

Student Power!
The Radical Days of the English Universities
by Esmée Sinéad Hanna

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According to the conventional account, the English student movement of the 1960s was relatively mild-mannered and a token effort in the context of wider global student unrest of the time (Marwick 1998). Esmée Sinéad Hanna sets out to revise this assumption and to rectify what she sees as a significant oversight in both the sociological scholarship on social movements and the history of universities. Taking in a time span of 1965-1973, *Student Power!* explores key events within the period as well as personal experiences of student activism. Organized into six clearly defined chapters, beginning with a thorough methodological discussion, the text offers an empirical exploration of the English student movement situated within the socio-political context of the decade. Through a combination of documentary analysis and oral histories, Hanna aims to examine the characteristics of the movement; explaining why it emerged as it did and offering insights into student life at this time.

In the introductory chapter, Hanna details her research methods with impressive reflexivity. The use of documentary sources equips her with the necessary contextual background to enable richer data to be gleaned from the interviews. The discussion of oral histories as a research method meanwhile raises a number of interesting epistemological questions, namely the peculiarity of memory. The

potential for 'misremembering' by participants is treated as a meaningful feature which can tell us something about the way people make sense of their experiences: 'any fallibility of memory is now part of their story' (p. 20). The second chapter provides us with a contextual account of the social and political landscape of the time. This encompasses the global phenomena of student protests – perhaps immortalized by the legendary *May '68* in France¹ – in addition to broader, intellectual changes brought about by the emergence of the New Left and new social movements.

The bulk of analysis begins in chapter three, which distils a huge amount of documentary evidence based on 16 case studies. Arranged thematically, this section gives a more general picture of the radicality emerging in English student populations at the time. Hanna explores the repertoire of tactics employed by students including rent-strikes, violent and non-violent direct action and sit-ins. The central importance of the sit-in as a tactic is a recurring theme throughout the study.

Hanna then turns to data analysis of the oral histories. Consciously forgoing claims to generalizability, she limits this to case studies involving former students at just three universities, Essex, Hornsey College of Art, and the London School of Economics (LSE). This builds on previous sections and offers more personalized accounts of the movement from Hanna's participants. A grounded theory approach is adopted and the input from the participants informs the categories of her analysis. What emerges from the data is a fascinating array of anecdotes, lived experiences and insights into student life. The students' ingenuity and sense of fun is demonstrated in one memorable incident. Activists at LSE were involved in a failed

1 *May '68* refers to a period of civil unrest in France which began with a wave of student occupations followed by mass strikes.

attempt to occupy the Greek embassy² which resulted in their arrest.

One reflected on the experience:

You had to declare your religion when you went to prison.
So we would all declare ourselves to be Quakers so they
would have to let us have a Quaker meeting. It didn't wash
though.

A number of key differences between the three universities are apparent. Experiences of protest at Hornsey were very different from LSE and Essex in terms of the tactics employed as well as the causes and issues at stake. There is a notable absence of any national, overarching political objective or coherent set of goals (although opposition to the Vietnam War and a growing disillusionment with the Wilson government seem to have united many students). Major similarities are identified in the sense of solidarity with other students across the wider movement which often found expression in memos of support. Themes of community and closeness also link the case studies. Many of the mobilizations were rooted in educational grievances and perceptions of 'victimisation' committed against fellow students.

Throughout the analysis, a narrative of disdain emerges for both the National Union of Students (NUS) and its student leaders (including a younger Jack Straw³), who were perceived as 'bureaucrats' and careerists. More ambivalent attitudes towards local Students' Unions emerge, with the local unit often operating as a useful mediator within formal and informal networks enabling information to be sent and received between groups. Perhaps more extensive data on constructions of and attitudes towards leadership would have been illuminating.

2 This was a protest against the coup in Greece in 1967.

3 Jack Straw was to later become Home Secretary then Foreign Secretary under the government of Tony Blair.

In assessing the overall impact of the movement, Hanna concludes that any lasting political change was limited. The lofty ambitions of the students clearly left an indelible impression on those who took part. In Hanna's analysis, the student movement was a product of its time, with the broader societal context of the 1960s giving the students a sense that they could change the world. They seized this as a political opportunity.

After what is a highly insightful and compelling narrative, the book begins to lose its traction, largely due to the superficial treatment of contemporary student activism in the concluding chapter, *Lessons from the Sixties*. Although some attention is paid to, for example, the anti-fees protests in 2010, ultimately the conclusion delivers little of an earlier promise to link the events of the 1960s to social movements in the present day. This closing section is also replete with assumptions. The author speculates that recent trends of marketization will further entrench apathy; English students in their new-found role as consumers, she argues, will wish to simply 'keep their heads down' (p.130). She cites, without evidence, the failure of recent mass protests such as the march against the Iraq War, as denting public confidence in the efficacy of social movements. No mention is made of more recent student mobilisations, such as the NUS-backed '#demo2012' or the most recent wave of sit-ins.

At one point Hanna posits the lack of a celebrated revolutionary past as the possible reason for the downplaying of the English student movement in political discourse. She claims the lessons – and passion – of the 1960s may teach students of today some valuable pragmatic lessons. But too little of their collective, radical political vision is put across in this book to give us real cause for celebration. Further research into the genealogy of the student movement, including a

detailed examination of its contemporary guise, would perhaps prove more compelling. Overall, *Student Power!* provides a rich and well-written account of the student movement of the 1960s which will no doubt come as a much needed addition to the empirical literature on the topic.

Bibliography

Marwick, Arthur. 1998. *The sixties: Cultural revolution in England, France, Italy and the United States c.1958-c.1974*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.