

SUMMARIZING THE MAIN IDEA: I

MLA format for bibliographic entry:

Cohen, Robert. *When the Old Left Was Young: Student Radicals and America's First Mass Student Movement, 1929-1941*. New York: Oxford U P, 1993.

APA format for bibliographic entry:

Cohen, R. (1993). *When the Old Left Was Young: Student Radicals and America's First Mass Student Movement, 1929-1941*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Passage I. "Introduction," pages xiii-xiv

The student rebels of the Depression era rank among the most effective radical organizers in the history of American student politics. They built a large and influential student protest movement, organized America's first national student strikes, and shaped political discourse on campus for the better part of a decade. No college generation before them and only the New Left insurgents of the 1960s after them ever had as much impact on student politics in twentieth-century America .

The American student movement of the 1930s emerged as students groped for solutions to the double barreled crisis which confronted their generation: the Great Depression and the growing rift in international relations that ultimately led to World War II. In contrast to the mass youth movements of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, the American student movement did not exploit the crises of the Depression decade to appeal to the worst instincts of the young. National chauvinism, racism, and militarism—hallmarks of these European movements of the Right—were anathema to the leftist organizers who launched and led the American student movement. Student activists in the United States used the crisis atmosphere of their time for much more humane ends, fanning their classmates' egalitarian idealism and revulsion for war and fascism. The American student movement proved attractive to many young men and women because, as political scientist and former 1930s student activist John P. Roche recalled, it offered them the opportunity to transform the (p. xiv) United States from a nation sunk in poverty and depression, racked by racial and religious discrimination and seemingly on 'The Road to War' ... to a society governed by the principles of economic and political justice and human equality, living in a peaceful world."¹

Passage II. "Introduction," page xiv

No protest movement in Depression America was more unexpected than the student movement, nor more symbolic of the transformation from the reactionary politics of the 1920s to the progressive politics of the 1930s. In the decade preceding the Great Depression, college students had represented one of America's most staunchly Republican constituencies. Student culture in that prosperous decade had been elitist and WASP-dominated; its championship of selfish materialism calls to mind the YUPPIE culture of the Reagan era, with its "Don't Trust Anyone Under \$30,000" mentality. The student movement of the 1930s—led by a diverse coalition of communists, socialists, liberals, pacifists, and Trotskyists—worked along with the Depression itself to challenge the bourgeois collegiate culture inherited from the 1920s. The movement encouraged students to identify with the working class rather

¹ John P. Roche, *Shadow and Substance: Essays on the Theory and Structure of Power* (New York, 1964), 436. From the outset radical student activists in Depression America expressed disdain for Europe's fascist youth movements. Indeed, one of the justifications these radicals used for organizing students in the U.S. was to preempt any possible rightist youth movement here (*Hunter Bulletin*, March 27, 1933; Theodore Draper, "American Youth Rejects Fascism," *New Masses* (Aug. 23, 1934), 11-13; *Columbia Spectator*, May 7, 1934; "Should the American Student Go the Way of the German? A Student Conference Against Fascism," leaflet, N.Y., May 1934, JPL).

than the upper class, to value racial and ethnic diversity instead of exclusivity, and to work for progressive social change. This activism helped to ensure that by 1936 Republican dominance of national student politics had gone the way of the raccoon coat and the other relics of the 1920s campus world.

Along with the labor movement and other progressive insurgencies of Depression America, the student movement contributed to the formation of a national consensus on behalf of a more activist and humane federal government and a more caring society. The student movement helped introduce and popularize the idea that poverty should not force any Americans to drop out of school, and that Washington should ensure this by providing direct federal aid to students. Often the movement's vision for governmental assistance to the underprivileged went well beyond the New Deal, as when the students called for federal dollars to aid all needy youths—rather than the small percentage actually receiving aid from New Deal agencies. Nonetheless, the generous idealism which motivated such demands attracted Eleanor Roosevelt, the New Deal's most forceful advocate for youth, and led her to befriend and cooperate with the movement's leaders. Mrs. Roosevelt sensed that whether these young activists attacked the New Deal for doing too little for youth or rallied to save the New Deal youth programs from right wing budget-cutters, the students were kindred spirits because they shared her desire for an unprecedented federal effort to rescue the Depression's young victims.

Passage III: "Introduction," pages xiv-xv

Unlike the other movements for social change in Depression America, the student movement devoted as much attention to foreign policy as to domestic issues. Students grappled with isolationism more intensively and visibly than any other group in Depression America, knowing that their generation would be called to fight the next war. The movement's largest national demonstrations were anti-war and anti-fascist strikes aimed at staving off world war. Some of the movement's most dedicated activists (page xv) not only marched for this cause, but died for it on the battlefields of Spain; fighting valiantly but futilely to stop the spread of fascism before it engulfed all of Europe.

Although international crises drew their attention overseas, the student rebels of the Depression generation also devoted considerable energy to battling for change in their own backyard: within the college gates. Recognizing that suppression of student dissent could jeopardize the entire student movement, these activists sought to advance the cause of free speech on campus. Scholars examining the history of academic freedom in this era have tended to focus upon the faculty.² But, in fact, students waged the largest and most effective struggles for political liberty on campus in Depression America.

The student movement championed a concept of student political rights much more expansive and modern than that held by many university administrators during the early 1930s. College presidents and deans clung to (*in loco parentis*) disciplinary traditions inherited from the nineteenth century, which gave them veto power over student political expression. They claimed the authority to gag student rebels, much as parents had the authority to silence rowdy children. Student activists rejected this collegiate oversight, insisting that they were not errant children, but rather citizens with First Amendment rights. The students' position was decades ahead of its time, and would not be adopted by the Supreme Court until 1969, when it ruled (in *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*) that students do not "shed . . . their constitutional rights . . . at the school house gates."³ The chasm between student radicalism and administration paternalism concerning student political rights led to a series of campus free speech fights during the early 1930s. Movement organizers risked suspension, expulsion, and arrest to secure free speech rights which students today take for granted.

² The best account of Depression-era violations of academic freedom among the faculty in the U.S. is Ellen Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (New York, 1986), 63-83.

³ On *Tinker v. Des Moines*, see William G. Millington, *The Law and the College Student: Justice in Evolution* (St. Paul, Minn., 1979), 160-213.