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# The Year of The Young Rebels

Stephen Spender

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# BOOK WORLD

## At young people's rebellions

THE YEAR OF THE YOUNG REBELS. By Stephen Spender. Random House. 186 pp. \$4.95.

By Alfred Kazin

Nothing in years has so disturbed and enlivened old liberals, radicals, rebels, as the current "youth unrest." Ancient protesters and solid anti-Communists of my generation, who had a right to expect quiet and respected professorships after having been disappointed in every social ideal except making money, now find themselves in constant battle with students, colleagues, wives, children, over THEM. THEM is that unanticipated phalanx for radicalizing America, the student radicals, now a race apart, who say rude things to teachers in private as well as to administrators in public, show no respect for learning, tradition, propriety, property, who perversely attack the "Pentagon" by occupying the Dean's office, scream "Racist!" at anyone who doesn't believe in open enrollment from Negro high schools, and apply moral pressure in ways that turn every disagreement into a test of social morality.

The worst of it is, the young — the professionally young, the militantly radical young, the unrestingly young — make old rebels feel guilty. Obviously ours is still an idealistic nation, for why else should the young's ideals of total social justice and racial togetherness have such a shaming effect on the middle-aged? A Boston business man, Harvard '44, said the other day to a member of the class of '69: "Why are you more moral than your mothers and fathers? Are your parents so crass? Am I so devoid of sympathy for the poor?" The young devil replied: "We have more time. You are so immersed in your own lives. We can do things, and I hope fifteen years from now, when the others are making new demands, we will still have the flexibility to consider them."

The "young" make the others feel guilty because they are still the party of hope and so of action, not the party of failures and excuses. "They" make "us" feel guilty because at least they believe that the age of super-technology justifies and makes possible some lightening of traditional oppression: which has always been Utopia. The young shame those too concerned with owning, saving, securing, bossing — with trying to mend or to stave off one of the thousand crises that the "secure" are heir to. Whereas the young thrive on crisis, sleep on



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Book Week

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50c 4.01.1 Encounter

# An old revolutionary looks at the new ones

By Gabriel Gersh

THE YEAR OF THE YOUNG REBELS. By Stephen Spender. Random House. \$4.95; paperback, \$1.95.

American student activists would regard Stephen Spender as a reactionary. For there is no reactionary like the one who has lived through the agonies of the 1930s and who has taken the present student revolts as a sudden, unexpected revival of his own youthful dreams. Yet for all this and his association with the Congress of Cultural Freedom, Spender has written a book that illuminates the meaning of the student rebellions that have convulsed so many universities.

His book consists of four impressionistic descriptions of student views and activities in New York, Paris, Prague and Berlin, concluding with three chapters in which he attempts to make sense of it all. Unfortunately, interspersed among these chapters are such irrelevancies as a memento on his bafflement at the Encounter-CJA affair, to illustrate the "cynicism of governments."

At Columbia University Spender was asked whether the student revolt of last spring reminded him of the Spanish Civil War in which he had been deeply involved, and he tells us that it did in certain ways. He mentions small parallels like the passionate telephoning and the flow of messages and messengers. But in a more important way Spender seems to be reminded of Spain when he assumes that — now as then — revolutionary idealism is an expression of youth and will yield to disillusionment with the passage of time.

Spender believes that whatever the course followed by the administration at Columbia during the convulsion, the result would have been the same. For social and psychological reasons many students want

such confrontation, defining themselves through antagonism to the university. Here, as in other universities, he found students eschewing long-range political strategy like that of student movements of the 1930s, localizing and personalizing the issues and, above all, believing in spontaneity. Riots, sit-ins, the occupation of buildings — all have taken the place of organization and program and often seem to relieve the sense of frustration exacerbated by the difficulties of explaining why it is felt.

With understanding and compassion, Spender recounts the determination of the students of Prague to win the very liberty and affluence the ideologues of the West reject. It upsets him that the Western New Left disgraced itself by criticizing the Czech experiment under Dubcek which believes that freedom can be built into a Communist system that shakes off the legacy of Stalinism. To others, however, the plight of the Czech student underlined the narrowness of the New Left's preoccupations, for the Czech students faced enemies in the form of Stalinist prisons and Red censorship, while the Rudds, Dutschkes and Cohn-Bendits behaved like modern counterparts of Bakuninist romantics for whom even Marx and Lenin had contempt.

So sympathetic is Spender's treatment of the student revolt that some may regard the final conclusion as naive. He believes that perpetual revolutionists can co-exist with serious academics, making a pact of non-interference. He argues that if the revolutionists concentrated on important social issues like over-population and city planning instead of ill-defined revolutionary aims or trivial issues like university discipline, such co-existence might be useful.

Whether one agrees with this formula for student peace, the book should be savored for the pleasure of its fringe benefits: an account of Allen Ginsberg and the hippies, a brief but succinct portrait of prewar Oxford and, more important, an examination of obscene journalism, an offshoot of the student revolution. All this adds up to a stimulating appraisal of the student revolt by a middle-aged intellectual, whose humaneness and breadth of vision are equal to the complexity of the subject.

Gabriel Gersh teaches at Long Island University

Starting this week and continuing through the summer months, Showcase will publish book reviews to supplement book coverage in special seasonal issues of Book Week on June 8, June 22, July 13 and Aug. 17 and in Family Magazine each Wednesday. Full-scale publication of Book Week will resume in September.

# The Year Of the Young Rebels

By Stephen Spender.  
200 pp. New York:  
Random House. \$4.95.

By JACK NEWFIELD

For some mysterious reason, perhaps psychological, perhaps literary, two women — Susan Sontag and Mary McCarthy — have written the two most honest and moving books I have read about North Vietnam. Similarly, the most evocative and perceptive prose I have read about the new student radicalism, oddly enough, has come from cultural and literary figures, rather than from political or educational ones. I have in mind Norman Mailer's "The Armies of the Night," essays by Richard Poirier and Martin Duberman published in the Atlantic magazine, and this gentle, wise book by the poet and critic, Stephen Spender.

The reason, I suspect, is that Spender and the other writers can see the personalities, confrontations and dreams of the young Left in larger than just its surface political dimension. Spender, for example, understands the cultural root of student alienation, that they are trying to change values and consciousness rather than lay down a program and seize state power. He understands they are trying to make *revolutionaries*, rather than make a *revolution*, that they are trying to create a "parallel world," in opposition to consumer cultures in which things manipulate individuals.

Spender also brilliantly sees the symbolic, stylistic, psychic and mythic layers of their politics. He calls one chapter "The Columbia Happenings," grasping the important role spontaneous anarchic energy plays in the movement. He perceives how much of the movement is based on gesture, myth and style, as well as the movement's close and subtle relationship with the ideas of sexual liberation, popular and underground culture and the theater of the absurd. He knows the real political significance of the epigrams and poetry chalked on the walls of the Sorbonne. He reminds us that the phrase, "Up against the wall with no doors," is literary, and comes from the poet LeRoi Jones. He comments on the

significance of liberated sex, obscenity and the underground press as a kind of cultural politics.

Spender understands that the stu-

Mr. Newfield, author of "A Prophetic Minority," is a political columnist for The Village Voice.

dent occupations of Columbia and the Sorbonne were, since there is no "revolutionary situation" in the West, "a revolution rehearsal, like a war game." He can see this so clearly because he knows some things the students, with whom he so sympathizes, do not yet know. He knows they are probably doomed to failure. And he knows they will soon grow old.

"The Year of the Young Rebels" is divided into seven chapters. The first four are first person, journalistic impressions of Spender's pilgrimages to Columbia, Paris, Prague and West Berlin, at the time of the student insurrections last year. The final three chapters are more speculative and analytical. They explore the common threads of student movements, West and East, and they thoughtfully rebut some of the older critics of the students, particularly George Kennan and Zbigniew Brzezinski.

The chapter on Columbia is lucid and fair-minded, without pretending to expertise or a false solidarity with the activists. Spender is especially astute in his observations about the black students, concluding:

"Their behavior was maturer (perhaps because they accepted the advice of older people) and less neurotic than that of the improvising white students. . . . The white students, as I have said, had a problem of identity which they resolved first by being students, secondly, more emphatically by being rebellious students. The black students, opposite here as in other respects, had a problem of losing their identity through segregation. Their identity is, of course, immensely real, in some ways the most real thing in America. . . . So if the neurosis of the white students is the fear that they have no identity, the passionate search to find one, that of the blacks is the fear that they will lose theirs, and beyond this the fear of actual extinction."

In his chapter on the Sorbonne, Spender emphasizes the special romantic and surrealist quality of the French students. He quotes the slogan "Imagination is Revolution," as an explanation of why the students rejected "the great trade unions, political parties, official communism." He frequently quotes with approval Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who

seems to remind Spender of the anarchists he saw fighting in Spain 30 years ago.

The Czech students, however, are the ones who won the author's heart without cavil or reservation, since they are the most heroic, most tolerant and the most rooted in reality. Their movement was not a rehearsal or a game, but a now tragic matter of life and death. They were not fighting the materialism of a consumer culture, or the impersonal manipulations of a "formal democracy," but for the elemental freedoms the students at Columbia and the Sorbonne took for granted—free speech, free assembly, no censorship.

Spender approves of most that is really new and distinctive about this internationalist generation of rebels: their passion for community, authenticity and participation; their rejection of all existing models, parties and dogmas of the Old Left, especially the Soviet Union; their efforts to strike alliances with the young workers; their lack of selfishness, and their perseverance despite the absence of revolutionary situations. But he has one crucial, and I think justified, criticism to make. He warns the young rebels repeatedly not to destroy the university, not to see it as a simple and vulnerable microcosm of the larger society. He writes:

"Students who attempt to revolutionize society by first destroying the university are like an army which begins a war by wrecking its own base. . . . Thus the militant students should accept the university as their base. . . . without the university there would be no students. The position of the students, even as agitators, depends on there being a university. . . . To say, 'I won't have a university until society has a revolution,' is as though Karl-Marx were to say, 'I won't go to the reading room of the British Museum until it has a revolution.'"

Stephen Spender has, of course, led a remarkable personal and public career. He belonged briefly to the British Communist party during the 1930's. (His essay in the collection "The God That Failed" convinced me personally, more than anything else written on the subject, of the futility of Communist dogma, of the illegitimacy of the Communist notion of the end justifying the means.) Later he was duped by the C.I.A., while he was co-editor of Encounter. He has survived these two potentially embittering experiences still a gentle radical, still a fine poet with a modernist sensibility, and a good man living in a bad time. □