



Rebels with a Cause. Helen Garvy.

Reviewed by Jesse Lemisch

Published on H-Labor (March, 2001)

Students For a Democratic Society, Heroically Portrayed, Before the Inexplicable Fall: Consensus History in a Left Film

As the winds blew outside the Screening Room in Tribeca on a Friday night in November, just after Election Day, more and more familiar faces walked south across Canal Street to join the line outside the US theatrical premiere of Helen Garvy's new film, *Rebels with a Cause*, a documentary about the sixties activist organization, Students for a Democratic Society. As is the custom of my people, I had arrived much earlier than was necessary, but this gave me a good chance to see the gathering crowd. On the line, and then inside, were some not-so-familiar faces that my brain had to process for a while to get back to the originals, as well as many immediately familiar New Left faces: Ros Baxandall, Steve Max, Paul Lauter, Marilyn Salzman Webb, Carl Oglesby, Cathy Wilkerson, Joan Wallach Scott, and a theatre-full of others. (Some of these people, talking heads in the film, were to join director Garvy for a Q and A, standing in front of the screen, after the film.) Conversations before the showing, even a kind of left networking, seemed to convey nicely the message that the fellow SDSers who had come had stuck with it, in one way or another. Now they were asking each other for data about treatment of patients in emergency rooms, and about witnesses in police brutality cases, talking about the Nader campaign, demonstrations against the Electoral College, the approaching re-issue of the Chicago Womens Liberation Rock Bands original 1972 record, the yogurt cultures growing in containers on their window sills, and so forth. Aside from myself, people looked pretty good, sometimes stylish, sometimes in the recognizable uniforms of the sixties. It seemed the beginning of a fine evening. But the film itself, while often mov-

ing and evocative to a participant in the events it describes, with good (although sometimes superficial) interviews and impressive contemporary clips, turned out to be stunningly uncritical and self-congratulatory, and thus at odds with much that the SDS I knew stood for (I was a member of the University of Chicago Chapter). The film rehearses the by now familiar plodding, mainstream narrative beyond which younger historians of the left have been moving. "This is our story," says Garvy in voice-over at the beginning. Whose story? What follows this announcement is consensus history, with most of the conflicts and important disagreements wiped out. Half of the interviewees (and Garvy as well) had been SDS national officers, or had worked in the National Office the film continues the top-down, N.O. focus on leaders that younger historians have been criticizing. And the list of interviewees is not at all strong on dissenters within SDS. The film is just short of being the voice of what might be seen as a faction in SDS, whose sometime intolerance of dissent within the organization is repeated by the film (at one showing, a critical questioner was shouted down by the audience). Except for brief and misleading attention to sexism in SDS (more below), the history of SDS is presented Whiggishly as a story of ascent and progress until, inexplicably and without prior sign or symptom, Weatherman comes along in 1969, with its Days of Rage and its bombs, and SDS goes under. The Weather Underground, the film says, was bad; but it couldn't have been all bad, since the talking heads include Weather vets Bernardine Dohrn and Bill Ayers, who are now shown saying intelligent things (as are so many others in the film, engaged in genuinely good works today). Huh? Its not clear

whether the film thinks of Weather as continuous with SDS, or at odds with it. No matter. The film then jumps discreetly over a couple of bad years to 1975: the war is over, the left has triumphed, and SDS, it seems, is responsible. The film ends with a crescendo of bites from the various talking heads, commending SDS. (Another SDS project, ERAP [Economic Research and Action Project], is vaunted, without any attention to its failure.) <p> SDS did grow, and it was a very important part of the sixties left. But, in this story of growth and ascent, what went wrong with SDS, and how is its decline and collapse explained? Government repression, particularly COINTELPRO, is examined, as is the grim nearly fatal physical attack on University of Chicago sociology professor Dick Flacks in his office in May of 1969. FOIA documents leave us with no room for doubt of one interviewee's statement that our paranoia was actually far less than was justified there was indeed a coordinated national campaign against us by the FBI and other organizations. (And, in a marvelous anecdote, Mike Spiegel—today a lawyer working in police brutality and death penalty cases—tells of phoning his mother, back in Portland, Oregon, from the SDS National Office in Chicago during the uprising after the April 1968 death of Martin Luther King, reassuring her that everything is OK, while, outside the window, a tank's turret rotates and points its barrel towards him.) <p> But when external repression is invoked as explanation without attention to mistakes that we ourselves may have made, the result is apologia. When I said to a historian friend seated near me that the film was like an upbeat and triumphalist account coming out of the Communist Party/Popular Front, with the internal problems left out, she nodded vigorously and told of numerous disputes with her Communist father: she points out CP mistakes, and he blames the FBI. (I'm a Red Diaper Baby myself, and know this pattern pretty well.) This film, by and about the New Left, paradoxically imposes on its own history some of the hoary interpretive themes of the Old Left. <p> Again: Amidst so much that was right, what went wrong with SDS? Talk as we might about hardy souls like myself who have stuck with the cause, the truth is that the collapse of SDS was a catastrophe for the left, driving a significant part of that generation out of politics. It cries out for explanation. Although I disagree with the interpretations, in their own way sectarian, offered in talking head Todd Gitlin's <cite>The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage</cite> (1987)—heroic moderate founders, like himself, are cast aside by zany flamers who lose touch with political reality—his argumentative book has the virtue of presenting conflict about goals and strategies within SDS from the earliest times. Indeed, af-

ter the film, talking head Cathy Wilkerson (at one time editor of SDS's New Left Notes) spoke movingly of the importance of the disputes within SDS: you argued, and you figured things out. But in her response to the criticisms I voiced during the Q and A, Garvy (and others) couldn't see any distinction between sectarian wars on the one hand, and, on the other, the important ongoing disagreements within the organization, in effect saying that to portray disagreements would give too much attention to sectarian dispute. The film offers a consensus interpretation, ignoring most of the fruitful disagreements. It leaves us with the notion that SDS was pushed to its death, but excludes the possibility that it might have, at least in part, jumped to its death. The process of dying may have begun before the Weather troubles of 1969. Were there no problems or disagreements, in this admittedly tremendously significant organization, before 1969? <p> In addition to these large political questions, there are important questions about internal governance and social relations in an organization supposedly devoted to participatory democracy. Jo Freeman's important work on *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*, written in and about the early women's movement, may well have applied to SDS as well. What about the heavies who were deferred to amidst the pretense of non-hierarchy? How were disputes resolved? Was there truly participatory democracy? These are all questions of direct relevance to today's emerging new New Left (see Jesse Lemisch, <cite>A Movement Begins: The Washington Protests Against IMF/World Bank, New Politics</cite>, Summer 2000, available at www.wpunj.edu/~newpol). Easy talk about the value of showing young people an upbeat account of the sixties ignores the fact that we leave them poorly equipped for reality if we give them a rosy picture that glosses over the things that went wrong, amidst the incontestably good things, last time. <p> And what about women in SDS? Talking head Vivian Leburg Rothstein has written powerfully of sexual exploitation in the communes (<cite>The Magnolia Street Commune</cite>, Boston Review, 1999: available at www.bostonreview.mit.edu). In its one partial departure from consensus history, the film can't avoid the early and increasing dissatisfaction of some (not all) SDS women with the often grotesque sexism in the organization. It goes on to portray the women's movement as arising from SDS, and somehow credits SDS for this, which is a little like saying that the Democratic Party should be credited for giving birth to the anti-war movement of the sixties, or to the Nader campaign of 2000 (or that Catholicism should be praised for having given birth to Protestantism). Women's rebellion within SDS did indeed play

an important role, along with others, in the early womens movement. But to place this movement for fundamental change in the ledger book of SDSs accomplishments is preposterous. (For the origins of the Women's Liberation Movement, see, among others, Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Snitow, eds., *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Womens Liberation*, 1996; Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*, 2000; Susan Brownmiller, *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution*, 1999). Strangely, talking head Marilyn Salzman Webb thought that the film had underestimated the importance of SDS in producing the women's liberation movement. (Happily, the film makes no similar claims for SDS as the fountainhead of gay liberation). And where is truth in all this? The stakes are high here: can the left be believed when it tells its own story? In the most telling comment from the talking heads after the film, Steve Max (a long-time political organizer) alluded to Winston Churchill's response to criticisms of the inaccuracy of his writing about the British Empire: if it wasn't that way, Max approvingly recalls Churchill saying, it should have been. Some of the audience applauded. I gasped, both at Max and at his applauding audience. So, putting aside post-structuralist doubts about reality, truth and causality (which essentially conservative doubts are in increasing disrepute as a movement reborn brings us back to reality), what becomes of truth if the-way-it-should-have-been is just as good as the way it really was? In response to this criticism, Garvy said she had only two hours (two hours!), and had to decide what audience to address. This is an ominous remark. Can we, who lived this movie, face up to the truths of our experience? Should young people today, birthing a new movement, be sat down and presented with a history that misrepresents an earlier movement, albeit an important one? Is there one truth for one audience, and a different truth for another? Shall we keep our errors to ourselves? (To me, this is reminiscent of the remark by one Cold War president of the American Historical Association that not everything which takes place in the laboratory is appropriate for broadcasting at street corners [Lemisch, *On Active Service in War and Peace: Politics and Ideology in the American Historical Profession* (1975), p. 73]). Shall we present those who come after with a fictitious paradise, leaving them to be surprised and even to feel betrayed when reality bites? Is this the CP, all over again? I find nothing objectionable, and much that is true, in what most individual talking heads in this film say. The question is how the film as a whole is put together: what's in it, and

what isn't. Even with her two hours, Garvy says you can't build conflict into a documentary. (I have heard this argument offered for years in connection with left films shorter than this one, and am beginning to wonder just how much time would be enough to invalidate this excuse. Would four hours be long enough to include some dissent?) This is silly: of course you can recount conflict, and in ways that are not only informative but that are also cinematically exciting. You can, among other things, film people arguing, and you can even do so without taking up any more time. Hey, what happened to the famous dialectic? *Arguing the World* (1997), which doesn't show Irving Kristol, Irving Howe, Daniel Bell and Nathan Glazer in direct argument, nonetheless reproduces some of the disagreements among that particular set of leftists/former leftists. My plea for building conflict into film is not a mere academicism: from the classic *Rashomon* (1950), to *Land and Freedom* (1994), even to *True Crime* (1999) all shorter than Garvys film we have ample evidence that conflicting interpretations of reality can be cinematically thrilling. (What an irony that Clint Eastwood does this better in *True Crime* than does this left film!) We need more than the old-time agitprop, now in glorious color, but nonetheless still just talking heads and Ken Burns-style klutzily untouched by a flourishing film avant garde, with such brilliantly imaginative films as David Gordon Green's *George Washington* and Richard Fung's *Sea in the Blood* (2000) on display in New York at the same time. Garvy has been making films for twenty years, but seems out of touch with newer developments. If the left is indeed still alive, it should be working towards edgier film-making, not this stodgy stuff. And we need to be able to say to people that we were and remain honest about our failings as well as our strengths. There is no reason for the American people to listen to the left unless we can be trusted to tell the truth. I was active in University of Chicago SDS 1963 (64?)-68, at which point I was fired from my job as assistant professor in the History Department and the College. U of C SDS leaders like Steve Kindred and Christopher Z. Hobson were enormously self-critical, anguishing over the chapters relation to students: were we with them, too far ahead of them, what were we doing wrong? Why did the latest sit-in fail? It is this self-critical spirit in SDS (now confirmed by such emerging scholarship as John McMillian's "Love Letters to the Future: REP, Radical America, and New Left History," *Radical History Review*, spring 2000) that

rescues it from the liberal/conservative imposition of cartoon stereotypes of our alleged anti-intellectualism. But none of this extraordinarily self-critical spirit appears in this film. <p> In 1986 I wrote of left film and documentary ("Pop Front Culture: I Dreamed I Saw MTV Last Night," <cite>The Nation</cite>, 10/18/86), The dominant esthetic of this genre, which we might call first-person heroic, became the documentary style of the New Left, but has its origin in the aesthetic of the left of the 1930s... The style strongly expressed the idea that the testimony of those who participated in great events is the truth, needing no comment or analysis. I criticized such left documentaries descended from that aesthetic as

<cite>Seeing Red</cite>, <cite>Union Maids</cite>, and <cite>The Good Fight</cite>: "History is complicated; people disagree... [In these films] there is little sense of the complexity of the past and little confrontation between conflicting views." This caused such a ruckus that it led to a second <cite>Nation</cite> article, "The Politics of Left Culture," 12/30/86, in which I said, "If we on the left expect the American people to trust us, we have to tell the truth... We have a duty to go beyond one-sided celebration." I'm sure there are examples of such attempts in the years since, but <cite>Rebels with a Cause</cite> isn't one of them. <p>

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-labor>

Citation: Jesse Lemisch. Review of , *Rebels with a Cause*. H-Labor, H-Net Reviews. March, 2001.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=15072>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.