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The Columbine Incident and the Radical Tradition in America: An Interactive Forum

Changing Times, Dissimilar Decades

by Sam Smith

Nicholas Turse is to be commended for the bravery with which he tackles the question of "radical youth" at the Millennium. The Columbine tragedy, considered within the context of similar outbreaks of school violence in the U.S. both before and since April 20, suggests that something as systemic as it is sinister afflicts North American culture, and public reaction to these events has demanded quick explanations and sure remedies. Sadly, a vast majority of the punditry attending "Black Tuesday" has been simplistic and short-sighted, as likely to worsen the situation as improve it.

Turse opens the door to a broader examination of the dynamics fueling the Eric Harris and Dylan Klebolds of our society, and is willing to ask uncomfortable questions in the process. For this we are in his debt. However, his suggestion that Columbine-style violence is the millennial analogue to radical rebellions of the 1960s places him in the untenable position of having to preempt probable objections to the assertion. Unfortunately, this activity distracts him from the task of developing his own case. Worse, the anticipated objections to the 1960s comparison are more compelling than Turse's rebuttals to them.

In short, Turse seems both right and wrong. His suggestion that "kids killing kids may be the radical protest of our age" is most apt (especially given that our age has produced so little in the way of radical protest otherwise). Harris and Klebold represent a contemporary mode of resistance to the dehumanizing character of the American machine, and it is hard to imagine that thirty years from now we will have forgotten the names of those who burned the word "Columbine" into the collective consciousness. May the gods be with us if the next three decades somehow render April 20, 1999 forgettable.

Moreover, I suspect that we'll look back, as we construct our histories of this moment, and link these killers to the likes of the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski, as well as to a larger body of neo-Luddites whose discontent with technological society finds voice in the writings of Kirkpatrick Sale, Sven Birkerts, and Mark Slouka. The public mind hasn't yet put these things together, but I suspect a critical minority will do so eventually. While Harris and Klebold weren't attacking the machine per se, it's hard to argue that the monolithic educational infrastructure that helped spawn them is somehow unrelated to the trajectory of technological society generally.

Turse's essay is compromised, however, by insisting on the 1960s comparison. Harris and Klebold cannot be "the Mark Rudd and Abbie Hoffman figures" of an age whose essential character precludes the very existence of Mark Rudds and Abbie Hoffmans. It's easy enough to understand the tendency toward this sort of comparison—our rose-colored myth of "the Sixties" has been so thoroughly canonized it's now impossible to discuss youth rebellion or youth anything without comparing it to the good old Baby Boomer heyday. This isn't to say that Boomer youth didn't earn the attention of social commentators—they certainly did. But where the youth of the "Millennial Age" are concerned the comparison obscures rather than illuminates.

For starters, millennial culture deprives would-be rebels of both easy targets and productive means of resistance. In the sixties the enemy was easy enough to identify; seemingly all grievances found a handy focus in the Vietnam war effort or the Civil Rights movement, or some combination of both. Youth resistance found clear symbols of institutional evil against which to rally, and thus radical protest was relatively focused. The social and political structure of the era was given to a more or less one-front conflict, with the enemy over there and the rebels over here. The terms of engagement were clear, a fact that dictated and sanctioned certain forms of resistance and ruled out others.

Would-be radicals at the Millennium face a war being fought on a thousand fronts. There is arguably as much or more social evil for a young radical to oppose, but it is diffuse and sometimes intangible. Being ostracized by your high school's mainstream is perhaps a distressing thing, especially if routine physical harassment by the football team is part of the bargain. When the school ignores the grievance it begins to

take an institutional shape. Still, that is a dramatically different thing than seeing friends coming back from Southeast Asia in body bags or watching redneck police turning the dogs on young people who differ from you only in skin color.

Millennial radicals have less obvious targets, and correspondingly their rage finds no moral sanction. The lack of outlets for this anger undoubtedly makes the problem worse—the sixties radical could work these impulses out in a nonviolent fashion that found increasing acknowledgment by the press. Regardless of public reaction, at least they knew someone was listening, a condition that simply did not exist for those unhappy with their lot at Columbine.

Countless other factors merit consideration here—for instance, one can't dismiss the role of music in shaping rebellion in the 1960s. Before the advent of FM radio and the spawning of new niche formats in the early 1970s, popular music was more shared across racial and class boundaries, and a protest song by, say, Bob Dylan, could have the effect of constructing "young people" as a unified class. Now, however, a multiplicity of popular music genres carve the culture's youth up as efficiently as any active program of segregation ever could, and even the most powerful protest artist of the day can barely hope to capture the ears, let alone the hearts, of a small percentage of the 12-24 demographic.

In summation, Turse's insightful identification of the events at Columbine as a mode of radical protest is welcome, but rather than getting hung up with comparing these events to the protests of the 1960s we would be far better served analyzing the unique character of the moment we're in. Comparing the 1960s to the 1990s can do little besides make clear just how dissimilar they really are.

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