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The Swiss Observer

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WHAT MAKES THE DISSENTER TICK?

Members turned up in exceptional numbers at the last NSH meeting to hear Dr. R. Schneebeli, director of the "Volkschule" in Zurich, talk on the particularly hot subject of student unrest in an affluent society.

Dr. Schneebeli began by telling us that he was not a sociologist and that he could not base his lecture on any statistical data, charts and questionnaires, but only on his personal experience with students.

He noted that present student restlessness was a universal phenomenon. It could be witnessed in Europe, America, Japan and the developing countries of Asia and Africa. Moreover, this movement was not only confined to the free world, but could be traced in Communist countries.

The student revolution is primarily due to a minority of students more sensitive than others to the contradictions of present-day realities. Their credo can be found in the writings of Marx, Mao Tse Tung and Marcuse. What is surprising, although hardly a coincidence given the means of communications of today, is that this explosion of dissent should take place so suddenly all over the world.

Two kinds of criticism

What the students are now doing on their campus and in the streets is to *criticise*. To criticise, says Dr. Schneebeli, is an entirely normal and wholesome attitude. Students wouldn't be worthy of their name if they were not basically critical since this involves a constant questioning and awareness of society. What is condemnable is the systematic repudiation by discontented students of all that society has stood for just because it doesn't accord with their drives or doesn't suit their book. The situation becomes potentially dangerous when this kind of criticism spreads out to the bulk of students and assumes the proportions of a mass hysteria.

The positive and negative aspects of dissent

In the same vein, students often fail to distinguish between *authority* and *authorities*. It is perfectly legitimate

to be critical towards those in authority and to question the responsibilities and eventual injustices of their charge. This fits within a general review of society. It is quite another matter to reject outright the concept of authority since this Society cannot exist without authority and without men holding authority over others. Some students consciously strike against authority itself in their romp with the police, who are the representatives of authority.

Some students also like to hit at tradition. Political, cultural, religious and moral traditions. There again, it is a sane exercise to question the relevance of the rigid traditions that outlasted the period in which they were introduced. But many traditions serve a deeply human purpose and have passed the test of time. It is wrong to overthrow them on the grounds that they are old. They still work very well. Openness to change should be welcome but change for its own sake could not be considered as a viable philosophy.

The same can be said of culture. There is a tendency to despise older forms of cultures on the grounds that they are not spontaneous. Pop and op art, free and formless modes of expression are opposed to the older kinds of middle-class pleasures. The aesthetic judgement of some students is distorted by their smouldering conceptions of reality.

Violence

Dissenting students hate bourgeois conformism but are themselves unaware of the conformity of their views and reactions. They hallow Marx, Mao and Marcuse because, quite apart from the merit of these writers, this is the socially done thing. This kind of conformism can bring them to intellectual one-sidedness and to a lack of openness to other schools of thought.

Lastly, there is the violence, which has now made its appearance in the university. It means a justification as an ultimate means of reaching a goal. Violence for its own sake, violence as a psychological catharsis just cannot be condoned because it means the death of peaceful society.

Having thus described the main lines of student action and pointed to their positive and negative aspects, Dr. Schneebeli went on to describe the kind of society in which we live and which underlies the present strife in the University.

Our clockwork society

We live in an industrial society, which means that our chief concern is to produce, sell and consume. To produce more and better can best be achieved by rationalising the production apparatus. This involves the creation of giant companies wielding subtle and pernicious powers. In order to produce as well or better than the next conglomerate, it is necessary for the human and non-human producing units of these companies to be *efficient*. The individual worker has to be as streamlined as the latest machine and his use to society is measured in terms of efficiency. But a company must sell in order to produce. It does so by analysing the market for its production and by finding out which artificial need can most appropriately and expeditiously be created to increase demand. In this way every consumer is submitted to a constant pressure by the "hidden persuaders". But this is a two-way process. The consumer is a producer as well, and, by being himself interested in promoting his standard of living, will try to influence fellow consumers by making his production as appealing as possible. Thus everybody is both pressurising and being pressurised by everybody else. But the whole system can only retain a moving equilibrium if it is properly organised. This organisation is very complex. Every part of our gigantic machine must play a specific but vital role. The machine couldn't be kept running otherwise. Dr. Schneebeli gave a fitting illustration in mentioning the Royal Navy's practice of weeding out the recruits *who would not fit in*. Life on a ship is difficult: it is crowded, it is isolated and it is charged with responsibility. A sailor whose temperament could not be attuned to this reality could not be kept for the safety of the ship. Our society, with its immensely complex organisation functionally aimed at maximising production has likewise its misfits, people unable to conform to the rigid discipline of being a component of the machine.

The frustration of youth

Dr. Schneebeli then described the world as the dissenting student saw it.

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To begin with, a student is still an adolescent, that is, at an age when one is still insecure. Instead of finding security around him, he sees that his distressed parents have no sincere belief in anything and no clear notion of what they are striving for. The student is also at an age where the urge for self-assertion is the strongest. But he knocks against an overcrowded society in which everybody is struggling for a place in the sun. He studies in order to find a niche in a cogwheel civilisation run by big corporations on the sacrosanct criterias of efficiency and productivity. He's still young enough to have some idealism, but finds a world where everybody is hell-bent on making money, a world soiled by pollution and indiscriminately exhausted of its natural resources, a world where non-profit ventures such as building better schools and assisting poorer countries have been neglected. To this must be added the loosening of parental ties, the heightening of his lusts through the capitalistic pleasure-seeking principle, both of which have tempted him to make unreal claims on life. The present psychological climate has not educated him to restraint but, quite the contrary, it has favoured his licentiousness and indiscipline.

Dr. Schneebeli maintained that the elder generations grew up in a far more stable and oriented world than the present one. The problems of today were unknown to them. All this has prompted a growing minority of radical students to overreact and reject the whole system, to throw away antiquated morals, money-making, authority in the universities and elsewhere, and capitalism.

Steps which can henceforth be taken

After having thus masterfully explained the heart of the matter Dr. Schneebeli outlined the steps which

could be undertaken within the limited but important province of the university.

There were no real objections to a common agreement between professors and students on the curriculum. This, said Dr. Schneebeli, had actually been practised in his own student days. Secondly, students could well be given a say in the running of their universities. Mentioning the case of Mainz university, Dr. Schneebeli said that it had never been run more smoothly than since the days students had been allowed to sit at the Senate. Switzerland was adapting to the times and new legislation will be providing students with a seat in the council of their universities (but not with the right to elect their professors). There was always a very practical limit to the students' administrative involvement which was, as militants soon discovered, that running a university cost a lot of time.

Dr. Schneebeli believes that a rector should avoid trials of strength with his students. It is far wiser for him to listen to their grievances and ask them for concrete proposals. But however good-willed the elder generation may be towards students, they could not push conciliation as far as to tolerate violence on their part. Violence had attained its end if it had clearly expressed a minority complaint for all to see. Further than that, a rector was entirely justified in calling the police when an unruly mob had invaded his office, even though this may be a breach of the university immunity proclaimed by demonstrators.

The solution to the problems of today and tomorrow should be sought in common. It is right to listen to students but it is wrong for mature men to say "yes" to every decision by students on issues which they themselves spent a lifetime to solve. An 18-year-old youth cannot by himself give the answers which have eluded the generations before him.

Question time

This is where Dr. Schneebeli ended his speech. As one can deduce from this incomplete report, he demonstrated a deep understanding of the problem, an understanding which forbade him to support one camp or the other. Dr. Schneebeli quite visibly liked and understood youth but was also not prepared to follow the dissenter further than the point at which the fundamental laws of humans and society began to be violated.

The interest which this conference aroused was reflected by the number of questions put forward by the audience. Among the points raised were the alleged violence of police on peaceful demonstrators, the psychological background of the dissenter, the excessive freedom of modern youth and the stifling of individuality by our present society. (PMB)

WELCOME TO A NEWCOMER

Swiss Observer subscribers may be surprised—pleasantly surprised, we trust—to find a supplement in the copy today, which is bound to attract considerable attention and also to still further enrich the reading matter regularly made available in our publication.

The new "Review of Swiss Trade", of which we enclose the first issue now, is a quarterly bulletin published under the auspices of Swiss Trade Promotion.

It is intended to send it out regularly to all Swiss Observer subscribers who, it is thought, will warmly welcome this new venture as a means of still further strengthening the many existing economic ties between Great Britain and Switzerland.

We of the Swiss Observer who can now look back on 50 years of uninterrupted existence and development of our organ, gladly take this opportunity of the very first appearance of the "Review of Swiss Trade" to extend to it our good wishes for a truly successful career. (GK)

COMMENT

THE CONGRESS OF THE SWISS OF FRANCE

The *Union des Suisses de France* has just held its third Congress in Lyons. The preoccupations of our compatriots in France obviously concerns us since we too, Swiss of Great Britain, belong to Fifth Switzerland.

The attendants at Lyons discussed four main topics: The Solidarity Fund of the Swiss Abroad, the implementation of the new Constitutional article on the Swiss abroad, the problems of keeping the Swiss abroad informed of events in Switzerland and vice-versa and the Schwarzenbach initiative.

Concerning the Solidarity Fund, the Congress was told that this Fund had in the past served an immensely useful purpose in helping out distressed Swiss in war-torn countries. It had gradually repaid an important loan contracted with the Confederation and was presently gaining in members. Many of the participants found that the new constitutional article which had been awarded to them (article 45-bis: it paves the way for closer ties between the motherland and the Swiss across the world, eventually to allow them to partake in the political life of their country) changed little in their lives. The feeling was that Berne was slow in getting the practical measures substantiating the new article under way. Concerning the problem of a centralised Press for fifth Switzerland, the Congress learnt that a special commission had made a thorough inquiry into