

Book Reviews / Comptes Rendus

Review of *Children of Privilege: Student Revolt in the Sixties*, by Cyril Levitt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984)

The student movement of the 1960's is a phenomenon trapped in mythology. Cherished by romantic supporters or denounced by hysterical opponents, the movement inspired a literature about itself that was more polemical than serious. The media made its own contribution to distorted perceptions by highlighting the confrontation, the moments of violence, and portraying it all in living colour.

That turbulent era deserves a fresh examination and *Children Of Privilege* makes a fair beginning. Cyril Levitt characterizes the student movement neither as a conspiracy fomented by "outside agitators" (a popular line among university presidents of the 1960's), nor as the product of collective neuroses among the baby boom generation (as argued by some psychologists). Instead he places the movement in the context of economic and social changes which the western world underwent in the period following World War II. He draws upon the experiences of Canada, the United States and West Germany, augments his research through interviews with former activists in all three countries (though, curiously, he never identifies them), and judges the movement in entirely unsentimental terms.

He argues that the student movement was a revolt "of privilege against privilege, for privilege in a society in which the character of privilege had been changing". What does this mean? The children of the 1950's, he contends, were raised in an environment of optimism, opportunity and affluence. They were conditioned by the American dream which had its equivalent in Canada and western Europe, and they came to expect that life for themselves and others would be fulfilling, fair and prosperous. In short, they took seriously the rhetoric of liberal democracy.

But on the verge of adulthood, youth found the world to be not as described. The cold war, the arms race, the civil rights movement, and the war in Vietnam proved that the west in general, and America in particular, regularly ran afoul of their own lofty ideals. At its peak, the student movement was a passionate social protest against officially sanctioned hypocrisy.

But more important to Levitt than any of these political concerns was the "massification" of the university and the process by which the value of the university degree was diminished in the market place. Students had expected to obtain creative, humane work that provided them with the power and influence to shape their environment. Instead they were to become cogs in bureaucratic and industrial machines, part of the army of "social labour", professionals

punching clocks. They resented this loss of privilege and in response they took to the streets.

It is a pity that Levitt emphasizes the supposed impact of these economic changes on the politics of the student movement, because this part of his argument is contradictory, and unconvincing. While the growth of government bureaucracy and the emergence of the massive, diversified corporation changed the nature of some professional work, it is absurd to say that university graduates of the 1960's were unable to obtain rewarding jobs. If anything such opportunity was taken for granted and student activists thought it unfair that the poor should not have similar advantages. In Canada this commitment fueled the student-led campaign for wider accessibility to higher education, a campaign that would not have been undertaken by students seriously worried about the diminishing value of their degrees.

If Levitt is correct, then what he calls the potential "proletarianization" of students in the 1970's should have inspired even more militancy as economic conditions deteriorated. Instead, he observes, it had the opposite effect. He is aware of the paradox and proceeds to qualify his previous argument by saying that "membership even in the massified elite was relatively privileged in society as a whole". Privilege which had disappeared in the course of history now reappears for the sake of the argument.

The reality is that the student movement was in decline well before the problem of under-employment among university graduates became widespread. The police riot against students at the Democratic National Convention in 1968, the election of Richard Nixon in the same year, and the political turmoil within New Left organizations in Canada and the United States all contributed to the demise of the movement. At the end of the decade activists were feeling defeated and dispirited, not hungry.

Another problem with the book is the author's failure to distinguish those involved in the New Left from the majority of students who sat on the sidelines (often cheering on their football teams). Why would the momentous events Levitt describes provoke one group to political action and not the other? In leaving the impression that the student movement included an entire generation, he perpetuates, instead of setting to rest, and old myth.

Levitt, a former activist in Ontario, and now a professor of sociology at McMaster University, concludes in a tone that is almost unbearably cynical. He claims that the movement, doomed from the start, was led down the garden path by Marxist ideologues, though his own study demonstrates how Marxism, in the context of the period, was the only conceivable ideological direction that the movement could have taken. His hostility to Marxism, and to the "half-baked Marxist prima donnas" (?) who teach in universities today is especially puzzling since his own book, with its commitment to linking ideas to their material origin, its emphasis on economic determinants, and even its use of language, appears to this reader to be in a neo-Marxist tradition.

This book reopens the window on a fascinating era, though occasionally it lets out air instead of letting in light. It will make an important contribution to, without itself becoming, the definitive study of the "children of privilege."

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The Short Road Down: A University Changes. By Robin Ross. Toronto, Published by the University of Toronto, 1984. A limited number of copies is available from the Office of the Vice-President, Institutional Relations, University of Toronto.

In 1958, when Robin Ross came to the University of Toronto as Assistant Registrar, it was governed in the traditional Canadian manner by two bodies: a Board of Governors appointed by the provincial government, which held supreme authority but limited itself largely to financial matters; and a Senate composed chiefly of members of the teaching staff but with some alumni representation, which was responsible for academic affairs. When Mr. Ross retired in 1982, the University was run by one body, a politicized Governing Council representing a variety of "estates": government appointees, alumni, faculty — and students. The process by which this change came about, and some of its consequences, are the subject of his little book. It will repay study by anybody interested in Canadian higher education, and not only by people with a special interest in the University of Toronto.

Robin Ross began his academic career at the ancient Scottish University of St. Andrews. He went on to Oxford, but his time there was interrupted by the war and service in the Cameron Highlanders. Thereafter he went into the Indian Civil Service, and upon the "transfer of power" transferred himself to the Commonwealth Office, which changed his life by sending him to Canada. He moved to the Canadian public service, and then the University of Toronto wisely snapped him up, and he was a senior university administrator for a quarter of a century. He calls the book "a personal history of the University of Toronto during the period 1958-1982, together with an examination into its governance, made by a sometime university Registrar".

Mr. Ross's opinion of the development he describes is perhaps adequately expressed in the book's title. And he makes the telling remark that, although the developments at Toronto have been well publicized, no university in Canada or elsewhere has chosen to imitate the University of Toronto's new system of government. Not everybody at his university will agree with Mr. Ross; people who had responsibility for the policies on which he comments will be livid; but unless I am much mistaken there will be a pretty unanimous chorus of applause from the university faculty.

The author quotes with approval a remark of Alexander Corry of Queen's that it is the business of a university to give "a training in civility". He practices