REVIEW

Radical chic

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In America," remarked Oscar Wilde, "the young are always ready to give those who are older than themselves the full benefit of their inexperience." As one might expect, this tendency manifests itself most often on America's college campuses, and not always for the worse. For example, a King's College (later Columbia University) student activist named Alexander Hamilton helped incite the mob that hounded the school's president onto a British warship heading back to England. Of course, some frown at the immature excesses of America's youth. In 1822, after enduring numerous protests, riots, and demonstrations, President Cooper of the College of South Carolina complained, in a letter to Thomas Jefferson, "Republicanism is good, but the rights of boys and girls are the offspring of Democracy gone mad."

Witnessing the effect of the 1960s on America's universities, some today might agree with the beleaguered President Cooper. Not Paul Rogat Loeb, author of Generation at the Crossroads: Apathy and Action on the American Campus.1 Loeb seeks to demonstrate that only students who sit-in, act-up, or march-on can realize their full human potential. Students who don't protest—he calls them "adaptors"—may not be completely morally deficient, but for Loeb they are close. By being "politically silent," adaptors endorse a "carnivorous individualism," which allows America's political system to remain "largely a feeding ground for the greediest."

For Loeb, "conservative activist" is, for the most part, an oxymoron. To be an activist requires concern, and concern is apparently a liberal or leftist virtue. Loeb tries to prove these assertions, and many others, by visiting campuses across the country and reporting on the state of student activism.

Loeb himself is something of a peripatetic evangelist of the

1Rutgers University Press. 460 pp. $24.95.
Left. A former 1960s activist, he has spent much of the last 15 years giving lectures on the evils of nuclear weapons, the Strategic Defense Initiative, the Central Intelligence Agency, avaricious multinationals, and other engines of America’s “omnipresent crises.” Judging from this book, there seem to be only two lines of argument in Loeb’s lectures: the old—capitalism and its dark prince, America, are bad, and the tired—Ronald Reagan and George Bush were especially bad.

While Generation at the Crossroads is something of a piñata—bash it from almost any angle and your efforts will bear some reward—there are three areas in need of special attention. The first is its advocacy of the idea, embraced by many activists on the left, that the politicization of life is a vital end, while the pursuit of the truth is simply an expedient means.

The most glaring example of Loeb’s indifference to truth is his discussion of a racial incident that tore apart Emory University in 1990. In a chapter entitled “A House Still Divided,” Loeb chronicles the persecution of a black student whose dormitory room was ransacked and vandalized with racially derogatory graffiti. The campus exploded. Black activists excluded sympathetic whites from an emergency meeting, preventing a unified response, and then somewhat disingenuously co-opted white support for a laundry list of demands on the administration, including an African and African-American studies center with its own library, archives, and independent faculty.

Alas, it turned out that the “victim” had manufactured the “attacks” herself (a fact withheld from the reader for almost 30 pages). Loeb dismisses this revelation as irrelevant because “other racial harassment has unquestionably occurred again and again, at colleges nationwide.” If similar authentic racist incidents indeed abounded, it is curious that Loeb found it necessary to build the only chapter he devotes to campus racism around an admittedly fraudulent example. It is especially unfortunate that he impugns students who were reluctant to protest the “attack” as abettors of racism.

Anticipating this sort of criticism, Loeb argues that “America’s most pervasive assaults on human dignity cannot be remedied” simply by determining (in the words of one black activist at Emory) “who wrote what in someone’s room.” Besides, argues Loeb, positive results stemmed from the incident. Discussion of race was intensified in the classrooms and cafeterias, plus Emory got a new multicultural center and, later, a women’s
center and a gay and lesbian center—an embarrassment of riches.

The Emory episode illuminates a sad fact of life in the world of higher education: American colleges are addicted to race talk. The academic establishment and, ironically, the liberal students who continue to protest against it are convinced that what is desperately needed to ameliorate the racial climate is a broader and more frank “conversation” about race. They might be right, but that isn’t what students get, despite the fact that almost every course in the humanities makes some room for discussion of race.

Instead, students are usually fed a steady diet of platitudes about white oppression and heroic black defiance. When students are taught that the coin of the realm is race and rage, invariably some will spend that currency on self-aggrandizement and controversy. That the universities could use a great deal less race talk after years of furor over affirmative action and political correctness eludes professors, administrators, and Loeb.

NOT surprising, then, is Loeb’s second major theme: the “myth” of political correctness. Loeb dubs critics of political correctness “P.C. Baiters.” A cadre of corporate cronies, the P.C. Baiters supposedly have fooled the American public by presenting academia’s attempt to become more inclusive and humane as a “false dilemma.” The Baiters know who they are, Loeb assures us, and if you’ve recently contributed to Commentary, National Review, the New Criterion, or The Public Interest, you are a likely suspect.

The big lie of political correctness, according to Loeb, is the conservative fantasy of “tenured radicals” running the academy. In his eyes, most professors are moderates, if not genuine reactionaries. A “good” professor fulfills his moral responsibility by exhorting students to protest and organize against America’s bankrupt institutions. The fact that some universities don’t actively encourage professors to use their podium as a pulpit is an indicator, Loeb believes, of academia’s deep-seated conservatism.

A third theme revealed in Generation at the Crossroads is a peculiar convergence between the Left and the Right. Loeb frets over the globalization of the economy and the uncertainties it engenders. Sounding a bit like Pat Buchanan, Ralph Nader, and others who wring their hands over the “anxious class,” Loeb argues for restoring local communities and forc-
ing big businesses to eradicate the fears of the working middle class. Loeb’s declaration that a “humane society needs businesspeople who respect efforts by workers and communities to organize and gain greater say in their circumstances” sounds somewhat similar to Charles Murray’s call for the restoration of a “valued place” for everyone.

It is true that, in the wake of the debates over universal health care, NAFTA, and GATT, as well as the 1994 Congressional elections, an embryonic, yet startling, consensus over the need to “protect” the middle class emerged. Writers such as James Fallows and Edward Luttwak have garnered a sympathetic audience from certain quarters of the Left and the Right with their arguments for increased government efforts to cushion the chaotic effects of global capitalism. Virtually the entire debate over the 1994 crime bill, and much of the debate over health care, was framed in terms of which party could deliver greater personal “security.” Indeed, the conservative emphasis on family, neighborhood, and school has always been, in large part, a call for a more ordered and secure (i.e., traditional) lifestyle.

The difference, of course, is that conservatives like Murray reasonably argue that the valued places have been eroded by too much politicization, characterized by concomitant petitions for greater government involvement in our daily lives. Obviously Loeb, and the Left in general, believe the reverse. Still, there is less sunlight between these segments of the Right and Left than one might think.

But whatever level of government interference the two political parties finally do agree upon, it will most assuredly not be high enough for Loeb. This is best demonstrated by Loeb’s criticism of volunteerism. Community and religious service groups do good things, Loeb concedes, and they are helpful in motivating young people toward political action, which is even better. But, he worries that volunteer projects

... take the heat off of corporate and governmental leaders who continue to slash human resources while America’s problems steadily bleed. They can lead service volunteers directly away from asking how America’s root social choices continue to betray the very communities they work to serve.

In other words, running a midnight basketball program is fine just so long as it doesn’t keep the movement from lobbying the federal government to run one.
LOEB believes that a major theme of his book is why some students become activists. This is indeed a fascinating question, deserving serious attention. Why did student uprisings erupt virtually simultaneously during the 1960s in countries as dissimilar as France, Indonesia, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Senegal, South Korea, Mexico, and the United States? Why do American university students, the greatest beneficiaries of society's wealth and care, so often bite the hand that feeds them? To get closer to the answers of questions like these, one must first read Seymour Martin Lipset's *Rebellion in the University*, written almost 25 years ago and still the definitive work on the subject. *Generation at the Crossroads* adds little to Lipset's effort because Loeb's answer is very simple: Students tend to protest more as they approach agreement with the romantic mythology of Paul Rogat Loeb.