Apathy, Alienation, and Activism: American Culture and the Depoliticization of Youth

Golden Apple Lecture

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Note: the links in this talk no longer work.

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And finally, I want to acknowledge the many campus organizations that are engaged in political mobilization, and are living proof that political activism is a strong force among youth today, including but not limited to:

**Students for PIRGIM (working for sustainable environmental policies)

**SOLE (Students for Labor and Economic Equality)

**Students Supporting Affirmative Action, which took nearly one thousand students to the Supreme Court hearings on the U-M case almost a year ago

**And without being too partisan I should also mention the College Democrats, a group with dynamite leaders whom I have worked with in organizing several campus forums

Their activism inspires me personally, and also demonstrates that many of the charges of alienation and apathy that I plan to examine this evening are either greatly exaggerated, or severely distorted, or based on a misunderstanding of the broader constellation of forces within American culture that serve to depoliticize youth—by which I mean not only high school and college students but also young adults in their 20s and perhaps even in their early 30s

Sixties Burden

**If "you can't trust anyone over 30," as the Sixties slogan warned, I crossed that barrier several years ago—in fact, right before I arrived at U-M to teach my first class on the politics and culture of the 1960s. Now I teach two large lecture courses—United States History Since 1945, and the History of American Suburbia. Teaching the course on American suburbia has been one of the best experiences of my life, and it has really been a joint adventure in which I have not only lectured but also learned a lot from the students in the class. My own research is about the politics and policies that have shaped the development of the suburbs, but I decided to teach the undergraduate course on American suburbia because of three events that all happened in 1999: the national panic that followed the Columbine school shootings in Littleton, Colorado [SLIDE]; the controversy over the meaning of the audience riots at the Woodstock '99 music festival [SLIDE]; and the systematic distortion of the "fair trade" protests that shut down the meeting of the World Trade Organization in Seattle [SLIDE].

**It's hard now to remember 1999—it seems so long ago, before the Florida recount, before the trillions of dollars in tax cuts by the Bush administration, before the collapse of the dot.com bubble in the stock market, before the terrorist attacks on September 11, before the launch of a pre-emptive war in Iraq. [SLIDE] *Newsweek* came to this campus after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, and branded students here as part of a new "Generation 9-11": "The generation that once had it all—peace, prosperity, even the dot.com dream of returning at 30—faces its defining moment." [SLIDE] In other words, a comfortable generation of consumers and conformists, a thoroughly depoliticized generation, finally had a serious mission in life. This "Generation 9-11" framework imposed on college students erased a substantial amount of political activism that did take place during the 1990s, revealed most clearly by the labor and environmental campaigns that culminated in the massive demonstrations at the WTO meeting in Seattle. The dominant response to all three of these cultural events—Columbine, Woodstock '99, and Seattle—was to deny any political voice to young people in this country—to represent them as scary ticking time bombs after Columbine, or as alienated consumers in a giant shopping mall after Woodstock, or as foolish rebels without a cause after Seattle.

**Understanding the depolitization of youth in American culture requires grappling with the legacies of the Sixties, an era that functions simultaneously as an inspiration and as a burden for young activists today. All three of these symbolic events of 1999 became part of a larger cultural discourse that negatively contrasts young people today with their more politically engaged counterparts in the Baby Boomer generation, in their parents' generation—who supported the civil rights movement, resisted the war in Vietnam, launched the feminist and environmentalist movements, among many other accomplishments. I asked one of the leading political activists on this campus about the legacies of the Sixties, and this is what she wrote:

"I often get taught the lessons and stories of the 60s—the generation that perhaps naively but nevertheless wanted to make America better. They searched for peace, love, equality, happiness and whether or not they found it their intentions were pure. Their intense politicization gets boiled down into a nugget of communal utopia. This does a disservice to them for sure, but it does a greater disservice to the current politicized generation. My generation is political, make no mistake about it, but this dissent gets packaged as angry, hateful, privileged violence with little political sentiment and no creative power. We came of age in the 1990s when there seemed to be no alternative, when neo-liberal global capitalism was becoming a mainstream political religion. So we struggled as a generation to find a new discourse that not only demands a more inclusive American Dream but demands a re-imagining of the Dream itself."

**Port Huron. This sense that history is over flourished during the 1990s after the victory over communism in the Cold War. According to this consensus view, there are no alternatives to the "American Way of Life" and the triumph of free-market globalization—we can spend our time obsessed with O.J. and Monica Lewinsky. But in historical perspective, I am struck by the similarity between this current call to reimagine the American Dream and the language of student activists in the early 1960s. The Port Huron Statement, the manifesto released in 1962 by the Students for a Democratic Society, announced that "We are the people of this generation [SLIDE], bred in at least modest comfort [SLIDE], housed now in universities [SLIDE], looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit [SLIDE]." Drawing on the inspiration of the civil rights movement, the Port Huron Statement offered an audacious proposal—that privileged college students could be a vanguard for the transformation of American society. Students for a Democratic Society called this political model "participatory democracy," a direct attack on the power of corporations and impersonal bureaucracies over American life, and a full-scale repudiation of the consensus belief that a liberal nation would cautiously orchestrate reforms from the top down.

**End of History. The student movements of the 1960s challenged the widespread belief that history had ended, that freedom to shop had supplanted political citizenship, that there were no alternatives to the limitless horizons of the mass consumer society. During the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, which sought to put participatory democracy into action on campus, philosophy student Mario Savio wrote that the "greatest problem of our nation [is the belief that] history has in fact come to an end."

**"America is becoming ever more the utopia of sterilized, automated contentment. The "futures" and "careers" for which American students now prepare are for the most part intellectual and moral wastelands. This chrome-plated consumers' paradise would have us grow up to be well-behaved children."

**"The university is the place where people begin seriously to question the conditions of their existence and raise the issue of whether they can be committed to the society they have been born into. This is part of a growing understanding among many people in America that history has not ended, that a better society is possible, and that it is worth dying for."

[DVD #1, Mario Savio, FSM, 27:33-29:00, *Berkeley in the Sixties*]

or Transcript of Savio Sproul Hall Speech

**[SLIDE] What would you think if you saw a young person publicly demonstrating this kind of passion today? Expressing this type of philosophical critique of the university administration, the power of corporations, the seductions of a comfortable career, the promise of fulfillment through the consumer society? Or challenging, as Students for a Democratic Society did, the foreign policy of the nation and the economic system that places "material values over human values"? Most likely they would be viewed as angry and alienated, instead of optimistic and passionate—as if the only alternative for youth today is either political apathy or nihilistic rebellion. But the student activists in the early 1960s, like campus activists now, believed that they were mobilizing to challenge a landscape of apathy, surrounded by middle-class white youth who seemed so thoroughly conservative and depoliticized that the mainstream media called them the "Silent Generation." The mass political movement of the 1960s did not arrive until after the Vietnam War, and especially after middle-class youth became vulnerable to the military draft. There is certainly more political activism on college campuses today than there was before 1965 or 1966. And if the government decided to start drafting middle-class youth again, then all this talk of apathy would suddenly disappear.

**Branding Rebellion. We have packaged the Sixties into a set of tidy boxes—campus radicalism to stop the war, peace and love at the Woodstock music festival, consciousness raising that the personal is political, hippies retreating to communal living, Yuppies selling out to the gods of capitalism and commerce. And more recently, corporate marketing campaigns have co-opted the countercultural message of rebellion, proving the seemingly infinite power of capitalism to absorb alternative visions and market them back to youth as just another lifestyle option. At first it was controversial when Nike, which has adopted the countercultural slogan "Just Do It" as its advertising motto, used the Beatles song "Revolution" to sell sneakers. Nowadays the colonization of Sixties rebellion by corporate America is part of the wallpaper of our consumer culture. Rolling Stones songs sell Snickers Bars, and the Who's generational anthem about a "Teenage Wasteland" is used in a commercial for SUVs. The GAP stores in the mall use countercultural icons such as James Dean, Jack Kerouac, and Joni Mitchell to sell clothes manufactured in Third World sweatshops. Apple/Macintosh markets countercultural cool and Sixties nostalgia through its "Think Different" campaign, including major Sixties musicians such as Bob Dylan, John Lennon, and Joan Baez, and nonviolent political activists such as Martin Luther King, Cesar Chavez, and Ghandi. Macintosh officially pays tribute to "the crazy ones/The misfits...The rebels....The troublemakers/The round pegs in the square holes/The ones who see things differently/They're not fond of rules/And they have no respect for the status quo."

**Brand yourself—[SLIDE]. The logical destination of corporate branding campaigns is to turn the self into a brand. In the spring of 1999, when I was teaching at a small liberal arts college, the CEO of American Express came to campus at the height of the "New Economy" boom. His talk advised students to prepare themselves for the corporate world, and secure their futures as top management material, by marketing themselves as individual brands. This concept, called microbranding in the corporate literature, became one of the most hyped ideas of the 1990s. Microsoft promised to provide the technology that would help you change the world through self-branding. Anyone could Be Like Mike or say I Am Tiger Woods—and ride Brand

Me to success in the boom economy. I confess that this admonition to self-brand made me think . . . where's Mario Savio now that we really need him? Was this the final destination of consumer capitalism, now that the end of history thesis was back in vogue?

Apathy

**Polarized Era. The Sixties, often remembered as a radical era in American history, was actually a polarized era when both the left and the right revolted against the liberal center. The Baby Boomers were in fact a deeply divided generation. One group of Boomers marched for civil rights, protested Vietnam, embraced feminism and gay rights, and launched the environmental and consumer movements. The other group of Boomers is actually running our country right now. Does anyone know what was the largest campus organization of the 1960s? Campus Crusade for Christ—an evangelical Protestant network that launched the careers of many of the future leaders of the Religious Right. And the Young Americans for Freedom, which began in 1960 during the same year as Students for a Democratic Society, played a crucial role in the takeover of the Republican party by the New Right. George W. Bush might have avoided politics as a fraternity boy at Yale in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but Karl Rove and many other current leaders of the conservative movement came up through the ranks of campus activism. The Republican party has adopted a strategy that the Democrats have largely neglected—that youth should be cultivated as a political force, and that the campuses are a powerful base for political mobilization. Youth movements on the Left have tended to fight with the Democratic party, from the war in Vietnam to the recent battles over free trade. Youth movements on the Right have been skillfully incorporated into the broader Republican coalition.

**The prevailing view that youth are apathetic begins with the very real problem of voter turnout. Young people in America actually volunteer in record numbers, so they clearly possess a civic consciousness. But they widely believe that politics is corrupt and that their participation will not make a difference, and they go to the polls in very low numbers. In the 2000 election, about one-third of Americans under the age of 25 voted. The percentages doubled for their parents and grandparents—about two-thirds of Americans over the age of 45 cast ballots.

**The lack of political participation by youth has direct consequences for the priorities that shape the national agenda. We live in a nation where both parties scramble to provide prescription drugs for senior citizens, a genuine crisis, but where Washington can't seem to do anything about 43 million working people and children who lack basic health insurance—a national scandal. We live in a nation where there is always enough money for prisons, but never enough money for social welfare programs. We live in a nation where both political parties support a war on drugs that cannot be won, that has criminalized an entire generation of young people, and that has resulted in the incarceration of millions of nonviolent citizens, disproportionately racial minorities and those under 30. We live in a nation where there is enough money to provide trillions of dollars in tax cuts to the top 20%, and hundreds of billions more to fight a war in Iraq, but where schools and universities face massive budget cuts in order to reduce the deficit.

**Rock the Vote-[SLIDE]. I thought about calling this talk "Rock the Vote," but I worried that MTV would sue me for copyright infringement. MTV is a clear example of the paradox of youth

consciousness, and the tensions between citizenship based on political activism, and citizenship defined as consumer freedom. The "Rock the Vote" campaign began about fifteen years ago as a response to the political effort to censor music lyrics in rap and heavy metal, and MTV uses celebrity endorsements and concert tours to encourage youth participation in politics. Bill Clinton supplied the dominant stereotype of "Rock the Vote" at a forum in the 1992 campaign, where he expressed a preference for boxers over briefs, an exchange that the national media reduced to a caricature of the shallow outlook of the MTV Generation. The campaign's greatest success came a year later when Bill Clinton signed the Motor Voter Bill, which permits voter registration through the agencies that administer driver's licenses, and which George Bush had vetoed. But in coverage of Rock the Vote forums, questions to candidates about the war on drugs or zero tolerance crackdowns on youth crime, issues that receive bipartisan support and provoke little debate in Washington, are swept aside in the emphasis on the silliness of MTV audiences.

**MTV is a problematic champion of youth empowerment, of course, since it is a subsidiary of Viacom, one of the five large global media companies that control a substantial amount of the content available to American consumers. From the business side, MTV is just another corporation using the language of hip-hop capitalism as a marketing strategy for the highly coveted 14-34 age group. The broadcast network will even sell you an assortment of Rock the Vote paraphernalia, including t-shirts and skull caps and even thongs. Around the same time as the "Rock the Vote" campaign began, MTV ran an advertisement in the business sections of newspapers and magazines, featuring an alternative-looking white male watching television, accompanied by the following text: "Buy this 24-year-old and get all his friends absolutely free. He watches MTV, which means he knows a lot. . . . What he eats, his friends eat. What he wears, they wear. What he likes, they like." Beneath all the rhetoric about politically empowered youth, it is quite clear that MTV positions its audiences as passive consumers, a captive demographic for a network in which the line between programming and marketing has been completely obliterated.

**Landscapes of Control. [SLIDE]. One of the central concepts that we explore in my course on suburbia is how the physical spaces in which youth grow up are landscapes of control, from the cul-de-sac culture of the subdivisions, to the arbitrary rules that govern middle and high school, to the all-encompassing consumer environment of the shopping mall. The average teenager views about 3,000 advertisements a day, and will have seen more than 10 million by the time that he or she turns eighteen. Soft drink companies and fast food chains have used the budget crisis to infiltrate the public schools, part of the marketing philosophy that younger children are most susceptible to brand loyalty campaigns that will last a lifetime. MTV co-sponsors parties on college campuses with Sprite and other corporate brands that market an aesthetic of urban cool to a white suburban audience that has few opportunities to cross over into actual urban spaces except through mass culture. The shopping centers that operate on low-wage teenage labor are the most intensive landscapes of control, privately owned spaces where freedom of speech barely exists, where young people grow up as consumers in a mall instead of as citizens in a democracy.

**Woodstock '99—[SLIDE]. The Woodstock '99 music festival managed to combine the consumer atmosphere of a giant shopping mall with the nostalgic marketing of a romanticized

version of the Sixties—the culmination of turning the most famous rock concert in history into just another MTV-style brand. The promoters promised more than 200,000 fans a weekend of peace and music. More than one hundred bands played during the three-day event, and concessionaires charged exorbitant prices for pizza, sodas, and bottled water. On Saturday evening, the promoters scheduled several hard-core rap-rock fusion acts on top of one another, including Rage Against the Machine and Limp Bizkit. Rage Against the Machine is a very talented and overtly leftist group that plays political songs very critical of mainstream American culture, railing against imperialism and racism, and listing conformity and complacency as central elements of the American Dream. Limp Bizkit is a mediocre MTV-manufactured band that performs with a focus-group calculated mixture of anger and alienation [at least that's my opinion]. At the end of a long weekend, some of the fans began to riot, targeting the corporate booths that many believed had profited off of their captive youth audience.

[Video #2, Woodstock Riot, 2:25, *My Generation*]

**[WOODSTOCK SLIDE #1, SLIDE #2, SLIDE #3, SLIDE #4, SLIDE #5, SLIDE #6]. The fans even tore down the MTV camera tower. Zach de la Roca, the lead singer of Rage Against the Machine, told *Rolling Stone* that "Kids danced around just like they see in MTV videos, beating each other up and tearing each other's hair out, doing this stupid little ritual." One of the promoters told the media that Woodstock '99 had been a success because "no one got in for free," although he lamented that "commercial opportunities were not as exploited as they might have been." Few mainstream voices blamed the corporate sponsors of Woodstock '99 for the riots, the $4 bottles of water and corporate mentality that corrupted the original spirit of the counterculture, although this was the dominant interpretation on the websites and in the chat rooms of members of the audience. The mainstream media paid attention long enough to highlight the difference between the committed political activists of the 1960s, who really did seek peace and love, and the apathetic and alienated children of the 1990s, whose violence tarnished the memory and legacy of the Woodstock Nation.

**A typical response from the Sixties perspective came from Todd Gitlin, once the president of Students for a Democratic Society: "The teachers of my generation are more radical than their students, and the rock stars are more anti-establishment than their audiences. This is mind-boggling for a Sixties generation which believed youth had the privilege of vision."

Alienation

**Generation X. The theme of alienated youth reached its peak with the arrival of Generation X—my generation—which became caricatured as a post-Boomer demographic of slackers and drop-outs, refusing to grow up and get a good job. This media construction denied any political voice to young people who came of age during the triumphant conservatism of the Reagan years and the timid liberalism of the Clinton presidency. The mainstream media settled on the suicide of Kurt Cobain as the "defining event" of Generation X [SLIDE]—the young people who destroyed the idealism and optimism of the Baby Boomers as we came of age in the 1980s and early 1990s. Hollywood quickly followed with a spate of films that collectively served to depoliticize an entire generation of youth by portraying Gen Xers either as pathological criminals

or as aimless slackers and stoners—*Dazed and Confused*, *SubUrbia*, *Clerks*, *River's Edge*, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *Breakfast Club*, *Less than Zero*.

**These cultural images served to reinforce the War on Drugs that the Reagan administration launched against Generation X, and that the Clinton administration expanded in the 1990s, resulting in the extreme racial and class disparities of the American prison population. Wading through these images of pathology and dysfunction, it would be hard to guess that members of Generation X also helped turn the college campuses into an organizational base for the massive nuclear freeze movement of the mid-1980s [SLIDE], the successful divestment campaign that contributed to the fall of the apartheid government in South Africa during the late 1980s, and the anti-sweatshop protests against Nike and other corporations that exploit overseas labor that accelerated in the mid-1990s [SLIDE].

**Generational labels serve most effectively as lazy media stereotypes and as corporate marketing strategies. Reading through marketing literature, I get the feeling that the main reason for the widespread anxiety about Generation X is that we weren't very predictable consumers—too cynical, too skeptical, too suspicious of brands, too IRONIC. Like the Baby Boomers before them, the current so-called Millennial Generation is considered to be optimistic about the future, coming of age in a time of prosperity and limitless horizons, eager to embrace the rewards of the mass consumer culture. According to a recent story in *Business Week*, "marketers haven't been dealt an opportunity like this [the Millennial Generation] since the baby boom." Not too long ago, ABC News also reported that members of this Millennial Generation grew up accepting the zero tolerance policies for school violence, underage drinking, and drug use that Gen Xers resented and resisted.

**Columbine. I'm not so sure about that. The watershed moment for today's high school and college students came after the events of Columbine in the spring of 1999, when two teenagers shot and killed twelve of their fellow students, a teacher, and then themselves. Fifteen incidents of school shootings took place in American high schools during the late 1990s, mostly in white upper-middle-class suburbs considered safe havens from violence, culminating in the made-for-TV spectacle at Columbine. The exploitative media coverage, and the hysterical political debates that followed, completely obscured the fact that there was no statistical epidemic of school violence, that students are far safer at school than they are at home, and that maybe Columbine actually wasn't a window into the souls of a new youth generation.

***Newsweek* asked "How Could This Happen"? [SLIDE], and politicians of both parties quickly jumped on the bandwagon with their favorite explanations. President Bill Clinton blamed lax gun laws and mass media: "A changing culture that desensitizes our children to violence, where most teenagers have seen hundreds or even thousands of murders on television and in movies and in video games, . . . and weapons which . . . are all too easy to get." Newt Gingrich, the Republican leader of Congress, blamed liberalism, the 1960s, and the loss of faith in God. " We have had a 35-year experiment in a . . . secular assault on the core values of this country. . . the elite news media, liberal academic elite, the liberal political elite—I accuse you in Littleton of being afraid to talk about the mess you have made.. . . . Hollywood and computerized games have undermined the core values of civility."

** In a political culture that spent the entire decade celebrating the triumph of free-market capitalism, suddenly a broad consensus emerged that mass culture was to blame. The low point in the mass media coverage came with the *Newsweek* cover story on the "Secret Life of Teens"—which warned parents of all the trouble their children were getting into through unsupervised use of the internet, through playing violent video games, through their musical tastes. When an adult goes on a killing spree, American society doesn't usually place the blame on New Country Music, or look for answers by indicting an entire generation. But when two young men commit an exceptional act of violence, it somehow becomes an opportunity to create the seeds of panic about a wave of potential mass murderers, about the ticking time bombs that could destroy any placid suburban community.

**Zero Tolerance. Columbine accelerated the turn to zero tolerance policies that have been building in American high schools since the 1980s. The zero tolerance crackdown includes the random drug testing of students without probable cause, the surveillance systems now in place that have turned high schools into miniature police states, and the criminalization of behavior once considered a typical part of adolescence or a permissible form of political dissent. Last fall I asked the students in my suburbia course, many of whom were seniors in high school at the time of Columbine, to write an essay about their experiences in high school. This is a sampling of some of the more interesting replies:

**"High school is the ultimate Orwellian police state"

**"If you were outside of the norm you were a target of harassment"

**"Every day a parade of Abercrombie and Fitch and American Eagle"

**Cliques of jocks, brains, drama kids, freaks"

**"A culture where money dominated morals"

**"A social pressure cooker acting as a catalyst for rebellion"

**"Entering my high school was similar to entering a jail"

**"The most stiflingly conformist, insulated, boring, hysterical environment in history"

**"High school isn't a separate world, it's the gateway to society's problems"

**"Most of us thank God we are still alive"

**"The ideal wasn't to be smart, but to be popular"

**"An insulated world where irresponsibility and apathy dominate"

**"Machine that I was cycled in and out of"

**"You couldn't pay me enough to do it over again"

**"If high school is a model for suburbia I'm not going back"

**I asked some follow-up questions about Columbine specifically, and many students believed that the backlash after Columbine served to criminalize politically subversive behavior among youth in general. One student reported a widespread panic because of a rumor that anarchists across America were going to stage a mass murder on a particular day, which they were pretty sure was a "national conspiracy to prevent anyone under the age of 19 from having anything resembling fun." Another student sent me a newspaper story quoting him as saying that the challenge for high schools after Columbine was to "build a community where all people can express ideas and be themselves and not get ridiculed"—which strikes me as an amazing outbreak of reasonableness. And finally, another student related her verdict on the aftermath of Columbine: "Two young men fit well into a narrative that was being constructed about how the current generation of young people dissented in all the wrong ways. The fact that there is no distinction between real political dissent and angry violence depoliticizes my generation and curtails the ability for us to build a counter political and popular culture that can galvanize our peers."

Activism

**Think Global, Act Local. The cultural narrative that draws no distinction between real political dissent and angry violence became most evident in the coverage of the Seattle demonstrations that took place at the end of 1999. The broad-based grassroots mobilization against the agenda of the World Trade Organization built on more than a decade of activism on the campus left and in the labor, environmental, and consumer movements. This loose alliance can best be described not as anti-globalization, but as a multifaceted challenge to the power of multinational corporations in the New World Order of free-market globalization that has replaced the Cold War framework. Fair trade and workers' rights activists have refined the Seventies environmental motto "think global, act local," [SLIDE] and in many ways updated it in a new version of "think local, act global" [SLIDE].

**Building on the model of the anti-apartheid divestment campaign, the student left began to pressure university administrations to require codes of conduct by companies that profited from their brand names but exploited low-wage workers overseas, such as Nike in the sports apparel market. Both on and off campus, the new student left has joined with other activists in "living wage" campaigns and consumer boycotts of corporations such as Nike and the Gap, by exposing the dirty secrets behind the products sold in the malls and endorsed by the hip celebrities and dead Sixties icons. Here at the University of Michigan, the Students for Labor and Economic Equality has led the way in events ranging from the anti-sweatshop campaigns to the campus support for the recent Borders strikers. SOLE is a member of a national umbrella organization of more than 200 campus movements called the United Students Against Sweatshops. By the late 1990s, these living wage and workers' rights campaigns had forced most American corporations to adopt codes of conduct for out-sourced production, at least on paper, and pressured many reluctant university administrations to sign agreements to enforce labor standards. The political consciousness raised by the anti-sweatshop campaigns has led in many directions, including a

grassroots movement for a global living wage, and the fair trade protests that escalated with the 1999 "Battle in Seattle."

**Global Left. An umbrella organization called the Direct Action Network coordinated the protests in Seattle, especially by taking advantage of the internet to connect groups across the nation and around the world. The slogans of the Direct Action Network directly challenged the corporate agenda in the global economy: "People before Profits", "Planet before Profits," "Fair Trade not Free Trade." The media quickly dubbed this the anti-globalization movement, a description that is as misleading as it is widespread. The real showdown in Seattle was between the advocates of free trade without any barriers, bringing together international corporations and their political allies, and the advocates of fair trade agreements that include environmental protections and labor rights and preserve the autonomy of less wealthy nations. This is a legitimate political debate worth having in a democracy. But the simplistic caricature of the fair trade movement as the anti-globalization movement completely misses the deep alliances between progressive activists in the United States and their counterparts in Europe, in Central and South America, and around the world. The best description of the fair trade and workers' rights alliance that had its coming-out party in Seattle is the Global Left. If it is anti-anything, the global left is anti-corporate, in the sense that grassroots activists contest the free trade mantra that whatever is in the interests of the most powerful international corporations is also good for everyone else in the world.

[Video #3, Seattle/WTO, 2:28, *This Is What Democracy Looks Like*]

**The grassroots demonstrations in Seattle succeeded in changing the national conversation about free trade and fair trade. The protesters also discovered the same thing that the antiwar movement also discovered in the Sixties—the government will respond with violence when challenged directly by grassroots activism that seeks to stop the institutions of power. The police violence against the fair-trade movement has recurred at every major demonstration since Seattle, including the recent protests in Miami, and has been systematically underplayed by the national news media [this footage was shot by alternative media groups]. Coverage of the Battle in Seattle focused extensively on a very small number of protesters who smashed the windows of Starbucks, the Gap, and Niketown. Just as in the Sixties, this overemphasis on property destruction by a small group of dissidents served to discredit the much larger group of nonviolent demonstrators who offered a coherent political alternative to the gospel of free trade. The distortion of the fair trade movement as the anti-globalization movement could be seen in caricatures such as one that ran in *The New Republic* under the headline The New New Left: Bold, Fun, and Stupid—steelworkers who cared only about protecting their own jobs, college students flirting with rebellion out of boredom, dolphin lovers and tree-huggers who wanted to deny prosperity to the Third World. In the *New York Times*, influential free-trade liberals such as Thomas Friedman and Nicholas Kristof have repeatedly charged the fair trade movement with a politics of selfishness by wanting to hurt poor workers in poor countries, denying them the chance to work for a dollar a day in a multinational factory.

**I asked a student who has been active in SOLE and United Students Against Sweatshops, and who has traveled to Guatemala for workshop training with poor women who are trying to start a labor union, what she thought about these criticisms.

"I think the most common media tactic simplifies the discussion into sound bytes, turning the anti-sweatshop activists into anti-globalization protectionists, which in media logic will therefore hurt workers in developing countries. Of course this really isn't true; I would say that most anti-sweatshop kids that I worked with are way more opposed to capitalism and neo-liberal economic/political policies than the concept of globalization itself. It's really important to remember that SOLE/USAS will never run a boycott of a corporation when we haven't been asked to first by the workers. The media/corporate agenda tries to simplify the argument in order to shut us down, dumb us down, and delegitimatize our voice as youth who really are pretty smart when we put our minds to it."

**Hipublicans vs. Deaniacs. Many activists in the fair-trade movement supported Ralph Nader in the 2000 election, and as a result they have been widely blamed by liberal Democrats for the defeat of Al Gore. The Republicans and the Democrats seem to have very different philosophies about the political power of youth, which parallels the portrayals of student activists in the national media. Last year, the *New York Times Magazine* ran a long feature on the "Hipublicans"—a new generation of right-wing campus activists in training to take over the country, with substantial support from the interest groups of the conservative movement. More than anything else, the news media and the Republican party take these young conservatives seriously as political actors with genuine ideas, which is exactly as it should be.

**Last December, the *New York Times Magazine* also ran an article about the swarm of young people who were volunteering for the Howard Dean campaign and playing key roles in his internet-savvy operation. But the article presented these young activists as aimless twenty-somethings, drifting college dropouts, lonely guys hunting for girlfriends—as people volunteering for Dean as some sort of exercise in personal therapy. The tagline on the cover read: "To be young, at loose ends, and searching for a cause—or anyway, looking to connect with some cool friends." In the Iowa primary, a conservative organization ran advertisements against Dean that ended with an elderly couple saying: "I think Howard Dean should take his tax-hiking, government-expanding, latte-drinking, sushi-eating, Volvo-driving, New York Times-reading, body-piercing, Hollywood-loving, left-wing freak show back to Vermont - where it belongs" (Club for Growth).

**Democratic leaders and the *New York Times* have repeatedly used the phrase "latte-sipping left" to describe Dean supporters [as if there are no latte-sippers in the Starbucks of every Republican suburb in America]. Howard Dean may well become a footnote in the history books, but whether or not Dean wins the nomination is less important than the broader message that mainstream liberals seem to be sending—grassroots reform movements are not welcome, progressive young activists are not really wanted in the political arena, and they should go back to hugging trees or piercing their navels or whatever else they would really rather be doing.

**About 1.2 million first-year students enter college every year, representing a massive potential base for political organization. According to the American Freshmen Survey conducted annually

by UCLA, about 20 percent of current first-year students consider themselves conservative and about 30 percent label themselves as liberal—the highest degree of on-campus liberalism since the Vietnam Era. In the 2002 survey, almost half of the respondents reported that they had participated in a political demonstration in the past year. At the same time, almost three-fourths of college freshmen express the goal to "become well-off financially", while only half as many say that they want to "develop a meaningful philosophy of life." Based on the constant messages of American culture, the constant pressure to define your identity through consumerism and material values, should it really be any surprise that a majority of 18-year-olds express these values and goals? Critics might argue that this justifies the depoliticization of youth, but to me it seems like a golden opportunity—there are still almost four years left to reverse these priorities.

**When I took my first college job in 1999, the economic boom was still going strong and the internet bubble had not yet collapsed. My very best students from history classes were taking high-paying corporate jobs, making more money than a 22-year-old really knows what to do with. Now the job market facing college graduates is reported to be the worst since the 1970s, and maybe even since the 1930s. This may seem like counterintuitive advice, but I think that the bad job market can be an opportunity in disguise, and in political terms could even be the best thing that is happening to youth today. Who wants to be in their early 20s and have their whole life planned out? If you think that your future is secured, and that everything will work out just fine, that security and contentment is what ought to scare you to death.

**Sometimes I think that small groups of young people today should be writing their own Port Huron Statements, and then hope that history rolls over them as it did during the Vietnam years. But then I realize that achieving genuine democracy—participatory democracy—requires political mobilization from the grassroots and political organization on the campuses.

**Today as in the early 1960s, the belief that history has ended is a myth. The message that there are no alternatives is a lie. The growing recognition of these basic truths is one of the most hopeful developments that I can see today, from the campuses to the nation and to the world. We all still have the ability to choose to be citizens in a democracy instead of consumers in a mall.

Resources

In addition to the various students from History of American Suburbia cited in this talk, I would like to thank four students in particular who helped me think through these issues and from whom I quoted directly: Jackie Bray, Emily Squires, Jess Piskor, and Heather Radke.

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