

SMOKING TYPEWRITERS

*The Sixties Underground Press
and the Rise of
Alternative Media in America*

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

A Note on Sources

A FEW THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND: Throughout this book, when I write about “the Sixties” (spelled out, capital “S”) I’m talking about the Sixties as an era, or historical period, with all of its implied associations. When I refer to the “1960s,” I’m referencing the actual decade. Also, when quoting texts from the 1960s and 1970s, I typically render passages that originally were underlined in *italics*. It looks better this way. Careful readers of footnotes should also bear in mind that when it came to putting dates on issues, or numbers on pages, some underground newspaper staffs were very sloppy. And sometimes in archives, I came across undated clippings or documents. If, in a very few instances, I’m missing some information about my sources, it may not be my fault.

This book would not be possible without Bell & Howell’s Underground Press Collection on microfilm, and virtually all of the underground newspapers and Liberation News Service (LNS) news packets that I draw from can be found there. Recently, however, some LNS veterans have begun establishing a web archive that promises to digitize every LNS news packet from 1968 through 1981; it can be found at <http://www.lns-archive.org>. Meanwhile, people associated with some of the underground newspapers that are discussed in this study, including Austin’s *Rag*, Boston’s *Avatar*, and Atlanta’s *Great Speckled Bird*, are likewise beginning to make back issues available on the web.

Hopefully, others will follow their lead. In addition to learning something about the underground press, I hope readers of this book will come to understand that the New Left’s tabloids comprise an amazing trove of primary-source material, capable of affording insight into a wide range of issues.

Way back in 1968, Allan Katzman, a cofounder of the *East Village Other* (*EVO*), said as much: "in the future," he remarked, "people will be able to look back and understand this period, get a good feel for what it must have been like, by reading the *EVO*."¹ Later, literary critic Morris Dickstein wrote, "The history of the sixties was written as much in the *Berkeley Barb* as in the *New York Times*."²

As Mary Ryan has pointed out in *Civic Wars*, her study of American public culture in the nineteenth century, newspapers can be read as "the printed nexus of an extended, multivoiced conversation," and as a result, they may be "as close as historians can get to the voice of the public."³ This observation would seem to carry special force vis-à-vis the hundreds of youth-oriented papers of the 1960s, which were so much a product of the grass roots. Again and again, the fullest and most revealing record of the behaviors, manners, and beliefs of New Leftists can be found in the pages of the underground press.

Smoking Typewriters

Introduction

"STONES CONCERT ENDS IT," blared the front-page headline of the underground *Berkeley Tribe*, dated December 12–19, 1969. "America Now Up for Grabs."

The Rolling Stones concert that the *Tribe* described was supposed to have been a triumphant affair. Coming just four months after half a million hippie youths drew international attention by gathering peaceably at Max Yasgur's farm, some had even hyped the free, day-long event—which was held at Altamont Speedway, some sixty miles east of San Francisco, and which also featured Santana, the Jefferson Airplane, and the Flying Burrito Brothers—as "Woodstock West."

But this was no festival of peace and love. As almost everyone knew, the idea for the free show only came about after the Stones were nettled by criticisms that they had alienated fans with exorbitant ticket prices and arrogant behavior on their 1969 American tour. What's more, Altamont proved to be a dirty, bleak space for a rock festival, almost completely lacking in amenities for the 300,000 concertgoers. People practically clambered over each other to get near the hastily built, three-foot-high stage, and by almost every account, "bad vibes" were regnant among the concertgoers. Asked to guard the performers—allegedly in exchange for a truckload of beer¹—the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang went on a drug-and-booze soaked rampage, assaulting countless hippies with weighted pool cues and kicks to the head.

When the Stones finally started their set after sundown, they found it impossible to gain momentum; they could only play in fits and starts, as the Angels roughed up spectators and commotion swirled around them. Albert and David Maysles' classic concert documentary, *Gimme Shelter*, captured

Mick Jagger nervously trying to soothe the crowd: "Brothers and sisters, come on now. That means *everybody*—just *cool out*." "All I can do is ask you—*beg* you—to keep it together. It's within your power." "If we *are* all one, let's fucking well *show* we're all one!"

But Jagger's entreaties were in vain. Just as the Stones were starting "Under My Thumb," the Angels set their sights on an African American teenager in a flashy lime-green suit: Meredith Hunter. By one eyewitness account, the whole thing began when a heavysset Angel was toying with Hunter, laughing as he yanked him by the ear and by the hair. Then, when Hunter pulled himself away, he ran into a pack of perhaps four more Angels, who started punching him. Trying to escape, Hunter whipped out a long-barreled revolver and held it high over his head; in an instant, an Angel plunged a knife between his neck and shoulder. Autopsy reports confirmed that Hunter was tweaking on methamphetamines when he was killed. His last words, supposedly, were: "I wasn't going to shoot you."²

Ever since, writers and historians have found it tempting to describe Altamont as a generation-shattering event, the proverbial "end of an era."³ If the early Sixties was a time of gauzy idealism, characterized by JFK's youthful vigor, righteous lunch-counter sit-ins, and the first flush of Beatlemania, then the Altamont disaster ranks alongside the 1968 Democratic National Convention riots, the Manson Family murders, and the Weather Underground's townhouse explosion as evidence of the era's swift decline.

Less well known, however, is that the trope arose in the underground press.⁴ "Altamont . . . exploded the myth of innocence for a section of America," wrote twenty-one-year-old George Paul Csicsery (now a respected filmmaker) in the *Tribe's* lead article. Just a little while earlier, he said, it had been "cool" for large groups of youths to assemble at parks and rock festivals. "People would play together, performing, participating, sharing and going home with a feeling that somehow the communal idea would replace the grim isolation wrought on us by a jealous competitive mother culture." But on the bleak, dry hills around Altamont, the feeling was entirely different: "Our one-day micro society was bound to the death-throes of capitalist greed." The Angels' violence had "united the crowd in fear" while Jagger strutted on the stage like a "diabolical prince." To Csicsery, the concert was a metaphor for a society on the brink: "Clearly, nobody is in control. Not the Angels, not the people. Not Richard Nixon, or his pigs. Nobody."⁵

Elsewhere in the *Tribe*, readers could find several more pieces on the Altamont debacle, all of them written by participant-observers, all of them done in a familiar, even informal style. Several writers made liberal use of the editorial "we" (as in, "We're turning into a generation whose thing is to be an

Audience, whose life-style is the mass get-together for 'good vibes.'") Others sprinkled their reports with song lyrics, hallucinatory images, or whimsical asides. The *Tribe* also featured an elliptical poem about the Altamont debacle, as well as a comic strip by the artist Greg Irons that skewered a local radio station for irresponsibly hyping the event and then fulminating against it after things went bad. Almost all of this material struck a portentous tone; the *Tribe's* radical politicos and youth-culture aficionados who caravanned to Altamont came away feeling grubby, mortified, and concerned. "I realize some people just had a good time," said one writer. "Me, I saw a guy get killed."⁶

Altamont received front-page attention in the *San Francisco Examiner*, too, but nothing like the blanket coverage that was found in the *Tribe*, and besides, the Bay Area's leading evening paper completely missed the concert's significance; its reports and analysis could not have been more wrong-headed.⁷ On December 6, the *Examiner* stressed that the biggest problem associated with the concert was the traffic headache it caused on Interstate 5/580; it specifically added that police reported "no violence."⁸ The next day, the paper mentioned that one person had been killed, but in fact four people died: two were run over by a car while sitting at a campfire, and another drowned in a swift-moving irrigation canal while zonked out on drugs. "But for the stabbing," the *Examiner* reported, "all appeared peaceful at the concert. . . . The record-breaking crowd was for the most part orderly, but enthusiastic. The listeners heeded the advice of the Jefferson Airplane: 'We should be together.'"⁹

Then on December 9, the paper's editorial writers fumbled to explain why 500,000 youths would even want to attend a free rock festival headlined by the Rolling Stones in the first place. They literally could not come up with an explanation that they deemed fully satisfactory.¹⁰ Finally, on December 14, Dick Nolan, an op-ed columnist, stressed that the event had been a disaster for the counterculture, but his tone was so priggish and excoriating that it's hard to imagine very many younger readers taking him seriously. "Maybe it's wishful thinking," he wrote. "But to me that Altamont rock fiasco looked very much like the last gasp of the whole hippie-drug thing." There were the Stones, he said, "peddling their idiot doggerel and primitive beat," before "that most mindless of animals, the human mob." Altamont was just another manifestation "of the rock-drug-slobbery cult," to which Nolan could only say good riddance.

This is not a book about Altamont, of course. But by quickly glancing at how two local newsheets covered the Stones concert, we can begin apprehending the powerful appeal of the underground press in the late 1960s and

early 1970s. Amateurishly produced by a collective of unabashed radicals, the *Berkeley Tribe* had a fleet of reporters who actively *participated* in the events they covered. Lacking any pretense of objectivity, they put across forcefully opinionated accounts of events that mattered deeply to them—that grew out of their culture—and they used a language and sensibility of their own fashioning; their hip vernacular was something they shared with most of their readership. By contrast, the professionals who staffed the *Examiner*—the flagship of the Hearst newspaper chain—approached Altamont with a prefabricated template. Their first instinct was to cloak the free concert in goopy, Woodstock-style sentimentalism. Then after that proved untenable, their editorialists proved totally uncomprehending of the rock and youth cultures they sought to explain.

It is little wonder, then, that many New Leftists never bothered to read daily newspapers, at least not when they wanted to know what was going on in their own milieu. Instead, beginning in the mid-1960s, in cities and campuses across the country, they began creating and distributing their own radical community newsheets, with which they aimed to promote avant-garde sensibilities and inspire political tumult. Amplitude and conviction were hallmarks of the underground press: this is where they set forth their guiding principles concerning the unfairness of racism, the moral and political tragedy of the Vietnam War, the need to make leaders and institutions democratically accountable, and the existential rewards of a committed life. And their success was astonishing. According to cultural critic Louis Menand, underground newspapers “were one of the most spontaneous and aggressive growths in publishing history.”¹¹ In 1965, the New Left could claim only five such newspapers, mostly in large cities; within a few years, several hundred papers were in circulation, with a combined readership that stretched into the millions.¹²

In addition to trying to build an intellectual framework for the Movement’s expansion, New Leftists imbued their newspapers with an ethos that socialized people into the Movement, fostered a spirit of mutuality among them, and raised their democratic expectations. The community-building work that New Leftists brought about in this way was neither incidental nor marginal. Instead, it played a crucial role in helping youths to break away from the complacency and resignation that prevailed in postwar America, in order to build an indigenous, highly stylized protest culture. Given the obstacles confronting those who have attempted to build mass democratic movements in the United States, this was a considerable achievement.¹³ Simply put, much of what we associate with the late 1960s youth rebellion—its size, intensity, and contrapuntal expressions of furious anger and joyful

bliss—might not have been possible without the advent of new printing technologies that put the cost of newspaper production within reach of most activists, or without the institutions they built that allowed their press to flourish.

WE HAVE NO SHORTAGE OF BOOKS seeking to explain how so many American youths grew restless and dissatisfied with their country in the early 1960s and why they became so intensely radical in the mid-1960s. Surely, demographics can account for part of the answer. Growing up in a time of unprecedented prosperity, baby boomers developed a keen sense of their own generational potency, a confident “can-do” attitude that inspired them to tackle the problems troubling public life.¹⁴ The civil rights movement was also pivotal. When African Americans bravely stood up against attack dogs, cattle prods, fire hoses, and lynch mobs, they dramatically demonstrated the power of collective action to foster social change. Meanwhile, the sterile culture that the Cold War helped to produce, in which middle-class youths were expected to march lockstep into impersonal bureaucracies and circumscribed gender roles, prompted some to reflect critically upon the supposed promises of the American Dream. The escalation of the Vietnam War, the draft, and the gruesome images that were transmitted from Southeast Asia’s jungles into American living rooms led many activists to ramp up their protest activities. So too did the era’s frightening urban unrest, which some traced back to the federal government’s unwillingness to address the more far-reaching demands of the civil rights movement. The fact that it was liberals, rather than conservatives, who presided over the catastrophic war, and who failed to bring about genuine racial equality, prompted some youths to direct indiscriminate animus against “the Establishment.”

The New Left’s development, however, can’t be accounted for by these factors alone; it has also been necessary for scholars to examine the internal dynamics that propelled the Movement. In the late 1980s, a small corpus of books arrived that greatly shaped thinking on this subject. Foremost among them are James Miller’s *Democracy Is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago*, and Todd Gitlin’s *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*.¹⁵ Both of these penetrating and beautifully written works helped to establish what I have elsewhere called “the New Left consensus”—the reigning narrative explaining the intellectual and sociocultural forces that account for the Movement’s rapid rise and precipitous decline.¹⁶ Both studies, however, focus heavily upon the institutional history of SDS—especially in its early years—when in fact much of the decade’s political energy arose from the grass roots, and it wasn’t until the mid and late 1960s that the New Left became a mass

movement.¹⁷ As a result, these books shaped the research designs of an even more recent body of scholarship, which has begun to present a fuller historical accounting of the youth rebellion by de-centering SDS, examining the Movement at the local level, and exploring other groups within the organized Left.¹⁸

By showing how underground newspapers educated, politicized, and built communities among disaffected youths in every region of the country, this book contributes to a broader revisionist effort. SDS played a major role in the Sixties, but the strategic and intellectual debates that preoccupied its national officers must have seemed removed from the concerns of many grassroots activists. By contrast, radical newspapers engaged local, hot-button issues, and sometimes inspired devoted regional followings. Moreover, since most of these papers were interconnected—whether through a loose confederation called the Underground Press Syndicate (UPS) or a radical news agency called Liberation News Service (LNS)—they also became the Movement's primary means of internal communication. Absent such newspapers and organizations, the New Left could not have circulated its news, ideas, trends, opinions, and strategies without having them "strained through a mainstream filter."¹⁹

Unlike, say, the covert and highly illegal newspapers attacking the Nazi occupation of France and the Netherlands during World War II, the vast majority of radical papers produced during the Vietnam era circulated openly.²⁰ The "underground" moniker arose because some of the first of them—including the *Los Angeles Free Press* (established in 1964), the *Berkeley Barb*, and New York City's *East Village Other* (both established in 1965)—appealed to self-styled cultural outlaws: freelance intellectuals, dissenters, artists, and folk and jazz musicians, who clustered in taverns and espresso houses in low-rent neighborhoods. Many of these papers, however, could seem genuinely subversive, openly flouting society's conventions and, by the late 1960s, championing the revolutionary overthrow of the United States government. Also, many of those who produced and sold such newspapers became targets of harassment from federal and local authorities.

A writer for Vancouver's *Georgia Straight* observed in 1968 that although underground papers were highly critical of capitalism, they represented "some of the greatest examples of practical free enterprise."²¹ Before the 1960s, newspaper copy had to be set in hot type on a Linotype machine—a procedure that was both costly and difficult. But with the advent of photo-offset printing, newspaper production suddenly became cheap and easy. All one needed was a competent typist, a pair of scissors, and a jar of rubber cement with which to paste copy onto a backing sheet, which was

then photographed and reproduced exactly as it was set. For just a couple hundred dollars, one could print several thousand copies of an eight- or sixteen-page tabloid.²² The Offset Revolution also allowed for creatively designed layouts, whereby prose could be fitted around swirling drawings and photo collages. Some of the more mystically oriented papers, like the San Francisco *Oracle*—which was rumored to receive funding from Owsley Stanley, the famous underground LSD chemist—pioneered split-fountain printing techniques that allowed them to blend colorful inks and create beautiful rainbow effects on their pages, no two of which were ever exactly alike.

As newspaper production suddenly became more accessible, amateurs filled the staffs of most of the papers, learning the mechanics of layout, distribution, sales, and advertising as they went along. Though they worked feverishly, most of them were jaundiced to the very idea of profit making; according to a 1969 survey, 72 percent of underground papers reported they made no profit whatsoever.²³ "Financially, it is nearly impossible to expect a small underground publication to pay for itself," one radical editor observed.²⁴ By the late 1960s, however, a few well-made tabloids in radical hotbeds like Los Angeles and Northern California did quite well.

Even when they were only barely solvent, the papers were often highly visible in their communities. They lined the shelves of head shops and offbeat bookstores, and street vendors sold them in hip neighborhoods or at public gatherings: "poetry readings, political meetings, art gallery openings, lightshows and other freakouts—anywhere [there was] a captive audience."²⁵ Most underground papers also had back-page calendars that alerted people to such events. Especially in smaller communities, which lacked the pageantry and intellectual ferment that accompanied the youth revolt in urban areas, underground papers could impart to their readers a sense of connection and belonging to the New Left. Thomas King Forcade, who would become something of a legend in underground publishing, nurtured his early fascination with the Movement through underground newspapers he was able to obtain while living in right-wing Phoenix, Arizona. David Armstrong, who later wrote a book about alternative media, recalled an epiphanic moment when, as an undergraduate at Syracuse University, he picked up "a thin weekly published on the West Coast called the *Berkeley Barb*." It was the first paper he'd ever seen that covered things like the Vietnam War, the draft, and the Black Power Movement "with anything approaching the intensity and urgency" that he and his friends felt.²⁶

The failure of the nation's glossy magazines and daily newspapers to cover the youth rebellion adequately also helped to fuel the subterranean press. By

the early 1960s, newspaper ownership, once diverse, had become highly concentrated, mainly because newspapers were such valuable properties. Those who could afford to buy them up and consolidate them—the Hearsts, the Annenbergs, the Chandlers—did so. By 1962 twelve managements controlled one-third of the circulation of newspapers in the United States. Large cities that could earlier boast of having multiple newspapers began to have only one or two. Furthermore, the corporate structures that girded these newspapers (and also television news programs, which in 1961 became the main source of news for most Americans) favored employees who were better educated and more “sophisticated” than previous generations of writers and editors.²⁷ The result, in this new era of consensus and conformity, was a ubiquity of increasingly bland, cautious, and professionally balanced journalism. Angry and iconoclastic opinions, which flourished in a formerly diverse world of newspapers, were largely restricted from the news diets fed to most Americans.

This helps to explain why the underground’s media activists were united in their disdain for Establishment journalists—those who resided, as Hunter S. Thompson combatively put it, “way out there on the puzzled, masturbating edge, peering through the keyhole and selling what they see to the big wide world.”²⁸ By contrast, New Leftists claimed for themselves a kind of epistemic privilege, arguing that only those from within the Movement could take its true measure. Typically, underground press writers actively participated in the events they wrote about, sometimes with considerable fervor. By coloring their stories with their subjective responses, they pioneered a literary style closely resembling that of the era’s celebrated New Journalists.²⁹ Commenting on the underground press’s widespread appeal in 1968, writers Joan Didion and John Gregory Dunne remarked, “It is the genius of these papers that they talk directly to their readers. They assume that the reader is a friend, that he is disturbed about something, and that he will understand if they talk to him straight; this assumption of a shared language and a common ethic lends their reports a considerable cogency of style.”³⁰

Numerous successful journalists working today got their start with underground papers. Among them are the celebrated investigative reporters Lowell Bergman (formerly of *60 Minutes*, currently of PBS’s *Frontline*) and Jeff Gerth (formerly of the *New York Times*), and foreign correspondent Mike Shuster (of NPR). Columnist Joe Conason (*New York Observer* and *Salon*) edited a monthly underground-style paper when he was still in high school. The work of Hunter S. Thompson and humorist P. J. O’Rourke appeared in underground newspapers before they became famous, and the same is true for

novelists Tom Robbins, Ishmael Reed, Charles Bukowski, rock critic Lester Bangs, and sex educator Susie Bright. Some esteemed poets occasionally contributed to underground papers, including Diane DiPrima, d. a. levy, Gary Snyder, and Allen Ginsberg, and some of today’s best-known graphic artists, including Robert Crumb and Art Spiegelman, launched their careers writing underground “comix.” The list of notable left-wing scholars who edited or regularly contributed to underground rags includes Maurice Isserman, Todd Gitlin, Paul Buhle, Chip Berlet, Michael Kazin, Jon Wiener, Clayborne Carson, and Ann Gordon. Sometimes unlikely voices appear in the radical newsheets, like Jon Landau (Bruce Springsteen’s manager), David Stockman (Ronald Reagan’s budget director), and Cameron Crowe (the Hollywood director who referenced the underground press in his loosely autobiographical film *Almost Famous*).

However compelling underground papers could seem, by conventional standards they usually weren’t of very high quality. “People involved with movement papers generally see themselves as activists or organizers first, and journalists second,” observed Thorne Dreyer and Victoria Smith, both radical journalists themselves.³¹ Nor is it surprising that, amid the great rush of events that characterized the 1960s, New Leftists had such little use for belletrists. As Tocqueville remarked, it is a rare thing when the “the literature of democracy” exhibits “the order, regularity, skill and art characteristic of an aristocratic” (or professional) literature. More commonly, writers “will be more anxious to work quickly than to perfect details. . . . Authors will strive more to astonish than to please, to stir passions than to charm taste.”³²

Certainly underground journalists could be fiercely polemical, and some critics easily dismissed the overzealous tones favored by some newspapers. But it bears remembering that young radicals hardly cornered the market on highly ideological agendas. In 1970, Allen Ginsberg stressed this point in a letter to PEN American Center president Thomas Fleming, who had recently released a statement condemning the attempts of authorities to suppress underground newspapers. Fleming hadn’t risen to the New Left’s defense because he was a fan of the radical tabloids (he was not); he was simply defending their right to free speech. And although Ginsberg was grateful for Fleming’s statement, he couldn’t help but add,

I would’ve taken exception, were it my place, to [the] adjective “inflammatory” applied wholesale to “New Left” literature outside the context of equally inflammatory ideology displayed in, say, *Reader’s Digest* with its historically inflammatory cold war fury or odd language about “dope fiends”; or *NY Daily News* which in editorials

has proposed atombombing China counting 200 million persons at their own estimate as reasonable; or for that matter the *New York Times* whose business-as-usual reportage in this era of planetary ecological crisis occasionally inflames my own heart to fantasies of arson. Be that as it may it's a minor quibble with your text. Merely to say that I find "aboveground" language as often inflammatory as I find "New Left" underground rhetoric, as [would] W. C. Fields.³³

Furthermore, most New Leftists understood that even the rude and untutored papers still brought people into the Movement's fold, shored up political communities, and inspired organizing efforts and militant actions.³⁴ In some instances, newspapers played this role in areas that previously had not seen much radical activity. By welcoming rank-and-file participation in all aspects of newspaper production, and by generally opening their pages to whoever wanted to air their left-wing views, they helped to bring radicals and bohemians into communion with one another. "For writers, editors, photographers, [and] artists," Todd Gitlin recalls, the underground press "was a marvelous adventure, full of infectious enthusiasm."³⁵

Oftentimes, street-corner papers drew attention to issues, inflamed opinions, and fomented dissent through heated prose and old-fashioned muckraking. In some instances, they were so provocative, inflammatory, or "obscene" that they became targets of censorship or harassment, thereby becoming local *causes célèbres*. Because these were often the only newspapers that radicals identified with, they were read with unusual intensity.³⁶ Sometimes the communal homes or offices where the papers were produced doubled as meeting spots for local activists, or stopping-off points for hippie travelers. Barry Miles, who helped launch Europe's first underground paper, *International Times* (abbreviated as either *IT* or *it*), recalled that his most enduring memories of the underground press have to do with the "warmth and camaraderie" of the people who worked within it. "I remember arriving in Los Angeles in January 1969 and walking unannounced into the offices of *Open City*, and saying I was from *it*," Miles recalled. "Immediately I was offered a place to stay and more invitations to events and meals than I could hope to use."³⁷ In a few robust youth culture enclaves, enterprising hippies could nearly earn a living by hawking underground newspapers.³⁸

No doubt because they were so effective, underground newspapers were targeted by the FBI, as well as by local authorities, campus administrators, and even a few vigilante groups, sometimes with devastating effect. As appendages of the New Left, the radical newsheets could not have outlived or surpassed the youth rebellion anyhow; their fate was always intertwined

with that of the larger Movement (and when they labored to win the affection of the broader Left, or purged their ranks of amateurs, they ceased being "underground"). But they might have been even more effective, or lasted a bit longer, if they'd constituted themselves a little differently.

Many papers functioned as collectives, in which entire newspaper staffs participated in all levels of decision making. Initially these decentralized working environments must have held a certain appeal, but most people who toiled within them eventually discovered they could also be burdensome, inefficient, and alienating. And when the papers were *exceedingly* coarse, brash, or harshly militant—that is, when they violated even the counterculture's loose standards of civility and propriety—they gave people good cause to turn their noses up at the Movement. Finally, in their organization and content, most underground newspapers mirrored the sexism and homophobia of the dominant culture. As a result, they caused unnecessary divisions and deprived themselves of valuable talent. When the gay and women's liberation movements hit full force in the very late 1960s and early 1970s, no one should have been surprised when some New Leftists lit out for new ideological territory and quickly established their own formidable network of more narrowly focused publications.³⁹

WHEN DISCUSSING THE SOCIAL REBELLIONS of the 1960s, it is sometimes necessary to draw distinctions between the strategically oriented New Left, which was made up of "politicos" who wanted to change society, and the counterculture, which consisted of lifestyle radicals, or "hippies," who self-segregated from society. Although the two groups shared certain obvious commonalities, including a basic skepticism toward the dominant culture and a yearning for "authenticity" in personal relations, the underground press sometimes underscored their differences. Papers like San Francisco's *Oracle* and New York's *East Village Other*, which promoted psychedelic drugs with millenarian intensity, were probably not so compelling to activists who were consumed with finding the right formulas for halting the Vietnam War, fighting racism, and restructuring American universities. However, just as most of those who contributed to the 1960s youth rebellion didn't operate exclusively at one or the other end of this spectrum, most of the era's underground newspapers presented an intermingling of aesthetic and tactical radicalism.⁴⁰ This became increasingly true in the late 1960s, when it became harder to distinguish precisely between the New Left and the counterculture, and when many formerly hippie-oriented papers began adding more specifically political content to their pages.⁴¹ When the term "New Left" appears in this study, it is used maximally, to describe the whole constellation of

predominately white, nonconformist, college-aged youths of the 1960s who rebelled against American racism, imperialism, and bourgeois social relations.⁴²

While some might be troubled by the lumping together of hippies and politicians, others may object that this definition of the New Left is too narrow, since it doesn't include many African Americans, multicultural activists, or feminists.⁴³ The New Left's relationship to these groups demands special comment. Without a doubt, activists of color were potent sources of inspiration for New Leftists, and combating racism was a central component of their politics. The United States in the 1960s, however, was culturally and politically segregated to an enormous degree, and black and white radicals often operated on parallel tracks. Even as white militants labored to win the trust of African Americans, they frequently acknowledged and lamented the exclusivity of their activism. And although second-wave feminism was among the most important protest traditions to emerge from the 1960s, strictly speaking, it was not part of the New Left. Very few male radicals developed progressive gender politics in the 1960s. In fact, much of the energy that fueled the women's liberation movement arose *in response* to the patriarchy and sexism they encountered in the New Left—and, especially, in its underground newspapers.⁴⁴ In this book, I've tried to present the New Left accurately, as a largely white, broad-based, and male-dominated movement, while nevertheless recognizing the crucial influence of the civil rights movement and the important contributions of women.⁴⁵

For some scholars, it has also been a matter of concern that the most influential writing on the New Left has been produced by Sixties veterans who have remained basically sympathetic to the lofty idealism that anchored their activism in the Port Huron Era.⁴⁶ By lack of birthright, I am not capable of having participated in the New Left, but I will cop to sharing the assumptions of some of its activists—particularly those who believed (as goes the cliché) that a genuine democracy is not possible in the absence of an informed, engaged citizenry. I also won't mind if this book helps to remind people that there was a time in recent American history when the political left soared with confidence. Whatever the New Left's deficiencies, the underground newspapers they left behind breathe of a more hopeful time, when the problems troubling American public life were addressed by a great mass of young citizens who thrust themselves into the public discourse, and who ached with ethical worry about the society in which they lived. Today, it seems necessary to recapture that spirit. Nevertheless, I hope my distance from the material that I analyze will be clear.

1

“Our Founder, the Mimeograph Machine”

Print Culture in Students for a Democratic Society

IT SCARCELY MATTERED whether it was day or night—people just kept coming and going. Amid the frequently ringing phones, the tap-tap-tap of perhaps a dozen typewriters, and the periodic rumble of a nearby elevated train, they worked, ate, and talked in dimly lit rooms, perched on wobbly chairs, surrounded by sheaves of paper and battered desks.¹ Flyers, posters, and newspaper photographs nearly papered over the chipped plaster walls. Some of the wall decorations—a charcoal drawing of Eugene Debs, stickers from the Industrial Workers of the World, and a print by the social-realist artist Ben Shahn—represented the American left of previous years. But other ephemera—a photograph of Bob Dylan, a political cartoon from the *Village Voice* by Jules Feiffer, and the bumper-sticker slogan “Make Love, Not War”—gave the headquarters of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) a sense of political currency. One journalist who visited its national office, which in the mid-1960s was at the edge of Chicago's West Side ghetto, described it as something between a newsroom and a flophouse, drawing attention to “an unmade cot, several laundry bags, a jar of instant coffee, and a half-eaten chocolate bar.” But one artifact, above all, caught his attention. Taped to one of the walls was a picture of a mimeograph machine. Just beneath it someone had written the words “Our Founder.”²

SDS leaders were nothing if not irreverent, but here we find a metaphor that speaks volumes about how they conceived of themselves, their history, and their mission.³ Seeing as it was not unusual for SDS organizers to imagine themselves working in the reflected glow of the left-wing luminaries they pasted on their walls, they could scarcely afford to be anything but confident about the agency of the written word and the power and authority of fresh ideas. Various and multihued pamphlets and flyers, densely printed newspapers, crude bulletins, circular letters, and delicate, smudgy carbons—this was the stuff through which SDS aimed to change the world.

On the whole, members of SDS wrote easily. Throughout the organization's various permutations, melodramatic zeal was rarely in short supply; reticence was. Even in SDS's earliest years, when it was a more intellectually minded organization than it became, the group's frustrations with American society sometimes registered awkwardly in print. Increasingly braying tones became more familiar toward the mid-1960s, and by about 1968 its literature frequently displayed such a violence of feeling that writers literally took to calling their pamphlets "shotguns." (As in, "My first project was to write a shotgun on political prisoners.")⁴ From this perspective, an analysis of SDS's published writings could easily replicate, and even amplify, the familiar story line about how the New Left betrayed its roots in liberalism and participatory democracy and eventually self-destructed.⁵

Through an examination of SDS's internal printed communications, however, we can tell an altogether different story, one that helps us understand how SDS established itself as a community of participatory democrats and, in the process, fashioned a political style that ended up greatly influencing the underground press of the late 1960s and early 1970s. This point has not quite been made before. Typically, people argue that underground papers owed much of their inspiration to liberal and satirical publications that came before them: the *Village Voice*, Paul Krassner's *Realist*, and even, to some degree, *Mad* magazine.⁶ Though there is some truth to this, SDS needs to be brought into the discussion as well. This was the organization that set the template for underground newspapers that functioned as open forums, to which virtually anyone could contribute. Many underground rags likewise functioned as democratic collectives; the people who staffed the papers were also the ones that determined how they should be run. In professional journalism, there was little, if any, precedent for these approaches. It was SDS that helped to make them seem attractive.

Efforts to explain SDS's wide-ranging appeal have sometimes touched upon its highly *verbal* culture—its seemingly endless meetings and debates and late-night bull sessions, inspired by the existential politics of the civil

rights movement, as well as C. Wright Mills's famous dictum that "personal troubles . . . must be understood in terms of public issues."⁷ SDS's meetings, however, frequently left much to be desired. Some people loved them, but others found them tedious, windy, unfocused, cliquish, sexist, and prone to being commandeered by whoever was most charismatic and articulate. Written conversations could be similarly skewed, but overall, SDS's print culture may have been better suited to its goal of eliciting genuine membership participation and reinforcing its inclusive and deliberative ethos.

To be sure, this spirit was sometimes strained. Resources in SDS were constantly stretched thin, the federal government waged a relentless dirty-tricks campaign against the group, and certain internal debates—concerning SDS's structure, strategy, and programs—were all too predictable.⁸ But even amid all of this, SDS never lacked various internal newsletters that helped to raise people's stakes in the organization. Although a few New Leftists tried to reach a wide public audience with their writings, in scrutinizing SDS through the lens of print culture, our attention turns not just to *ideas* set forth in the SDS's published works, but also to the *cultural work* they accomplished through their printed materials. In addition to trying to build an intellectual framework for the Movement's expansion, SDS created an ethos surrounding its printed communications that welcomed people into the movement and encouraged their democratic activity. This was no small thing; before long, underground newspapers in every region of the country began playing a similar role.

STUDENTS FOR A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY was officially founded in 1960, but for all intents and purposes, the group launched itself in June 1962 at a United Auto Workers camp in Port Huron, Michigan, when fifty-nine of its members gathered there to complete the Port Huron Statement—a twenty-four-thousand-word manifesto that was originally drafted by Tom Hayden.⁹ Today a certain mystique surrounds the document, some of which is deserved, some perhaps not.¹⁰ On the one hand, only a cynic would deny the romantic appeal of young intellectuals writing a political *cri de coeur* from the edges of a Michigan forest. But the popular notion that the Port Huron Statement rekindled a moribund left is overblown.¹¹ It actually appeared during a rising tide of political activism and cultural nonconformity among young people, and while the new student radicalism was a fertile topic for journalists in the early 1960s, few of them regarded SDS's manifesto as especially important.¹² Finally, while more than a few 1960s veterans claim that their readings of the Port Huron Statement provoked a certain frisson, others found it rather dull. Those SDS leaders who have admitted that they found sections of it "tedious" or "boring" are probably more representative of the New Left as a whole.¹³

But if it is true that an essential ingredient of politics is timing, then the Port Huron Statement's authors were maestros. The manifesto's celebrated opening salvo—"We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably at the world we inherit"—put into prose the smoldering discontent of countless students in the Cold War era.¹⁴ Its dour conclusion—"If we appear to seek the unattainable . . . then let it be known that we do so to avoid the unimaginable"—captured a sense of moral urgency among young leftists.¹⁵ Its impertinence—the notion that it represented an "agenda for a generation"—reflected the outsized ambitions of many baby-boomers idealists.¹⁶ Its strategic call for "realignment" (which meant replacing the Democratic Party's Dixiecrats with left-liberals) struck a familiar chord, but its suggestion that students themselves could be the driving forces for social change was novel.

Finally, the Port Huron Statement popularized participatory democracy, the idea that people should have some say over the decisions that affect their lives.¹⁷ Participatory democracy did not originate in the New Left; many whites gleaned the concept from the civil rights movement, particularly the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's emphasis on consensus building and "group-centered leadership."¹⁸ Others had been educated in the virtues and pleasures of civic engagement through their encounters with theorists like Arnold Kaufman and C. Wright Mills. As SDS biographer James Miller argues, participatory democracy was never adequately defined, and eventually the concept became hopelessly tangled up with the New Left's calls for direct action and personal "authenticity."¹⁹ Nevertheless, it provided a rationale for any number of left-inflected political activities in the 1960s, and it offered a simple way of critiquing all sorts of existing institutions.

Equally important, it promised to frame social relations within the New Left itself.²⁰ Whatever different shades of meaning participatory democracy may have had in the 1960s, on this point the Port Huron Statement seems reasonably clear. One of the "root principles" of participatory democracy, it said, was the idea that "decision making of basic social consequence [must] be carried on by public groupings." Furthermore, politics should be "seen positively, as the art of collectively creating an acceptable pattern of social relations" and bringing people "out of isolation and into community."²¹ If participatory democracy remained rather vague as a macropolitical analysis, as a basic interactional model within SDS it was easily understood and implemented. Of course, people could (and did) quibble about the details: Did participatory democracy mean that decisions should be made by consensus, or simply by consensus-building methods? Should leadership positions be

frequently rotated, or abolished altogether? Who knew? But participatory democracy did not need to be crisply formulated to function effectively as a bedrock ideal; certainly very few New Leftists ever called for centralized decision making, entrenched leadership, or rigid hierarchies.²²

Members of SDS gathered in small groups to refine various sections of the Port Huron Statement that Hayden had already drafted with help from others, and they finished their work in three days. For decades afterward, many of those who collaborated on the project retained glowing memories of the whole experience. Dorothy Burlage recalled, "People kept operating out of idealism and their instincts about what would create a better world. It was a rare moment in history, and we were blessed to be given that opportunity."²³ Barbara Jacobs (later Barbara Haber) remembered feeling "like the luckiest person on earth for having had either the good luck or the good sense" to have made it to Port Huron; the conference, she said, was "dazzlingly exciting."²⁴ An often-overlooked preface to the Port Huron Statement underscores its democratic spirit. "This document represents the results of several months of writing and discussion among the membership," it begins. The preface goes on to explain that the manifesto should not be regarded as the final word on SDS's ideology, but rather as "a *living document* open to change with our times and experiences. It is a beginning: In our own debate and education, [and] in our dialogue with society."²⁵ In other words, the Port Huron Statement was itself a product of the collaborative ethos that it championed in its text. It offered a critique of society and specific strategies for change, as well as being a symbol and an embodiment of participatory democracy itself.

Although SDS began establishing a democratic print culture with the Port Huron Statement, the ethos they built around their printed communications did not become a pronounced force in the organization right away. Instead, it evolved gradually, over the course of several years, in an effort to retain the harmonious social relations that characterized SDS when it was founded. To understand how this happened, it is necessary to briefly examine SDS's institutional history in the period following the Port Huron conference, as it began growing into a larger, more heterogeneous organization.

For a time, the same sense of camaraderie that marked the group's retreat to the Michigan woodlands continued to propel SDS. As one former member recalled, Tom Hayden and Al Haber personally drew many people into their fold. "They would go find people they . . . connected with on a gut level. It wasn't 'Do you believe in the principles of unity?' It was, 'You feel good to me. I have the feeling you're very bright and you're spirited and we see things basically the same way.' So this was a hand-recruited bunch of people who

really wanted to use their lives to change the world, and who loved finding each other."²⁶ Frithjof Bergmann, a professor at the University of Michigan in the early 1960s, said much the same thing: "The nucleus attracted good people."²⁷ Most were high achievers—student government leaders, editors of campus newspapers, and precocious intellectuals—who were united by friendship and mutual admiration.²⁸ As a result, dialogue was eased by a "mutual awareness." As Dick Flacks put it, "You could trust each other, even if you disagreed."²⁹

SDS meetings were typically thorough and intensive. Jeremy Brecher, who attended his first SDS National Council meeting in New York City in 1963 while he was an undergraduate at Reed College, found himself enthralled by the group's "freewheeling discussions," not least because they seemed scrubbed clean of the Old Left's sectarianism. "They weren't talking about the history of Soviet-American relations and who was right in 1956," he said. Instead, meetings provoked "emotional and political responses that were relevant" to people's lived experience.³⁰ Alan Haber's influence seemed particularly notable. According to Brecher, Haber "was the one who taught [SDS activists] to be thoughtful and argumentative without being sectarian. . . . He had set the tone of a place that was committed to open discussion and yet also politically committed."³¹

Moreover, so long as SDS remained very small, there was room for deeply felt personal conversations. Ann Arbor peace activist Elise Boulding recalled one memorable evening when "eight or ten" SDSers attended a New Year's party at her home one year. After her husband, the economist Kenneth Boulding, read aloud Alfred Lord Tennyson's "Ring Out Wild Bells" at the stroke of midnight, a group gathered on the living room floor in front of the fireplace:

They began asking each other how they might have dealt with situations each had faced, like having police dogs unleashed on them. How do you protect yourself from a police dog that is taught to leap at your throat? . . . For middle class students who had come from protected families, this was the first time they had faced raw violence. They were totally unprepared for it. This was a time for them to share with each other what it meant to them, how much it had hurt them inside—much more than the outside hurt—and what it meant to feel afraid. The tone of the dialogue impressed me profoundly, because there wasn't a trace of defensiveness or even hostility. It was beyond all that. . . . Their conversation went on for hours. I just sat, barely breathing. I felt I was tapping another dimension of human experience that was very rare. One just didn't hear people sharing at that level.³²

This very same group, however, could also appear cliquish and self-absorbed. Looking back, one SDS veteran even characterized himself this way: "I honestly walked around with the feeling, as narrow and group-centered as it was, that if you weren't in SDS your life was empty and you were not perceiving what was really happening," he said.³³ Another former member, Barry Bluestone, said that his first impression of SDS was that it was dominated by "purely political people [who] had no other interests at all." When he attended an SDS retreat in 1962, it only seemed to confirm his negative assessment. "It seemed to me there was more to life than debating . . . infinitely detailed political nuances," he recalled. Only later did he learn that "you could get intensely involved and entwined with political struggle and yet still lead a full and active and enjoyable life."³⁴

Another problem arose from the fact that although elitism was officially discouraged in SDS, the group maintained an obvious internal pecking order. According to Brecher, while "there was no intimidation about arguing" with the so-called "heavies" in the organization—people like Tom Hayden, Al Haber, Dick Flacks, Paul Potter, "and to some degree Steve Max"—it was often a foregone conclusion that "obviously their rap was going to take the way [and] your rap wasn't."³⁵ Moreover, no matter how inclusive SDS aimed to be, some members *were* intimidated, simply because others shined so brightly. Jacobs recalled a summer afternoon when Hayden—in many respects the early New Left's *beau ideal*—cockily announced (with his feet on the desk, while reading the *New York Times*) that the Democratic Party's "realignment" was all but imminent, "and [so] it was time for him and Al [Haber] and Casey [Hayden] to get in the car and drive down to Washington." When Jacobs read the same newspaper article without managing to reach a similar conclusion, she thought to herself, "Boy, he's a genius and I'm dumb. He knows how to read the *New York Times* and then he has the guts to go down and talk to congressmen, which I never would have the guts to do."³⁶ Another SDS veteran, looking back with almost two decades of hindsight, said, "I still consider [SDS's founders] to be some of the most brilliant people of our generation, and I still, in some ways, idolize those folks."³⁷

Finally, although the issue of sexism within the New Left had yet to emerge as a topic of conversation, women generally took secondary roles in SDS. Today, SDS veterans sometimes disagree over whether women were muscled aside or simply acquiesced to prevailing gender stereotypes, but almost everyone acknowledges that that they were less vocal than men, and that they handled the great majority of what the New Left called "shit-work" (which could include anything from routine office tasks to cooking and cleaning).³⁸ Cathy Wilkerson recalled that she "first became conscious of

the issues around men and women" at the SDS meetings she attended at Swarthmore College in 1963. "I noticed that no women were in leadership positions. No women were really listened to. . . . I realized that to be accepted, you had to date one of the men."³⁹ Another woman who says she belonged to "a very typical chapter of SDS," recalled that "men tended to dominate all the discussions and women tended to run the mimeograph machine, and would sort of be expected to screw and make meals."⁴⁰

In December 1962, Al Haber and his fiancée, Barbara Jacobs—who, perhaps not coincidentally, was among the women who felt her talents were not being recognized—expressed some of these concerns in a Cassandra-like letter that they distributed among the SDS inner circle. "We have, each in different ways, felt isolated, missed communication from the national office or from projects, missed a sense of membership activity and élan, and squirmed with a feeling of in-groupishness," they said. SDS was "still an association of friends, and not yet an organization where the individual member has dignity and respect and is the concern of the 'leadership.'"⁴¹ Although a few SDSers resented the letter's tone, its general thrust was hard to refute. SDS may have described itself as a "national" organization in 1962–63, but this was an obvious conceit: It was barely solvent and basically jerry-built, with only four hundred members and nine chapters rigged together through a combination of meetings, conferences, and occasional visits from field secretary Steve Max.⁴²

Moreover, the Haber-Jacobs missive arrived at a propitious moment, as the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis had had a truly unsettling effect on SDS—most obviously because it raised the horrible specter of nuclear war, but also because it threw into sharp relief the enormous chasm between SDS's outsized ambitions and its organizational capabilities. In New York City, SDS activists could do little more than greet the nuclear standoff with mordant humor.⁴³ In Ann Arbor, students responded by converging on Tom and Casey Hayden's home, where they ran up a massive phone bill trying to keep tabs on protest activity that unfolded elsewhere; all they accomplished locally was to organize a tiny demonstration at the University of Michigan, where they were pelted with eggs and tomatoes by an opposing group of students.⁴⁴

Much of what SDS required in this period was obvious: "A lot of plain dirty fundraising and a lot of laborious chapter organizing."⁴⁵ But SDS leaders also recognized that if their group was to grow stronger and more cohesive, it would need to experiment with new approaches.⁴⁶ The democratic idealism that fueled the Port Huron Statement would not be enough. As a result, they began promoting new ways of communicating with the membership through

print. In short, they tried to replicate on paper what was attractive about SDS meetings (the warm, honest, probing discussions that helped to build a store of trust and a sense of community), while mitigating those qualities that hampered the organization (its ineffectuality, clannishness, and unequal participation). SDS may have been infused with a collaborative spirit from the beginning, but the values and assumptions that governed many of its communications, and that in turn bonded many people to SDS, evolved out of a painful recognition that participatory democracy—like any form of democracy—did not unfold naturally. It would have to be promoted and protected.

TO A CONSIDERABLE DEGREE, SDS expressed its egalitarian social theories through its attitudes toward written correspondence. Although we frequently think of letters as among the most private of communications, in SDS epistolary exchanges were shared liberally. This was true from the beginning, when Tom Hayden sent the very first drafts of the Port Huron Statement to a select group of colleagues, who in turn mailed back their responses, which he retyped, mimeographed, and distributed to the entire group "for the purposes of dialogue and cross fertilization."⁴⁷ In subsequent years, however, letters carried on and informed SDS conversations in such unusual ways that Arthur Waskow, a prominent peace activist, asked a friend whether anyone had ever considered the possibility that the New Left was inventing a "new literary form."⁴⁸

Sometimes, SDSers passed letters around by hand (and since they were frequently typed with carbons, multiple copies abounded). National secretary Clark Kissinger once acknowledged that unless his missives from the Chicago national office were marked "personal," he expected them to be circulated in this way.⁴⁹ On other occasions, New Leftists orchestrated an exchange of letters on a particular issue, intending their correspondence to be distributed to others, so as to expose the student community to differing points of view. At Swarthmore College, which had a strong SDS chapter, activists launched a small, mimeographed magazine called *Albatross* that was made up entirely of letters that students had also sent to campus and public officials "on such matters as the Cuban situation, the Un-American Activities Committee, the Peace Corps, foreign policy in Africa, and the sit-ins." Recipients of these letters were told that duplicate copies were slated to be reprinted in *Albatross*, a magazine read by "several thousand students and adults." The idea "was not only to make Congressmen attentive to the letters but to inform and consolidate student opinion."⁵⁰ Similarly, New Leftists sometimes used the epistolary form when writing for a larger audience, say

by publishing dispatches from their travels or open letters to the SDS community.⁵¹ Finally, letters originally intended as private exchanges sometimes appeared in print later on, in one of SDS's various newsletters, or in its official newspaper, *New Left Notes*.⁵²

Usually this happened with the author's blessings, but not always. The democratic sensibilities of some New Leftists were such that they could be remarkably casual about copyrights, permissions, and rights of privacy.⁵³ Occasionally, letter writers even took special care to indicate that they did *not* want to see their correspondence published.⁵⁴ Certainly Steve Max was not pleased when, on several occasions, SDS officers published his private letters. The final straw came when someone at *New Left Notes* took the liberty of printing a personal letter sharply critical of a recent essay by someone Max admired—the distinguished author and labor activist Sidney Lens. "Listen you sons of bitches, if I wanted my letter on the Sid Lens piece printed, I would have asked to have it printed," Max exclaimed. "Unlike some people in SDS there is nothing wrong with my toilet training and I don't feel the need to communicate my every thought to the entire world. When I write for publication, I try to write in a bit more reasoned and careful way than when I dash a note to you screwups." (To Sidney Lens, Max added, "I must apologize . . . for my unfortunate use of the word 'didleywack.'")⁵⁵

The question of just how much confidentiality SDS's letter writers could expect provoked a revealing discussion at a 1964 National Council meeting. The issue came up when Vernon Grizzard, head of one of SDS's Economic Research and Action Projects, suggested that certain sensitive correspondence relating to their work should be stored in locked file cabinets.⁵⁶ But others strenuously disagreed; Shelly Blum worried that the proposal made SDS look like an "autocracy" and argued that "there should be some leniency in who sees what." Robert Ross was even more adamant: "Any dues paying member should be able to see all [SDS] correspondence," he said. "As soon as confidential files not open to all are established, a new elite is set up. People should feel that they know what is happening in the organization."

When someone else noted that there were important security considerations to take into account, Doug Ireland dismissed the claim as "old left conspiratorialism." "The FBI won't be prevented from getting information from a locked file," he scoffed. Another member suggested the group should simply rely on the good judgment of SDS's elected officers to decide which letters should be kept confidential, but added that, of course, the files should be left "fairly open." Only Todd Gitlin said flatly, "It should be the right of a member to decide who will read what he writes." When Dickie Magidoff argued that

the case for confidentiality should not hinge on political considerations, but rather upon "pragmatic and functional" ones (apparently having to do with that fact that a few "nuts" were beginning to hang around the office), Ross amplified his argument that the very idea of holding letters in locked file cabinets was antithetical to SDS values. SDS would not be treating people equally if the National Council allowed one group of people to see its letters, but not others. "We're acting like people who attach more importance to little things without some concern for the way we do business," he added. The discussion finally wound down when the group settled on a compromise: SDS's files would be left open to the membership, except for certain sensitive materials that could be stored elsewhere "at the discretion of the president and national secretary." Although Ross's position didn't fully carry the day, the National Council clearly took special care to protect SDS's reputation as a democratic community.

The National Council also helped to establish SDS's print culture at a meeting in Columbus, Ohio, in 1962, when it voted to launch a newsletter called the *Discussion Bulletin*. Unlike SDS's *Membership Bulletin*, which aimed to keep people up to date on SDS's activities, the *Discussion Bulletin*—often called the "DB" for short—was designed to stimulate discussion on the Port Huron Statement, although it soon opened itself up to a much wider range of concerns.⁵⁷ The National Council charged the group's indefatigable assistant national secretary, Don McKelvey, with putting the DB in motion.⁵⁸ Having graduated from Haverford College in 1960, McKelvey was slightly older than most of SDS's members, and as a former National Secretary for the Student Peace Union, he had prior experience working in a highly democratic organization.⁵⁹ At the same time, he had an almost sentimental attachment to the *Discussion Bulletin*, and in his frequent correspondence with new and prospective members he promoted it zealously. Later, the *Membership* and *Discussion Bulletins* were streamlined into a single *SDS Bulletin*, and Helen Garvy and then Jeff Shero took turns as editors, until the entire operation was scrapped in 1966 to make room for SDS's tabloid newspaper, *New Left Notes*. Regardless of who was at the helm, these newsletters welcomed input from anyone who wanted to contribute, even if they were not SDS members.⁶⁰ This ongoing editorial policy aimed to generate a steady flow of ideas in SDS, but it served another important purpose as well; as McKelvey put it at the time, people's written contributions were thought to facilitate the "creation of community."⁶¹ Garvy agreed, but added that the *Bulletin* likewise functioned as a countervailing force against SDS's testosterone-fueled meetings. "I saw it as an equalizer," she recalled. "Sometimes meetings were dominated by whoever talked the loudest,"⁶² and from her perspective, the *Bulletin*

represented a way "to bring members into the mainstream of the organization—into its thoughts and discussions."⁶³

The *Discussion Bulletin* appeared irregularly, and no one expended much effort on its design. At first McKelvey printed it from SDS's headquarters on East 19th Street in New York City on a hand-cranked mimeograph machine; later, Garvy produced it on colored paper through an offset printer after SDS moved its operations to Chicago. Only when Jeff Shero took over in late 1965 did the *Bulletin* begin featuring a few photographs, illustrations, and sidebars. (Later Schero became heavily involved in the underground press, and from 1968 to 1970 he edited New York City's second major underground paper, the *Rat*.) One gets a sense of the special role it played by how the SDS faithful described it—almost never as a newsletter, but rather as an "organ of intellectual exchange," a "dialogue," a "forum," or a "medium."⁶⁴ Just as it was an article of faith in SDS that politics grew out of personal experiences rather than entrenched ideologies, the *Bulletin* was spurred on by the notion that the very process of writing—of sitting down, laboring over one's prose, and putting ink to paper—often helped people to sharpen thinking, crystallize viewpoints, and generate new discoveries.⁶⁵ When a student from Georgia State University inquired about how to go about building an SDS chapter there, McKelvey suggested he might begin by asking new members to write critiques of the Port Huron Statement. This was "most important," he said, because "those who write . . . are, hopefully, stimulated to thinking and writing on their own."⁶⁶ To a student at Rutgers University, he underscored "the importance to you and others . . . of examining what you're doing in order to articulate your thoughts about it."⁶⁷

The opinions of newcomers were particularly welcomed. As McKelvey told one student, "We especially need the comments of people who were not involved in the writing of the [Port Huron Statement]."⁶⁸ Similarly, editors took special care to solicit commentary from grassroots members, reminding them that they, too, had a stake in the SDS's future. When Garvy took over the *Bulletin* in October 1964, one of the first things she did was draft an editorial announcing, "The SDS program and analysis are neither static nor complete. There is a continuing dialogue within SDS and it should not be limited to . . . members who are active at the national level."⁶⁹ The *Bulletin* also sometimes published local chapter reports, which gave members an idea of the scope of SDS's activity and a sense of connection to a larger movement.

But the *Bulletin's* editors especially prized dissenting opinions, iconoclastic proposals, and sharply argued theories—anything at all, in fact, to keep SDS ideas from calcifying into orthodoxy.⁷⁰ As McKelvey said at the time, SDS must avoid presenting itself "as a package of set ideas and dictated

actions."⁷¹ When a student wrote to ask whether SDS had any connections to the Communist Party, McKelvey answered that it did not, but he added that he worried that "overconcern with communism . . . contributes to an atmosphere in which young people . . . fear to inquire in 'unsafe' ways."⁷² By contrast, SDS depended on its vigorous spirit of inquiry. When another student wrote in announcing he would like to join SDS, but that he didn't always see eye-to-eye with everyone in the organization, he might have been surprised at McKelvey's reply: "I am more than glad to hear that you disagree with several of our members' published opinions," he said. The student was encouraged to give full vent to his disagreements in the *Bulletin*.⁷³

So accessible were the *Bulletin's* pages that its editors rarely fulfilled all of the duties their titles implied. "I really ain't no editor," McKelvey once confessed. "In fact, one of the reasons the *SDS Bulletin* has gotten so big . . . has been my general refusal to edit things, to cut things out, my desire to include everything. I have *compiled* an increasingly good—and now excellent—*Bulletin*; I've edited nothing, really."⁷⁴ Shero, a colorful activist (who once campaigned for an end to segregated toilets at the University of Texas at Austin under the slogan "Let My People Go") proved equally reticent to exercise his editorial hand. "I've no fixed policy on editing copy, but tend to want to edit as little as possible," he wrote. "I conceive [of the *Bulletin*] as a democratic publication growing from the membership's concerns rather than a news magazine [coming] from the national office." When on one occasion an especially prolix letter arrived, Shero asked its author for permission to pare it down, adding humorously, "[t]his confronts my budding neo anarchist tendencies with severe and difficult mental problems."⁷⁵

Shero recognized the obvious dilemma that arose from such a laissez-faire editorial approach: "A democratic publication sacrifices professionalism so that all the voices, even the halting and poorly expressed, can be heard, yet at the same time a shoddy production will not serve the needs of the membership."⁷⁶ Most of the *Bulletin's* contributors were college aged, and while some were very talented, it was rare that their work would not have profited from an editor's red pen. With such minimal editorial oversight, the *Bulletin* always had a certain stitched-together quality. One typical issue covered an ongoing New York City newspaper strike, U.S. relations with China and Cuba, the peace movement, and the McCarran Internal Security Act of 1950.⁷⁷ Another issue ran an analysis of the 1964 congressional elections, a debate on SDS's Peace and Research Education Project, correspondence between two SDSers about how to organize the unemployed, and a news report about a misadventure that Tom Hayden had with the Newark Police Department.⁷⁸

Another persistent problem that the *Bulletin's* editors grappled with was that in spite of their eagerness to accommodate SDS writers, they frequently had difficulty getting rank-and-file members to contribute the kinds of material they hoped for. During their tenures, all three of the *Bulletin's* editors—McKelvey, Garvy, and Shero—made urgent appeals for more writing, and sometimes they seemed convinced that printed discourse was as essential to SDS's survival as food and water are to living creatures. In one unsigned editorial, someone said that writing "substantive pieces" for the *Bulletin* was as important as attending SDS's upcoming national convention, for without such writings "SDS cannot build the politically and socially conscious base on campuses which it must build in order to attain even the most modest success."⁷⁹ Around the same time, McKelvey circulated a memo flatly telling SDS organizers that if they didn't participate in conversations through the *Bulletin*, "the organization won't grow and be cohesive."⁸⁰ Garvy similarly pleaded with SDS's inner circle to produce copy for the *Bulletin*. "I really feel strongly [that] there should be more discussion—and in a public way, involving as many members as possible. . . . And I'm really at a loss as to how to get this going."⁸¹

The editors may well have been laboring under unduly high expectations, since during most of the time that the *Bulletin* was in operation SDS remained relatively quiescent. This changed rather quickly after the Berkeley free speech movement got under way in September 1964. Then in March 1965, students and faculty at the University of Michigan organized an all-night teach-in against the Vietnam War that attracted some three thousand students. Similar events were soon replicated on dozens of campuses. The following April, SDS spearheaded the first national rally against the Vietnam War in Washington, DC. Expecting a turnout of about five thousand, organizers were amazed when the gathering, on a balmy spring afternoon, attracted upwards of twenty thousand. Meanwhile, several major magazines and newspapers published long articles describing the new student intelligentsia.⁸² As a result, membership in SDS swelled from 29 chapters and just one thousand members in June 1964 to 124 chapters and more than four thousand official members by the end of 1965.⁸³

From SDS's perspective, the only problem with this upsurge was that it came on so suddenly that it proved difficult to manage. To cite but one telling anecdote, when former SDS president Todd Gitlin embarked on a speaking tour through several Great Plains states in the fall of 1965, he discovered three functioning SDS chapters that no one in the national office even knew existed.⁸⁴ Brecher summed up the exigencies SDS faced in an internal memorandum:

From an organization almost non-existent outside of the East Coast and Middle West, we have become an outfit with a severe case of national sprawl—so spread out we can hardly keep in touch across the continent. We have grown so much in size that whereas less than two years ago almost everybody knew everybody else, now hardly anybody but the "old gang" knows anybody else. Our function has grown from an organization where people got together to talk about the things they were doing in various movements to one [that] has its own extended program on half-a-dozen fronts, involving wildly different kinds of people and approaches.⁸⁵

Implied, but unstated, was the widely shared sense that the influx of these "wildly different kinds of people" had produced a *Kulturkampf* in SDS. Far removed in both temperament and background from the doughty, often well-heeled progressives who helped found SDS, this new generation of radicals—sometimes called the "prairie power" faction of SDS because many of them came from the South and the West—were mainly novices. More likely to be guided by urgent moral considerations than by any ideological traditions, some among them lacked the old guard's sophistication, urbanity, and *savoir faire*.⁸⁶ Many years later, former SDS national secretary Greg Calvert, who was closely aligned with the prairie-power faction, still bristled at the memory of being treated by some of SDS's old guard with "upper middle class arrogance," as if he were "some sort of ignorant bum"—a galling experience for anyone, but especially so for Calvert, who grew up in severe rural poverty but held a PhD in history from Cornell University.⁸⁷

In a surprisingly unguarded letter to SDS benefactors, national secretary Paul Booth pointed out the shift in member profile:

From a movement of theorists we have become largely a movement of activists. . . . Where two years ago, the model SDS personality was someone doing a master's thesis on C. Wright Mills, today he is a college dropout. Where we used to spend months prior to an SDS convention debating the preparation of a document of political analysis and strategy, today . . . activists with radical humanist values implement whatever analysis strikes them as appropriate.⁸⁸

Booth's letter injected a dose of hyperbole in the situation, for at no point was SDS ever in jeopardy of being overrun by a scrum of college dropouts.⁸⁹ But others echoed his concern that the new members who were surging into SDS might have something of the effect of a downhill stream, loosening its agenda and carrying its nonhierarchical tendencies into uncharted waters. In a

National Guardian article, Steve Max grumbled that SDS's "fantastic growth" and heterogeneity carried a hidden cost: an "anything goes" ethos that threatened to undermine its political coherence. A "high degree of programmatic consensus" in the Port Huron Era had given way, he said, to a "Pandora's Box of theories of social change."⁹⁰

SDS's disastrous national convention at Kewadin, Michigan, in June 1965 stoked Max's fear; by almost all accounts, newcomers felt excluded, old guarders were threatened, and discussions proved tedious. Robert Pardun—a fresh arrival to SDS—recalled the Kewadin meetings "tended to be dominated by a few articulate men who spoke often and seemed to enjoy the political bantering." This might have been tolerable enough, but Pardun also found something discrepant about the fact that these old guarders were so concerned with "winning" their various debates. By this time, Pardun had already reached an understanding—strongly encouraged in SDS writings—that "democracy and winning aren't the same thing. Winning is about overwhelming the opposition while democracy, as we defined it, encouraged everyone to participate in making collective decisions."⁹¹

The sudden upsurge in SDS also put a new strain on the *Bulletin*. Originally designed to promote membership participation and organizational dialogue, it now tried to keep tabs on the widening range of SDS activities; to function, in short, much more like a traditional news bulletin. Complaints that SDS wasn't keeping its members up to date were particularly pointed when coming from members who lived in regions where SDS had yet to gain a significant toehold. As one letter writer put it, "Being out in the wilderness like this makes one feel lost to the national tone of SDS."⁹² Similarly, a regional organizer from San Francisco complained, "The longer I am on the West Coast the more I become concerned over the lack of communication between the [national office] and SDS in general. . . . I am completely in the dark as to what has been happening in the East over the last two or three weeks."⁹³

The National Council responded to these concerns by revamping the *Bulletin* so that it would appear weekly rather than monthly. In the summer of 1965, Shero was elected vice president of SDS largely on the basis of his pledges to do just this.⁹⁴ Shortly thereafter, he sent out a note promising that the "new" *Bulletin* would give "the widest possible view" of recent SDS activity.⁹⁵ Here again we see evidence of SDS's confidence in the power of printed material, but as sociologist Francesca Polletta points out, with hindsight, this may seem a rather small-scale solution to the divisions that were plaguing SDS.⁹⁶ Besides, even the "new and improved" *Bulletin* failed to meet everyone's expectations. One supposedly lackluster issue prompted a reader

to snap, "People's literature isn't sacred merely because it comes from the people's [*sic*]! . . . If SDS is growing as rapidly as everything we read would have us believe, why the hell isn't there more substantive news about the chapters?"⁹⁷ In this same period, the national office received at least two more letters from members who claimed they learned more about what was happening in SDS from major newspapers and magazines than from SDS itself.⁹⁸

After only a few more months, the *Bulletin* folded, this time for good. (Most members learned of its demise in January 1966 when its tabloid replacement, *New Left Notes*, arrived in their mailboxes with a front-page headline reading "SURPRISE!")⁹⁹ As the chief means of internal communication among the growing number of chapters that were operating more or less independently, *New Left Notes* marked a turn in the history of SDS's print culture. Whereas SDS had once relied on printed dialogues as a way of shoring up its identity as a democratic organization, by the mid-1960s its character and temperament were no longer in question. The new challenge for the national office was simply to keep tabs on SDS as it outgrew its cosseted childhood to become an established force in the organized Left. Nevertheless, *New Left Notes* still bore more than a passing resemblance to its predecessor. Edited at first by Shero, it featured on its masthead the old Economic Research and Action Project slogan, "Let the People Decide," in its masthead, and, as SDS historian Kirkpatrick Sale quipped, "In terms of how the paper presented itself that is exactly how it was edited. Almost any scrap of news, any letter, any essay or comment that came into the paper found its way into print."¹⁰⁰

In this way, SDS was living up to its democratic promise. The group never quite had a fixed identity—its own members sometimes described it as amoeba-like, as an "*organism* as well as an *organization*"¹⁰¹—but in its early years, the social processes that guided SDS's printed communications contributed to its reputation as an accessible, egalitarian New Left organization. True, this spirit was present at SDS's founding, when fifty-nine of its charter members contributed to the redrafting of Tom Hayden's Port Huron Statement. Not only was the manifesto written collectively; its supple-minded authors also conceived of it as a "living document," subject to future deliberations by SDS's membership. But it was only later, in response to specific exigencies, that SDS fashioned a culture of print that granted liberal access to its records, in which letters were freely circulated, editors deferred to writers, and newsletters were regarded not as official organs but as running dialogues to which everyone was welcome to contribute.

Of course, this ethos carried its own built-in biases; just as not everyone had the force of personality or "mystique" that was required to be an SDS

leader, not everyone in the New Left had the wherewithal to capably express themselves in print. Nevertheless, by the mid-1960s, SDS was known on the Left as a group that “passed the charisma around.”¹⁰² Its print culture is part of the reason why. Soon, underground newspapers would begin playing a very similar role, affording a basis for community among activists and avant-gardists, and helping to democratize the youth rebellion. With this in mind, the notion that the New Left was founded not by any individual, nor even by any group of persons, but rather by SDS’s mimeograph machine, is so rich a metaphor that if it hadn’t already been suggested, one would almost feel compelled to invent it.

2

A Hundred Blooming Papers

Culture and Community in the 1960s *Underground Press*

METAPHORS, OF COURSE, are supposed to be revealing, and when radical journalist Walt Crowley observed that by the summer of 1966, underground newsheets were “popping up . . . like mushrooms after a spring rain,” he was no doubt aiming to convey his enthusiasm for the underground press.¹ Similarly, *Time* magazine revealed something about its standpoint when it commented on precisely the same phenomenon in July 1966, only it had the papers “popping up like weeds.”² Either way, it’s clear that by the mid-1960s, the climate for youth-oriented, antiestablishment newspapers had quickly become fertile. Although these papers varied widely in terms of their quality, size, and style, together they documented the New Left’s efflorescence and subjected defenders of the established culture to unprecedented levels of scrutiny and ridicule. Along with the new gravitas in rock and roll, the rising tide of campus-based activism, and the outré countercultural style, underground newspapers began contributing mightily to the New Left’s sense that it stood at the heart of a new society.

An examination of the early histories of three of the New Left’s “prototypical” newspapers—the *Los Angeles Free Press*, East Lansing, Michigan’s, *The Paper*, and the *Rag*, from Austin, Texas (established in 1964, 1965, and 1966, respectively)—reveals some of the ways that they emboldened activists and dissenters in their own communities.³ Each of these tabloids grew out of relatively isolated regional subcultures, and they originally presented themselves