should sprout like mushrooms.”⁷¹ Though third-party grassroots movements were present in the past, they did not nearly galvanize the youth to the extent of Thomas’s campaign. His tactics contrasted with major parties because his strategy was “more of a protest movement than an electoral race.”⁷² To recreate such an eminent movement or gain the student vote in future elections, it is crucial for scholars to understand why students, rather than the general public, were drawn to politicians like Norman Thomas. He should be credited for expanding the political landscape of American politics by offering a significant alternative to the singular trend of the two-party system.

THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF THE 1932 ELECTION

In order to build a socialist alliance, the League for Industrial Democracy (L.I.D.) also wanted to convince students to stray from the conservative politics of their parents. In the 1920s, students nationwide had a seemingly blind faith in President Herbert Hoover and his pro-business approach to politics. However, the realities of the 1929 stock market crash and a yearning for independence fostered a divide among the youth and the general electorate. The L.I.D. was faced with the challenge to leave the conventional ideologies they had grown up with, as a means to create a new social order.

The 1932 election drew an influx of the students vote compared to previous years, despite that the two mainstream presidential candidates, Hoover and Franklin Delano

⁷⁰ Victor, 20.

⁷¹ “The Nation at the Polls: The Background.” *The New York Times*, 6 November 1932, XX1 (Proquest).

⁷² Cohen, 77.

Roosevelt, chose not to focus on college students. In 1932, only a few hundred thousand were of voting age, and so Hoover and Roosevelt strategically channeled their efforts to target other demographics. As a result, the socialist candidate, Norman Thomas, gained the immediate advantage in winning the votes of students. He was able to provide assurance for students that times will get better, in an age that was dominated by pessimistic outlooks.

Hoover lost the advantage of incumbency by failing to reverse the ailing economy and by failing to restore hope. Students in the L.I.D. often blamed the Hoover administration for the crashing stock market, which was down 90 percent, and many were not convinced by his fear mongering tactics. Many also associated the incumbent with the 25 percent unemployment rate, because he refused to directly provide aid to those who were losing their homes.⁷³ Hoover even acknowledged that students were losing confidence in their nation's financial system, but mistakenly focused on the "symbol" of economics and overlooked the "reality" of hope.⁷⁴ To repair a dispirited nation, Roosevelt conversely indicated that Americans needed their government to promote optimism, and not to restrict the focus to a stable currency as the sole cure for the ailing American temperament. He won public respect for his ability to restore hope during his campaign because he mobilized various groups of Americans. He united people of different political parties, people of different economic statuses, Southern whites, Northern Blacks, and women, who tended to vote Republican.⁷⁵ However, despite endorsements from these diverse groups of Americans, Roosevelt did not gain the support of the youth. In truth, students who sympathized with the L.I.D. were apathetic towards Roosevelt because of his habit of evading specifics. Many college students

⁷³ Jonathan Alter, "Letter? I Never Got Any Letter, Herbert." *Newsweek*, 1 December 2008, 24.

⁷⁴ Bernard Asbell, *The F.D.R. Memoirs* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1973), 4.

⁷⁵ Ritchie, 158.

found Roosevelt ineffective when attempting to address the strife and idealism, which consequently drew a considerable number of students to Thomas.

For students who began to lean Left, Roosevelt's ambiguous reforms could not compare to Thomas's radical call for a massive restructuring of the economy. Roosevelt did not appeal to students because he was unsuccessful in conducting an inspiring campaign with a clear message. His contradictory platform failed to convey pragmatic solutions for the financial crisis. The central focus of his campaign rhetoric was balancing the budget, and he often spoke of his concern over the gold standard and the protective tariff. Simultaneously, in a campaign speech, Roosevelt explained that it's the federal government's duty to ensure that starvation and poverty are ended, and he promised that the federal government would solve the crisis created by the previous administration.⁷⁶ Many students saw through his inconsistencies and questioned the true message he was trying to convey. Cohen contends, "Students' low estimation of Roosevelt was influenced by much of the intelligentsia, which found him intellectually shallow."⁷⁷ Roosevelt's flaw among the student population was that he lost the moderate students to Hoover, while losing the rising constituency of Leftist students to Thomas. In 1932, Roosevelt had trouble finding a medium amid identifying with radical values like Thomas, but having conservative rhetoric similar to Hoover.

In 1932, a straw poll confirmed that Roosevelt was "unsuccessful in channeling the mixed idealism and unrest that rallied nationally behind Thomas's candidacy."⁷⁸⁷⁹ The polls conducted on New York City campuses repeatedly alluded to students' hesitation to support

⁷⁶ Franklin D. Roosevelt, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt* (New York: Random House, 1938), 772.

⁷⁷ Cohen, 75.

⁷⁸ Cohen, 76.

⁷⁹ Straw polls, however, are unofficial votes and thus risk being biased, especially in the first half of the twentieth century. Unfortunately, more organized polling, such as exit polls, did not emerge until the 1960s when it became a common tool to predict winners.

Roosevelt because of his uncertain platform for bettering the student condition. Straw polls in 1932 also indicated that the Socialist Party was the one political faction to gain new student support, when compared to past presidential elections.⁸⁰ Socialist students were tremendously encouraged by the returns.

Roosevelt's popularity on campus emerged well after the 1932 campaign. In fact, Hoover outpolled Roosevelt on most campuses. However, most historians overlook this reality and assume Roosevelt was popular among young voters in 1932. Donald A. Ritchie, a historian on the 1932 campaign argued, new immigrants, organized labor, young voters, Southern whites, and Northern Blacks defined the new Democratic Party.⁸¹ Ritchie's assertion that young voters supported Roosevelt in the 1932 election is flawed; it was not until later in Roosevelt's presidency that he earned his renowned reputation among the youth. In general, Roosevelt did not gain his repute as one of America's most beloved politicians until after his 1932 campaign. Historians often assume Roosevelt's success started in 1932, but he grew into himself as a politician after he assumed office in his first term. Roosevelt's weaknesses during the 1932 campaign provided Thomas with an opportunity that he was never able to recreate in future presidential elections against Roosevelt.

Although the L.I.D.-led campaign for Thomas on campus attracted a minority of undergraduates," Cohen argues, "it was a larger and more geographically diverse minority than had ever before been organized on campus for an anti-capitalist cause."⁸² At universities across the nation, such as the University of Cincinnati, Minnesota and Vermont, Thomas was second to Hoover. On some campuses in New York and Colorado, Thomas topped the

⁸⁰ Cohen, 78.

⁸¹ Donald A. Ritchie. *Electing FDR: The New Deal Campaign of 1932* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 158.

⁸² Cohen, 77.

polls.⁸³ The editors of the University of North Carolina's *Daily Tar Heel* admitted that the vast protest vote for Thomas surpassed expectations even among student radicals. The student poll returns signified a petition for change. The results were encouraging for Socialist students because they demonstrated that the party was gaining momentum in '32, compared to polls in previous years.

Yet Thomas had always been realistic regarding his chances in 1932, even on Election Day, when he received a mere 900,000 votes, compared to Roosevelt's 2.8 million nationally.⁸⁴ "The fine young intellectual element which composes the nucleus of Socialism today and which will be indicated by the vote cast for me is today," Thomas stated in his so-called victory statement on Election Day, "the most hopeful factor in America."⁸⁵ Thomas and Leftist students alike, however, could not have predicted Roosevelt's surge in popularity on campus in the coming years. Socialists had every right to believe the student vote for Thomas was the foundation for expansion of the Socialist Party on campus. In regard to the future of the Party, a *New York Times* contributor noted, "the outlook does not seem to [Thomas] discouraging in view of the considerable number of third party movements that have appeared in this country."⁸⁶ But in 1932, student critics of Roosevelt immensely underestimated his aptitude, which ultimately stalled Thomas's momentum in future elections.

Although Norman Thomas appealed to students who considered Socialism a feasible solution to the nation's crisis, the American political system was still rooted in the two-party system. Socialism was still perceived as an alternative party, with little chance of winning

⁸³ Cohen, 77.

⁸⁴ "Socialist Showing is Hailed by Party." *The New York Times*, 9 November 1932, 13 (Proquest).

⁸⁵ "Socialist Showing is Hailed by Thomas." *The New York Times*, 9 November 1932, 13 (Proquest).

⁸⁶ "A New Program for Democracy." *The New York Times*, 29 March 1931, BR1 (Proquest).

national elections. To the mainstream American public, Socialist candidates were often deemed “dissident” or “un-American,” which limited their place on the ballot; however Thomas was able to surmount the negative attitudes regarding third-parties to overcome the structural obstacles.⁸⁷ The 1932 campaign was Thomas’s most effective run for president out of six consecutive presidential attempts, his first in 1928. Other than Thomas’s message in ’32, which promoted an egalitarian vision, it was the organization of the campaign that gained student support. Students for Thomas clubs were active on well over 150 campuses, which was far more active than the two conventional political parties.⁸⁸ “This student vote for Thomas” Cohen argues, “suggested that socialistic thinking or at least disillusionment with the two-party system had advanced much further on campus than off.”⁸⁹ Although Thomas’s allure to students is not widely discussed in history books, it was immensely prevalent on campuses in New York City in the 1930s.

CASE STUDIES

Norman Thomas’s campaign helped spur a social movement by teaching college students protest tactics that they could apply to non election years. Joseph Lash recalls in July 1932 attempting to start a street meeting on the corner of 116th street and Broadway in New York City. He poses the question to a bustling crowd walking by, “Who knows the difference between the Republican and Democratic parties?” By comparing the Democratic and Republican proposals, Lash was employing a technique that Thomas did in many of his campaign speeches. Unlike the two major parties, Thomas was able to offer an alternative option. Rather than labeling the Socialist Party a third party, Thomas posed socialism as a

⁸⁷ Keyssar, 187.

⁸⁸ Cohen, 76.

⁸⁹ Cohen, 76.

feasible choice. By coupling the Democratic and Republican parties together, Thomas was attempting to incorporate the Socialist Party into mainstream American politics. Similarly, Lash was presenting the parties as the Democrats and Republicans versus the Socialists.

However, on the street corner in July, Lash's attempt to gain the public's attention was not proving to be successful. Even relaying jokes failed to capture the crowds' attention. However, Lash then explains, a miracle happened—an elderly man asked a question. "Drama, even in such rudimentary form," Lash writes in his diary, "interests people." He was now preaching to a crowd of nearly 50; yet, once he began to delineate the agenda for the socialization of the coal industry, everyone left. Lash was beginning to employ methods he had learned from socialists at the turn of the century in order to protest against the capitalist system. "The hallmark of mass movements," sociologists Aldon Morris and Dan Clawson argue, "is the use of unconventional strategies and tactics to create wide-scale social disruption that serves as political leverage."⁹⁰ Although, Lash's small rally would hardly constitute as a mass movement, his tactics were contributing to the launch of an unprecedented student movement.

The disenchanted youth were not exclusive to campus extremists. John Cheever, one of the nation's most renowned writers of the 20th century, would have entered college in the early 1930s had his family not been affected by the financial crisis. After the 1932 crash of the construction company Kreuger & Toll, which Cheever's father had invested the remainder of the family's money, they lost their house to foreclosure and his parents divorced. Consequently, Cheever and his older brother moved to Boston where they attended meetings of the Communist Party at the John Reed club. In Susan Cheever's biography of her

⁹⁰ Aldon Morris and Dan Clawson, "Lessons of the Civil Rights Movement for Building a Workers Rights Movement." *WorkingUSA: The Journal of Labor and Society* 8 (2005), 686.

father's life, she wrote that her father's generation of the 1930s, "turned against a capitalism that seemed to have failed, threw off the conservatism of their parents, and took on a listless, angry politics of their own."⁹¹ Along the east coast, the youth who were personally effected by the financial climate refused to accept the severe economic conditions as the norm.

The student movement on campus was primarily driven by men, since they were more likely to pursue higher education, but some women did speak out.⁹² Throughout U.S. history, William Henry Chafe argues, "Female college students were infused with a self-consciousness sense of mission and passionate commitment to improve the world."⁹³ During the Great Depression, anthropologist Margaret Mead noted that career-oriented women could either define themselves first as a woman and accomplish less as an individual, or define themselves by their accomplishments, but risk being considered less of a woman.⁹⁴ The women who chose to highlight their careers were more likely to enroll in college. These were the women who began to defy the accepted cultural norms that their place in society was confined to housewives.

Socialism had a stronger presence in the life of college women compared to women who did not have a degree, because women in college were more willing to challenge societal standards. Many wanted to defy the common ideology that women had no position in the workplace, which was driven by the capitalist mentality. Kate Richard O'Hare recognized, "Socialism is needed to restore the home."⁹⁵ Undergraduate women were drawn to socialism as an alternative to capitalism, since they were less likely to be confined by the

⁹¹ Susan Cheever, *Home Before Dark*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 24.

⁹² Although there was activism on all-women's campuses such as Bryn Mawr, there has not been any in-depth research conducted on women's involvement in student activism in the 1930s, which yields future research to be conducted.

⁹³ Willaim Henry Chafe, *Women and equality: Changing Patterns in American Culture*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1977), 28.

⁹⁴ Chafe, 15.

⁹⁵ Zinn, 343.

male dominated system. "Mobilization occurs" Flacks argues when a "situation of perceived threat to accustomed patterns of everyday life."⁹⁶ Women's' lives were disrupted tremendously by the Depression, and thus many undergraduate women demonstrated activism by perceiving socialism and the L.I.D. as a means challenge societal structures that confined them.

Despite being raised in a conservative environment, Alice Dodge recounted her involvement in the Student League for Industrial Democracy (S.L.I.D.) She participated in the S.L.I.D. Summer Leadership Institute in 1935. The Training school opened in November 1932 as program for recent graduates who planned to use field work to prepare for their work in the labor movement.⁹⁷ When in the training program, Dodge wrote a personal narrative. She explained that her father ran for the Legislature on the Democratic ticket at age 24, but since then he has always voted Republican. Her mother also voted Republican, she argued, because she had to display loyalty to her husband. Yet, Dodge did not share the same obligation as her mother. "One by one my parents have seen their four daughters emerge from Vassar no longer Republicans," Dodge explained, and "one has only gone so far as being a Democrat, but two of the others voted for Thomas in the last election and are more or less parlor Socialists. The fourth, myself, belongs to the Socialist Party."⁹⁸ Students were leaving the ideologically conservative party of their parents, James Wechsler argues, to challenge the deeply-rooted "provincialism of the American college," in which the goal was to "guard its occupants against unorthodox, independent thought."⁹⁹ As some students were drawn to the political student organizations as an act of rebellion against the politics of their

⁹⁶ Flacks, 71.

⁹⁷ "What the L.I.D. Stands For," *Revolt*, Vol. I, No. 1, February 1932, 6.

⁹⁸ Alice Dodge, "Autobiography of Alice Dodge," (1935). Transcribed in *The New Deal Network* (1996). The Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute (FERI) and Robert Cohen <http://newdeal.feri.org/students/slidi01.htm>.

⁹⁹ Wechsler, 63.

parents, as war approached, students began to reevaluate their goals and why they initially joined the movement.

THE LEAGUE FOR INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY'S FOCUS ON THE WAR EFFORT

By the mid-1930s, the focus of the L.I.D. dramatically shifted to concentrating on the abolition of the R.O.T.C. on campuses. The R.O.T.C. was—and still is—a college-based program to prepare students for the Armed Forces. The concept of R.O.T.C. was derived from land-grant universities, which receive benefits from Morrill Act of 1862 and 1890. The Acts endowed schools that focused on the teaching agriculture and engineering to meet the needs of the industrial revolution. The government required the schools to include military tactics as part of their curriculum, thus establishing the R.O.T.C. To the L.I.D., the R.O.T.C. signified a barrier to their peace movement as a means to counter World War II. Students in the L.I.D. viewed the war as another way for those in authority to exploit the working class, who put in the effort but receive no legitimate compensation. A *Revolt* article in 1932 stated, "These students, forerunners of a disillusioned army which the depression is helping to recruit, are a thorn in the flesh of college administrators, who wish, above all else, to avoid any publicity that smells of radicalism."¹⁰⁰ Schools that had an R.O.T.C. program usually had administrators with unfavorable views of a movement for pacifism, and thus student activists were at times threatened not to participate in antiwar protests. The students in the L.I.D. put themselves at further risk because promoting Socialism on campus was often viewed as a personal attack on the Dean.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Tucker Smith, "Resisting the R.O.T.C.," *Revolt*, Vol. I, No. 2, December 1932, 22.

¹⁰¹ Smith, 22.

Students in the L.I.D. often framed their opposition to the war through symbolic measures. The November-December 1934 issue of the *Revolt* displayed a political cartoon depicting headless soldiers, which epitomized their new agenda. The sketch showed five soldiers with guns marching in unison, and above the image reads, "Abolish the R.O.T.C.!" The bottom left of the illustration shows a bubble that reads, "The Perfect R.O.T.C." with an arrow pointing to the soldiers.¹⁰² The image implies that student soldiers were being used as perfunctory figures by the government.

The graphic in the *Revolt* was published eighteen years after Robert Minor's well-known cartoon "The Perfect Soldier." Minor's controversial cartoon was printed in *The Masses*, a Socialist magazine dedicated to art and politics. The highest paid cartoonist in the U.S. at the time, Minor created anti-war cartoons in protest of World War I. His most famous drawing depicted a muscular headless soldier facing a doctor and reads, "Army Medical Examiner: 'At Last! A Perfect Soldier.'"¹⁰³ Minor was ultimately jailed for his cartoons, but was released in 1918 after the war was over. Regardless, Minor's cartoon is deemed a masterpiece of protest art by many critics and inspired many of the art featured in *The Student Outlook*.

By the middle of 1933, editors of *The Outlook* started publishing issues with acute messages to advocate against student involvement in World War II. The editorial, "Refused to Fight," analyzed polls that uncovered an undeniable antiwar attitude on college campuses.¹⁰⁴ The article remarked that S.L.I.D.'s previous endeavors had not captivated students to the extent of their disapproval of war. The editors of *The Outlook* consequently

¹⁰² "Abolish the R.O.T.C.," *The Student Outlook*, Vol. 3 No.3-4 November-December, 1934.

¹⁰³ Steven Heller, "Reviewed Work(s): The Art for the Masses: A Radical Magazine and Its Graphics, 1911-1917 by Rebecca Zurier," *The MIT Press; Design Issues* 6.2 (1990): 85.

¹⁰⁴ Ralph S. Brax. *The First Student Movement: Student Activism in the United States during the 1930s* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1981), 29.

implored their readers to not fight in any war because participation would only signify a perpetuation of those in authority manipulating others for personal gain.

Pacifism was prevalent on college campuses prior to World War I, but not to the magnitude of the 1930s. In 1925, a peace club at City College of New York (CCNY) organized an event entitled, "What Can College Men Do About War?" The symposium exemplified students' approach towards war in the 1920s. They opted to promote peace through fostering relationships and open discussions with foreign exchange students rather than participate in protest. It was not until 1931 that CCNY underwent a massive peace campaign caused by the activism of student groups. By early 1932, students started to protest against the Japanese presence in Manchuria, and began overtly advocating for freedom from strife. In a "participation-in-war poll" of seventy colleges, 39 percent opposed any participation in war, and only 33 percent said they would fight if the U.S. was invaded.¹⁰⁵ Yet some students were not permitted to participate in the poll. The president of Hartwick College in Oneonta, New York, would not sanction his students to partake in the poll because, he claimed, that one of the questions concerned treason.¹⁰⁶ Despite authoritarian rule, students were exhibiting an isolationist mood and a yearning to avoid participating in the war effort.

However, as historian Charles Chatfield notes, "peace advocates" who opposed the R.O.T.C.'s presence on campus, "faced a military establishment with large resources of finances, influence, and congressional goodwill."¹⁰⁷ General Douglas MacArthur released a report in 1933 arguing that the U.S. Army was performing below average because they are

¹⁰⁵ *The New York Times*. "Student War Poll Strongly Pacifist", 25 May 1933, 21.

¹⁰⁶ "Student War Poll Strongly Pacifist", 21.

¹⁰⁷ Charles Chatfield. *For Peace and Justice: Pacifism in America 1914-1941* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1971), 156.

neglecting proper military training. The report "advocated assignment to reserve officers wherever possible," including "the Reserve Officers' Training Corps."¹⁰⁸ Two days after the report was released, a group of 300 members of the L.I.D., alongside the N.S.L., marched in front of the White House carrying signs reading, "down with war and the R.O.T.C."¹⁰⁹ Five members presented an anti-R.O.T.C. petition to President Roosevelt's secretary, with 5,000 signatures from college students nationwide.

American student pacifism in the early 1930s can be traced to the tactics of students at Oxford University. On February 9, 1933 students in the Oxford Union, the University's debating society, voted 275 to 173 against participating in war.¹¹⁰ They implemented the resolution "That this house will in no circumstances fight for its King and country."¹¹¹ The vote stunned authorities since Oxford was widely recognized as the most aristocratic university in the world. The society received an influx of criticism, as students who took the Oxford Pledge were perceived as lacking courage. Despite the negative public reception, American students were moved by Oxford students' success and adopted a similar oath the same semester.

The printing of the "Abolish the R.O.T.C.!" image was indicative of a sharp change in student involvement in the anti-war effort. Prior to 1934, the U.S. Congressional Appropriations Committee was aggressive in their effort to limit the R.O.T.C. on campuses; however, by March 1934, their approach changed. For the 1935 fiscal year, they had allotted \$3,108,701 for the R.O.T.C.¹¹² Students responded by holding antiwar conferences and advocated to reallocate funds for the R.O.T.C. to education and academic independence.

¹⁰⁸ *The New York Times*. "Army Weakened, Says M'Arthur", 27 November 1933, 1.

¹⁰⁹ Eunice Fuller Barnard. *The New York Times*. "Students March to White House", 29 November 1933, 1.

¹¹⁰ Cohen, 79.

¹¹¹ *The New York Times*. "Oxonians Get White Feathers; Voted Not to Fight For Nation", 16 February 1933, 6.

¹¹² *The New York Times*. "Report Army Bill With \$279,391,505", 6 March 1934, 11.

Students pledged to oppose the R.O.T.C. but furthermore, oppose any attempt by the federal government to persuade the youth to back the war effort. In 1934, Eunice Fuller Barnard, *New York Times* contributor noted, the “fear of exploitation” was growing, which was evident in “editorials of the past year in college papers.”¹¹³ The feeling had manifested in April 1934. The L.I.D. and the N.S.L. initiated “the most successful single device of the entire student movement—a ‘Student Strike Against War.’”¹¹⁴

On April 13, over 15,000 New York City students partook in a nationwide antiwar strike.¹¹⁵ At 11 o’clock, honoring the hour that the U.S. declared war with Germany in 1917, thousands of students boycotted classes to participate in a one-hour campus protest. At CCNY, the school that displayed the most discontent, students chanted slogans mirroring that of the Oxford Pledge: “We the students of – College pledge not to support the Government of the United States in any war it might conduct.”¹¹⁶ Banners were posted around the schools with slogans such as, “Cut Classes 11 to 12,” “Schools Not Battleships,” “We Will Not Support Materialistic War,” and of course, “Abolish the R.O.T.C.”¹¹⁷ Though it was a nationwide strike, the greatest activity was evident in New York City. Along with CCNY, 2,000 students at Columbia University and 1,300 at New York University distributed antiwar pamphlets. Some marched downtown to gather at Washington Square, while others met at Goldman Stadium. At Goldman, R.O.T.C. members in the back of the stadium jeered at the ten student speakers preaching against war. At the end of the speeches, police had to restrain some R.O.T.C. members who were preparing to throw eggs at the demonstrators. Yet, L.I.D. and N.S.L. members continued to picket classrooms, convincing students to walk out.

¹¹³ Eunice Fuller Barnard, *The New York Times*. “Students Lay a Barrage Against War”, 29 April 1934, SM5.

¹¹⁴ Brax, 37.

¹¹⁵ *The York Times*. “Nation’s Students ‘Strike’ For Hour in Protest on War”, 14 April 1934, 1.

¹¹⁶ “Nation’s Students ‘Strike’ For Hour in Protest on War”, 1.

¹¹⁷ “Nation’s Students ‘Strike’ For Hour in Protest on War”, 1.

The students who participated in the strike, as well as the editors of *The Student Outlook*, supported Thomas's notion that war stemmed from the economic elite who controlled corporate power. Students were eager to avoid making the same mistakes that they made in World War I, in which they viewed economics as the primary rationale for the U.S. to enter the First World War. In 1936, James Shotwell, founder of the International Labor Organization, wrote "The tendency to find in economics the chief if not the sole cause of war has grown in the United States in recent years and has almost become an axiom in the thinking of the younger generation."¹¹⁸ Since World War I, socialists' general thinking had shifted from fixating on the cause of war to finding an option to prevent war. Thomas learned from peace advocates' past mistakes and emphasized an alternative approach stressing social change, which he believed would lead to greater equality and stability among all nations.

However, the American youth viewed war differently than other non-English speaking nations. By 1934, in South America, the youth were starting a revolution, in Germany they enlisted in Hitler's troops, in Russia, they eagerly joined the Red Army, and in Japan, serving in the military was one of the most popular careers. However, the majority of the American youth did not share the same willingness to fight as their counterparts abroad. Barnard explained that many undergraduates felt "that war is an old man's game played for profit, with youth as the pawn."¹¹⁹ The prevailing sentiment across college campuses centered on the notion that during war, those in power tend to take advantage of the youth. Through *Student Outlook* articles, it is evident that students believed by eliminating the presence of the R.O.T.C. on campus, the government would not be able to easily target undergraduates.

¹¹⁸ James Thomson Shotwell. *On the Rim of the Abyss* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1936), 210.

¹¹⁹ Barnard, "Students Lay a Barrage Against War", SM5.

In 1930, there were 127,500 student reported in the R.O.T.C.¹²⁰ Despite students' efforts to mitigate war propaganda on campus, by the Fall of 1935, more than 5,000 men in the U.S. joined the R.O.T.C.¹²¹ Universities were quick to report that "the popularity of college military instruction courses was due to the increase of student body, not the nation's condition."¹²² However, socialist students disagreed. As they indicated in past protests, socialist students believed that the country's economic condition led to support for war, not a rise in undergraduate enrollment. The Student Strike Against War, in which students refused to attend class to participate in a one hour protest, was to be emulated annually from 1934 to 1941. The radical pacifist sentiment galvanized nearly half of the American undergraduate population in protesting war. The shift to the antiwar effort is a more direct correlation to the Vietnam era protests. However, the fight to abolish the R.O.T.C. would not have emerged had the L.I.D. not set the foundation of student activism in the early 1930s.

A RESTRUCTURING OF THE LEAGUE FOR INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY

The League for Industrial Democracy (L.I.D.) had established themselves as a serious force in the anti-war and labor movement by the mid 1930s. To meet the demands of their rising student involvement, in 1933 the collegiate facet of the L.I.D. was restructured to form the self-governing Student League for Industrial Democracy (S.L.I.D.) The new student organization was comprised of two types of Socialist students: the L.I.D. and the Young People's Socialist League (Y.P.S.L.) Students who leaned towards the L.I.D. were in essence liberal social democrats, whereas the Y.P.S.L., who outnumbered the L.I.D. types, were more revolutionary socialists. Both sections, however, were committed to militant activism. The

¹²⁰ *The New York Times*. "House Passes Army Bill", 15 January 1930, 11.

¹²¹ *The New York Times*. "ROTC Shows Gain of 5,000 Students", 30 September 1935, 17.

¹²² "ROTC Shows Gain of 5,000 Students," 17.

S.L.I.D.'s *Blueprints for Action—A Handbook for Student Revolutionists* stated, "The radical movement has too many sideline commentators; the great need is for participants. Besides action is one of the best ways of getting clarification."¹²³ Although they considered themselves to be radicals, members of the S.L.I.D. were pragmatic. They were aware that since students supported Hoover over Roosevelt in 1932, they would not adopt socialism instantaneously. The S.L.I.D. did not encourage non participants to join the fight against capitalism, but rather attempted to appeal to students for common causes, such as crusades for peace.¹²⁴ They used reform campaigns to rally fellow students with hopes of they would then join the movement.

Once the S.L.I.D. did gain momentum, they still faced their most daunting challenge—turning their support into a mass movement. By 1934, the S.L.I.D. membership climbed to over 3,000, yet the organization struggled to make every member take ownership of their activism on campus. The organization had a distinctiveness that separated itself from other student groups, but struggled to maintain their newly formed collective-identity. Della Porta and Diani argue identity-building provides a "sense of collective belonging maintained even after event or campaign ends."¹²⁵ Although students had moments of powerful protest, such as the Harris strike, the S.L.I.D. struggled to convert their support into a mass movement after the event had subsided. The lingering discontent that occurred during a sole event often dictates the future of the movement's identity. If the goals are not met during a single event, feelings of unsettlement will make a resurgence of activism easier. When conditions are conducive, organized rallies will often reemerge. Although protests did

¹²³ Hal Draper, "The Student Movement of the Thirties: A Political History," in *As We Saw the Thirties: Essays on Social and Political Movements of a Decade*, ed. Rita James Simon (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1967), 177.

¹²⁴ Cohen, 226.

¹²⁵ della Porta and Diani, 26.

resurface, some students still felt distanced. In a *Student Outlook* article, Monroe Sweetland admits that the S.L.I.D.'s major problem was to convert the group's mass participants into a movement which everyone felt tied to. They needed to make the members of the S.L.I.D. to define themselves as "being a member in a student society committed to a new social order based upon production for use and not for profit."¹²⁶

However, majority of the students in the S.L.I.D. were committed to creating a new social order. During winter break in December 1933, thousands of students from various organizations joined forces in Washington DC through a series of conferences. Most notably, the S.L.I.D. established the first National Student Congress and participants showed genuine enthusiasm about the future of the student movement. Within the first meeting, the S.L.I.D. made many organizational changes; yet it was their collaboration with the N.S.L. to overcome racist initiatives that made national headlines. The two organizations devised a plan to picket Kaufmann's department store—which sold clothing, footwear, furniture, jewelry, and beauty products—since it refused to employ black workers despite that blacks were their primary cliental. The S.L.I.D. released a statement of solidarity with the organized forces of labor and endorsed student groups' cooperative actions. The S.L.I.D. used the Kaufmann incident as a case study and worked tirelessly to propose a resolution that resisted racial discrimination, especially against blacks. Students' loyalty to the S.L.I.D. was a testament to their determination. However, a *Student Outlook* argued it was "their willingness to remain in session without food and without rest in order to debate dreary organizational details" that proved "the vitality and tenacity of purpose in the Student L.I.D." Nonetheless, their collective fortitude was often perceived as too extreme to the general public.

¹²⁶ Monroe M. Sweetland. "The Student L.I.D. Reorganizes," *The Student Outlook*, Vol. II, No. 3, February 1934, 22.

Although the S.L.I.D. and the N.S.L. refused to officially merge in 1933, the two student groups did come together to stage an anti-R.O.T.C. demonstration outside the White House at the end of that year. Several hundred students paraded placards that urged President Roosevelt to end to the war and abolish the R.O.T.C. The S.L.I.D. and the N.S.L. also joined forces to endorse one of the winter symposiums, the National Conference on Students in Politics at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce on December 30, 1933. The National Student Federation of America (N.S.F.A.), however, refused to attend the conference despite the various groups that pledged their support. The N.S.F.A. was founded in 1925 at Princeton University as a forum for students to discuss the U.S.'s involvement in the war effort. In their Statement of Purpose from a 1931 brochure, the N.S.F.A. sought to peacefully "develop an intelligent student opinion on questions of national and international importance," acting "independently of any political party or religious creed."¹²⁷ Therefore John Lang, president of the N.S.F.A., deemed the S.L.I.D.-led conference too radical. When the S.L.I.D. and the N.S.L. protested before the White House against the war, Lang again refused to participate. He explained that the N.S.F.A. prefers "to consider the matter of the R.O.T.C. at length and with cooler heads."¹²⁸ In the media, Lang tactfully preserved the N.S.F.A.'s image as a peaceful, compliant organization.

Mainstream newspapers tended to side with the N.S.F.A. over the S.L.I.D. largely due to Lang's calculated construction of his organization's reputation. According to Lang, the S.L.I.D. believed, "peaceful revolutions are no fun at all. Its members believe in parades and hair-raising speeches" and "They are carried away by wild enthusiasm. They are

¹²⁷ Eugene G. Schwartz. *American Students Organize: Founding the National Student Association after World War II: an Anthology and Sourcebook*. (Westport, Connecticut: American Council on Education/Praeger 2006), 30.

¹²⁸ Elizabeth Perrow. "Students of 250 Colleges Gather in Capital," *The Washington Post*, December 27, 1933, 11.

iconoclasts.”¹²⁹ Thus, it is understandable why the public sympathized with Lang’s efforts over the S.L.I.D. Della Porta and Diani argue that opinion polls indicate that more peaceful political action is more apt to gain public approval.¹³⁰ The sanction of political protest decreases when action is direct, but nonviolent. Within political movements, the media tends to portray images without explaining the history or providing the reader with legitimate facts. The issues important to protesters are only shown through abbreviated slogans,¹³¹ such as one of the S.L.I.D.’s posters demonstrated against an “imperialist war.”¹³² Social movement scholar Thomas Rochon argues, “The problem is not so much one of political bias,” but rather, “a matter of the exacting criteria used by the media to determine what is newsworthy.”¹³³ When the media glorified the N.S.F.A., the S.L.I.D. in turn became stigmatized as radicals without a cause.

Washington Post writer Elizabeth Perrow quoted Lang out of context, which consequently demonized the S.L.I.D. In an article, Perrow reported that the S.L.I.D. attended one of the conferences in Washington DC on December 29. To introduce the S.L.I.D. to the reader, she stated that the student group’s members “think that peaceful protests are no fun at all” and “believe in parades and hair-raising speeches.”¹³⁴ However, she did not quote Lang, who initially used the distinct language. She reported her description of the S.L.I.D. as fact, compelling the reader to perceive the S.L.I.D. as an extremist organization that lacked rationality. She also failed to recount the S.L.I.D.’s logical response to Lang’s attack, which

¹²⁹ “The Student LID Reorganizes,” *The Student Outlook*, Vol. II, No. 3, February 1934, 22.

¹³⁰ della Porta and Diani, 179-180.

¹³¹ della Porta and Diani, 80.

¹³² “Students Wave Antiwar Flag At White House,” *The Washington Post*, December 29, 1933, 3.

¹³³ Thomas R. Rochon. *Between Society and State: Mobilizing for Peace in Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 102.

¹³⁴ Perrow, 11.

explained that the two student organizations simply have varying agendas. The S.L.I.D. released the statement:

The L.I.D. is a distinctly different sort of organization from the N.S.F.A. so that there was no occasion for taking umbrage at the program of the League which is a definite program for the transformation of the present social order into a socialized, warless, society.

However, the N.S.F.A., and the media, continued to derail the S.L.I.D. When a young woman from a conservative, prestigious college in the East left the N.F.S.A. to join the S.L.I.D.'s efforts, Perrow described it as perturbing. Lang said the girl's change of organization was entirely emotional. In *The Washington Post*, he continued by rejecting the term conservative, yet was quick to label the S.L.I.D. as socialist. He explained that the N.S.F.A. does in fact believe reform is necessary, but students should accept the advice of international experts. Lang attacked the S.L.I.D. by saying:

The American student is not radical by nature. He is only when aroused by leaders from more emotional, hot-blooded nations. The extreme radicals have had their chance to accomplish good. They have done nothing. We think that we should have our chance. There is a revolution today, but it is essentially an American revolution.

And it is the duty of the American student to be in the front ranks.¹³⁵

Perrow concluded the article by promoting the N.S.F.A., by explaining that their purpose was to prove to the older generation that students were shrewd and reasonable. "That is," Perrow added, "if the Industrial Democrats do not break up the conference."¹³⁶ She painted the S.L.I.D. as a threat to the image of students. Her biased reporting was indicative of

¹³⁵Perrow, 11.

¹³⁶Perrow, 11.

Americans' perception of the S.L.I.D., and the group consequently fought to clarify their mission throughout much of their existence.

The S.L.I.D. was able to openly explain their standpoint through *The Student Outlook*, though the circulation clearly did not match that of *The Post*. Since it was a less public forum, S.L.I.D. members overtly explained the N.F.S.A.'s weaknesses. They compared their rivals' philosophy to the businessmen who promote the ideals of an industrial society. However, the true difference between the organizations can be read only through their means of protest. A *Student Outlook* article infamously stated, "With war imminent, with unemployment awaiting almost every college graduate, with fascism sweeping the world, the N.S.F.A. blithely sips tea."¹³⁷ The quote, later to be repeated by *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, was referring to a day in mid-February 1934, when the N.S.F.A. had tea in the White House as the guest of Mrs. Roosevelt. Simultaneously, the S.L.I.D. proposed an appeal to the President to redistribute the R.O.T.C. funds to student aid and to rid the military science program. Despite their radical connotation, the S.L.I.D. was in fact mobilizing a mass movement only to be heightened by joining with N.S.L. The prevalence of both students group in national newspapers is also a testament to the significance of student activism during the 1930s.

STUDENT LEAGUE FOR INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY MERGER WITH THE NATIONAL STUDENT LEAGUE

In December 1933, when the idea of the Student League for Industrial Democracy (S.L.I.D.) joining forces with the communist-led National Student League (N.S.L.) emerged, the S.L.I.D. was quick to reject the proposal for fear forming one organization with varying

¹³⁷ "The Student LID Reorganizes," 22.

objectives. But in a 1934 editorial appearing in *The Student Outlook*, the exclusivity of the S.L.I.D. was perceived as potentially problematic. It was not until the following year when the proposal resurfaced that it was taken seriously. Still, the S.L.I.D. was hesitant to commit. The group overtly opposed the merger because they wanted a student movement that was “genuinely radical and truly united.”¹³⁸ They were apprehensive to form a unified group which was not utterly committed to a program which opposed cutbacks in education and resisted racial discrimination. The S.L.I.D. was also frustrated with the N.S.L.’s favorable view of the Soviet Union. S.L.I.D. firmly believed, as stated in the editorial, “a student organization without commitments of this sort thereby perpetuated existing injustices.”¹³⁹ They were not against forming one unified movement, but rather, opposed a student movement that was not keenly focused on a specific agenda.

The S.L.I.D. employed a more militant approach than the L.I.D.; the Student L.I.D.’s rhetoric started to mirror the N.S.L. in a call to reform campus related issues, such as abolishing the R.O.T.C. Despite the two groups’ perceived similarities, the S.L.I.D. believed they had a strong enough following without the N.S.L. By 1934, it was evident the S.L.I.D. constituted as a Social Movement Organization (S.M.O.), which according to social movement scholars John McCarthy and Mayer Zald, is a formal association that recognizes its goals with partiality to a social movement as a means to execute their objective.¹⁴⁰ Neutrality among S.M.O.s occurs when there is a lack of competition for members. When organizations have varying definitions of certain issues, collaboration becomes increasingly difficult. In the case of the S.L.I.D. and the N.S.L., they did not agree over a specific agenda, and thus struggled to unify. However, della Porta and Diani argue that often, the groups’

¹³⁸ “One Big Student Movement?” *The Student Outlook*, Vol. II, No. 3, February 1934, 3.

¹³⁹ “One Big Student Movement?” 3.

¹⁴⁰ della Porta and Diani, 140.

definitions of issues are irrelevant because they do not have to compete for members since they appeal to different sectors of the public.¹⁴¹ Although the S.L.I.D. and the N.S.L. both appealed to students, it was a different type of student—a socialist or a communist—who they believed should not be mistaken for one another. Further than their ideology, the groups' definition of issues as well as their agenda inhibited them to initiate a mass S.M.O.

The S.L.I.D. did compete with the National Student League (N.S.L.), but not for overtly for members. In a *Student Outlook* article that posed the question about forming one movement, the S.L.I.D. boasted that for every piece of coverage the N.S.L. received in the *Daily Worker*, a New York City newspaper published by the Communist Party, the S.L.I.D. could find an equivalent in a radical press.¹⁴² Furthermore, for every chapter that has protested with a Trade Union Unity League, the S.L.I.D. has protested with American Federation of Labor unions. However, the article concluded by providing hope that the two organizations could potentially join forces. "We could see no way of separating a student movement from the wider political and economic movement in behalf of which it was organized," yet, "we left the way open for joint action and future unity."¹⁴³

Ultimately, by June 1935, Joseph Lash, the executive secretary of the L.I.D. at the time, could not ignore the pressure to merge the two groups. The S.L.I.D. consequently formed a national committee to meet with the N.S.L. leadership to discuss combining the two groups and form a cohesive student group against fascism. The leadership within the S.L.I.D. could no longer deny the pressure to form one anti-fascist organization with the threat of a local Red Scare looming. Lash feared that by ignoring calls for a merger, the S.L.I.D. would lose powerful chapters on the West Coast. The debates were resolved in October, when both

¹⁴¹ della Porta and Diani, 157.

¹⁴² "One Big Student Movement? 22.

¹⁴³ "One Big Student Movement? 22.

groups agreed to establish the American Student Union (A.S.U.), which would be announced at a convention that December. The goal of merging the student students was to surmount both groups limitation—the fact they could not convert enthusiasm to membership. At the A.S.U.'s first annual convention, the membership of both the S.L.I.D. and the N.S.L. was a mere 5,000 undergraduates.¹⁴⁴ However, the same year during a peace strike, the groups had rallied over 175,000 students.¹⁴⁵ Again, the S.L.I.D. and the N.S.L. struggled to persuade demonstrators to officially join the movement.

The problem largely revolved around both groups trying to clarify their collective identity to participants who were not officially tied to the groups. A protest constitutes as a social movement when there are mass number that show support. Della Porta and Diani argue, “identity production” is therefore, “an essential component of collective action.”¹⁴⁶ To galvanize mass numbers, activists must demonstrate solidarity for their common cause, and though students readily protested, they were hesitant to officially commit. The S.L.I.D. and the N.S.L. were attempting to form a collective identity, but they could not change misconceptions about students already associated with the groups.

Despite both groups arguing otherwise, a majority of students still viewed the S.L.I.D. and the N.S.L. as an extension of the socialist and communist parties on campus. Liberal students were hesitant to officially join for fear of being typecast, despite their involvement with protests spearheaded by the two groups. The A.S.U.'s platform maintained similar initiatives as the upstart of the student movement such as calling for federal aid to education, academic liberty, racial equality, and collective bargaining rights. The S.L.I.D. and the N.S.L. believed that the merger would attract students because they would not be

¹⁴⁴ Cohen, 140.

¹⁴⁵ Cohen, 139.

¹⁴⁶ della Porta and Diani, 92.

perceived as a radical political sect, but rather students with differing ideologies uniting for a common cause.

The A.S.U. was ultimately considered the most successful organization of the student movement because it emerged during the height of student protest between 1936 and 1939. After the A.S.U.'s convention at Vassar College in 1937, Lash argued that though the Roosevelt administration would not admit it, the A.S.U. "became a sort of a student brain of the New Deal."¹⁴⁷ The A.S.U. shifted their platform in 1938 to reflect the influx of student involvement. At the 1938 convention, the discussion revolved around the significance of academic reform. Particularly, bettering the relationship between professors and students, and enhancing student government to serve as a model for student democracy.¹⁴⁸ Perhaps most significantly, the student activists stopped their resistance to the R.O.T.C., and stated that students should have the option to attain military training.

Yet the A.S.U. shift in focus to international affairs in the late 1930s is what led to their downfall. Communist leaders in the A.S.U. pressured the group to publicly endorse the Soviet Union's non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany. The agreement stated that if an issue arose between the Soviet Union and Germany, than it would be dealt with in good-nature and the two countries would not attack each other. Though the duration of the pact was set for ten years, it only lasted two. The A.S.U.'s support of the pact alienated those who were not sympathetic to the Communist agenda. As a result, liberals in the A.S.U. who supported the New Deal as well as students were left estranged and felt they could no longer support the American Student Union's leadership.

¹⁴⁷ Joseph Lash, "The Student Movement of the 1930s: Joseph P. Lash, Interview," (1935). Excerpted in *The New Deal Network* (1996). The Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute (FERI) and Robert Cohen. <http://newdeal.feri.org/students/lash.htm>.

¹⁴⁸ Lash Interview.

THE FUTURE OF STUDENT ACTIVISM

The 1960s student movement was undoubtedly the most widely recognized collegiate movement in American history. The Students for a Democratic Society (S.D.S.) helped define the movement that occurred during the Vietnam era. In the beginning, activist Richard Flacks recalled, S.D.S. activists did not foresee a mass student movement. Rather, they hoped for a movement would “use both the direct action and the electoral process to build a political base for achieving racial equality, eliminating domestic poverty, ending the arms race and the cold war, and building a more democratically organized social order.”¹⁴⁹ The rise of the S.D.S. spoke to the prominence of the New Left, and symbolized the largest student protest against war in American history. The Student League for Industrial Democracy (S.L.I.D.) changed its name to the S.D.S. in January 1960, given that the former name carried too many labor oriented connotations. The S.D.S. found that such ties to the L.I.D. inhibited on campus student recruitment.

Prior to 1962, the two groups worked collaboratively, but ultimately the S.D.S. viewed the L.I.D. as a liability. There were clear deviations regarding political preferences such as the decision to lobby Congress, which the S.D.S. keenly supported. Norman Thomas, still involved with the L.I.D., became a mediator between the two groups. He argued that the L.I.D. “shares the hope of those who believe that there is some evolutionary progress in the USSR,” yet “these views by no means prohibit dialogues with the Communists or Communist sympathizers, but they do assert the traditional values of the L.I.D.”¹⁵⁰ The S.D.S. found the L.I.D. was unbending regarding their views, but they also limited the S.D.S.

¹⁴⁹ Richard Flacks, *Youth and Social Change*, (Chicago: Markham Publishing Company, 1971), 76.

¹⁵⁰ James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets: from Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 135.

in more managerial ways. The L.I.D.'s tie to the S.D.S. stunted the new student group since the L.I.D. was a tax-exempt educational organization. By 1965, the two completely cut any association. James Miller, a scholar on 1960s activism, argues the break was in fact "in part because L.I.D.'s tax-exempt status inhibited the ability of S.D.S. to engage in partisan political activity."¹⁵¹ For both groups, the tax exemption justified the separation and led to a cordial split.

In February 1965 President Lyndon B. Johnson heightened the U.S.'s involvement in Vietnam by bombing North Vietnam and implanting ground troops in South Vietnam to fight the Viet Cong. Many students initiated antiwar demonstrations through their local S.D.S. chapters on campus. The first major anti-war demonstration occurred in Washington DC on November 27. Over 20,000 were in attendance to hear S.D.S. president Carl Ogelsby preach about the U.S. approaching an era of imperialism.¹⁵² The speech launched the S.D.S. into the national sphere and ignited antiwar protests on campuses nationwide, ultimately forming *the* student movement.

By the spring of 1968, S.D.S. local chapters had been conducting successful rallies and sit-ins, which led to the most eminent student strike in American history. Although the L.I.D. is often not credited, the student sit-ins and protesting outside classrooms were tactics derived from early student protests in the early 1930s. On April 26, only 36 years after the Reed Harris strike, students at Columbia cut class again for a political cause. This time, however, nearly one million students showed up and the university was forced to shut down. The climax of the student movement could largely be attributed to Eugene McCarthy's 1968 presidential Democratic bid. McCarthy, the Senator from Minnesota, inspired millions of

¹⁵¹ Miller, 235.

¹⁵² "Throng of 20,000 Marches In Protest of Vietnam War," *The Washington Post*, 28 November 1965, A1.

students to become involved in the political process through radical means. The antiwar cause was widely embraced by a younger generation given that they were directly affected by the cultural hostilities. They employed tactics such as cutting their hair and shaving their beards to embody the slogan "Get Clean for Gene," to appeal to the independent nature of their target voters.¹⁵³ Thousands of young people, many who had never heard of McCarthy before he denounced President Johnson's management of the war in Vietnam, rallied nationwide to use the electoral process as a means to end the war. Similar to Norman Thomas, McCarthy was able to galvanize millions of American students in an age encompassed by political apathy. But a year after McCarthy's campaign, the S.D.S. disbanded and the anti-war movement significantly declined.

Many student activists from the 1930s viewed the Vietnam anti-war marches with contempt. Students of the older student movement, such as James Wechsler, were troubled that students of the 60s did not hesitate to include communists in their early marches. Wechsler wrote editorials for the American Student Union magazine in the 1930s, and ultimately became the editor of *The New York Post* in the 1960s. As editor, he used the latter paper as a forum to belittle the anti-Vietnam protest as pro-communist and un-American.¹⁵⁴ His strong anti-communist feelings lingered from the 30s, and he refused to support the new student activists who he believed did not understand the history of anti-communist sentiment. Robert Cohen argues the 1930s student movement "in its heyday had promoted political tolerance, but which died in a fit of intolerance."¹⁵⁵ Although many students from the 1930s did participate in anti-Vietnam protests, Wechsler's opinion largely reflected the outcome of

¹⁵³ George Rising, *Clean for Gene: Eugene McCarthy's 1968 Presidential Campaign* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997), 67.

¹⁵⁴ Cohen, 321.

¹⁵⁵ Cohen, 321.

the 1930s student movement. The 1930s student movement must be brought to light since these students not only pioneered student protest tactics, but helped change the American political tenor at large.

The 1930s student movement is a forgotten history. Although by 1932 student strikes appeared on the front page of *The New York Times* nearly daily, today the movement is masked by student activism in the 1960s. The tactics that proved to be successful in the 30s were applicable to the 60s and even today. By unearthing the 1930s movement we are rewriting history by telling a different story of student activism. As a result, history books would no longer argue the 1960s student movement defined student activism; rather it would be the outcome of the Depression era student protests that challenged American culture and revolutionized student social movements.

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