

Student Power: Democracy and Revolution in the Sixties

Hans G. Schuetze

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BOOK REVIEW

STUDENT POWER: DEMOCRACY AND REVOLUTION IN THE SIXTIES

REVIEWED BY

HANS G. SCHUETZE
UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Licata, N. (2021). *Student Power: Democracy and Revolution in the Sixties*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Pages: 212. Price: CDN 128.50 (hardcover), CAD 9.99 (Kindle e-book).

This book is the author's autobiography as an undergraduate student at a small conservative university in rural Ohio, Bowling Green State University. The account is interesting for two reasons. The years covered in this personal account are 1965 to 1969, a period when America underwent big changes both politically and culturally. These were years of great upheavals, unrest and change. The war in Vietnam and the fights of conservatives in the old confederate South against the civil rights movement, the reaction to the assassinations of the black civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. and of Senator Robert Kennedy in the spring of 1968, and the tumultuous Democratic Party National Convention in Chicago in the summer of the same year were some of the major events that caused massive protests and actions by students at many U.S. universities. At the same time, student protests took place in many other countries and for other particular causes, such as the uprising of French students in May of 1968, which almost toppled the conservative government led by President Charles de Gaulle, or the massive student protests and their bloody suppression in Mexico at the time of the opening of the summer Olympics in October of the same year.

Bowling Green, Ohio, located in the conservative heartlands of middle America, is far away from the places in the United States where student protests were most visible—for example, Berkeley (the University of California) or New York (Columbia University). Bowling Green State University was mainly attended by students from the surrounding region who had grown up in conservative families and shared their values and lifestyle; they grew up with and assimilated the

conservative views of school teachers, local officials, and the local and regional press.

The author, Nick Licata, was no exception. However, on entering the university he soon realized that at Bowling Green State University, although there was some nominal student participation, a great discrepancy existed between student needs and expectations on the one hand, and university administrative rule on the other, and that student activism was needed to change that. So, finding his own voice and, together with fellow students, trying to change the status quo was the first step in trying to change some archaic rules of campus life as they applied to undergraduate students. From there, he and some of his fellow students took a broader interest in the issues of the time—especially the Vietnam war, civil rights, and free speech—and engaged in various groups and activities to make student voices heard.

This account of the author's political awakening and actions is structured into 40 short chapters, small vignettes that describe, step by step, the small-town university and the development of both the students' activism and engagement and his own role in it. The chapters cover not just the roots and local causes of the emergent "student power" at Bowling Green State University, but also the larger context and political and cultural themes of the time. The headings of the chapters show the breadth of the landscape the author is portraying, reaching from "Finding my voice," "Challenging the status quo," and "The rise of the student movement" to "Beer and sex on campus" and "The Woodstock nation."

Not all the chapters seem of equal importance, with

some describing issue of mostly local interest. However, they are nonetheless useful pieces in the big picture of how a small-town conservative college was affected by the influence of the larger issues, especially the anti-Vietnam war movement, and how the activism of the author and his friends and fellow students was changing the administrative and cultural environment.

Although this publication is a case study of just one student at a small university, it reflects the general situation of the students in the United States in the second half of the 1960s and the specific changes that his generation brought about, not just to a particular university, but to the entire country. While this case study approach involves a certain amount of minutiae and detail, it provides a very concrete background to the changes that were taking place due to student activism and engagement.

Although this book is a first-person account, almost written like a personal diary, it provides a larger and lively picture of the situation and of the role of students at the time when young people became politically aware and actively engaged. It not only benefits from the insight and personal development of the author, it is also written with humor and a lightness of style that makes it very readable. It is descriptive of a particular epoch and as such it is of historical value, but it also shows the need for imagination, persistence, and effective action to organize students' voices and actions.

This book is highly recommended for everyone interested in the history of student protest and engagement in the 1960s, primarily in the United States but also in other Western, democratic countries that experienced student activism. The situation was very different in the former Warsaw Pact countries, as the example of the "Prague Spring" demonstrates, where peaceful student protests were crushed by Soviet tanks (Schuetze, 2019). However, it is also more than a historical case study of conditions and developments at American higher education institutions some 50 years ago—it is kind of a how-to handbook for initiating and bringing about organizational change in academic institutions.

References

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