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## **Student Radicalism in the LSE Campus: A Qualitative Study**

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### **Introduction**

Marx viewed the particular history of radical tradition as being rooted in the life experiences of peasants, proletarians and other subaltern classes. A natural explanation to the radical tradition could be found in the analysis of social class (Burgess and Festenstein 2007). This approach has been adopted by Christopher Hill in his major study *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972) where he has argues that popular revolt had been an essential feature of English class for many centuries. However, he did not delve into its continuity and transmission.

A second approach to radicalism has been propagated by Colin Davis (1994) who treated it within a functionalist paradigm. His approach defended the application of the term radicalism to diverse phenomena even before the term itself became current in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, it did not assume any real historical connections between different examples of radicalism. It did not link them into a single continuous tradition of popular protest. Rather, it laid down certain basic functional criteria for recognising radicalism and suggested that any political idea or act that matched with those criteria could be used as an instance of radicalism (Burgess and Festenstein 2007). Davis's formulation of radical ideology needs to do three things: 1) it must delegitimize an old socio-political order 2) it must re legitimate an alternative or new socio political order and 3) it must provide a transfer mechanism that will change things from old to the new. This approach has been widely popular and has arguably become the most common approach outside the Marxist circles which defined radicalism within class relations.

The functionalist approach to radicalism was critiqued by Condren who argued that radicalism could not be confined to innovativeness but also would relate to conservatism and renovating. He emphasized on the fact that while the term radicalism suggests an enthusiastic acceptance of innovation, pre modern societies which were classified as radical under this perception were more or less universally hostile to innovation. They thought of conservation

and renovating not innovating. Therefore the understanding of radicalism would be faulty as associated only with newness. This radicalism is a complex and subdivided term. Radicals and radicalism is everywhere and comes in different forms of popular and elite, left or right, Tory or Whig. Radical as a label varies as based on the understanding and assumptions of others.

The context of any radical idea or action is rooted in its social setting, the structural and environmental factors. University campuses, for example provide a nurture bed for such radical ideas and protests. The rise of student radicalism can be located in the 1960's and 1970's when student movements spread across many parts of the industrialized world. There were two interconnected facets to student movements in this period. The first was the spread of movements on university and college campuses, protesting at specific regulations, policies and actions by the academic authorities. The second was the involvement of growing numbers of students in other significant movements of the period, notably on the Left. The two processes had a reciprocal impact. University campuses have not only given rise to such radicalism on being subsumed by general protest movements, but also been seedbeds of giving birth to such movements.

### **Methodology**

This paper is an outcome of qualitative research on the topic of student radicalism in the LSE campus. Qualitative research is a method of inquiry appropriated in many different academic disciplines, traditionally in the social sciences, but also in market research and further contexts (Denzin, Lincoln, Yvonna 2005). Qualitative researchers aim to gather an in-depth understanding of human behavior and the reasons that govern such behavior. Qualitative method investigates the *why* and *how* of decision making, not just *what*, *where*, *when*. Qualitative findings generally grow out of three different methods of data collection in- a) in-depth, open ended interviews b) direct observation and c) written documents (Patton 2002:4). In this study on student radicalism, in-depth open ended interviewing technique was used for data collection. Interviews yielded quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings and knowledge. The aim of interviews was to find out the interpretations and perceptions of students on the topic of radicalism.

For the purpose of study, three broad areas were investigated -radicalism in general, radicalism at LSE and personal involvement in radical activities. The first area was aimed at

understanding how the interviewee interpreted the term radicalism and what ideas and actions and beliefs did he/she associated with it. The questions asked were:

*What are the first words that come to your mind when I say the word student radicalism?*

*What kind of beliefs do you associate with radicalism?*

The second area aimed at understanding how the individual viewed radicalism at LSE, the intensity, the environment for radical activities and what instances he/she had experienced that would be identified as radical. The questions asked in this section were:

*How accommodating do you think LSE is to student radicalism?*

*What instances of radicalism do you see at LSE?*

*What are different sorts of involvement within student radicalism?*

The last section of the interview entailed questions on personal involvement in radical activities. The aim here was to find out whether the interviewee saw himself as radical and the motivations behind involvement/not involving in radical activities. The questions in this section were:

*Can you describe any activities you are or have been engaged in, which you would describe as radical?*

*What motivated you to get involved? / Can you explain your reasons for not being involved?*

*Do you see yourself as a radical person?*

### **Sampling**

Sampling technique was a combination of random sampling and purposeful sampling techniques. The logic behind this combination of sampling techniques was to control for selection bias by randomly selecting interviewees and also to focus on information-rich cases that would illuminate the question under study. Students were randomly approached on the campus at places where they would be generally be seen taking a break, such as Library lobby, Garrick or passing by Houghton Street. Also, emails were sent out to three student societies at the LSE to contact the radical student members, who were often spotted on the campus organizing campaigns and protests. The email contained a brief outline about the research project and assured that the members interviewed and the information provided by them would remain anonymous and confidential.

## **Interview and Interviewing Experience**

The purpose of interviewing people is to find out from them those things that cannot be directly observed. The issue is not whether the data is more desirable, valid or meaningful than self-report data (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). The fact is that we cannot observe everything like peoples' feelings, thoughts, intentions and their experiences. The purpose of interviewing therefore is to allow the interviewer to enter into another man's perspective. Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that that perspective of others is meaningful, knowable and able to be made explicit (Patton 2002).

Ten semi-structured face to face interviews were conducted. The interview guide was prepared to mark the areas or sections which had to be probed and explored. Interview guide was developed to specify the precise topics under the three areas that were envisaged for study - radicalism in general, radicalism in LSE and personal involvement in radical activities. On that basis, questions were asked that would illuminate and elucidate the particular subject. The advantage of an interview guide is that it facilitates the interviewer to efficiently use the limited time available in the interview setting and also to keep the interview focussed (Bryman 2008).

In cases of randomly approaching people for interviews it was ascertained that confidence played a significant role. The students yielded into giving an interview when approached with confidence whereas in cases where there was a little hesitation or ambiguity, the members denied the request and expressed a doubt about the consequences of the research or were intimidated and doubted the intentions. Also, it was a tedious task sending and resending mails to contact the student societies as they did not respond readily. This was not successful therefore the researcher had to approach and visit the student societies directly on campus. This worked out for recruiting the participants for interviews.

The questions posed were a combination of experience, behaviour, and feelings. The interviewees were assured of the confidentiality and informed consent was taken before they became involved in the project. Also, an attempt was made to establish a rapport with the interviewee so as to make him/her feel that their opinions, attitudes and feelings were respected and valuable (Fontana and Frey 1994). The flow of the interview was from general to specific questions which helped to set the context and bring the respondent at ease. Once some experience had been described, then opinion and feelings were solicited and further probing for interpretation and experience was done. There were new questions that were

asked on the spot to facilitate probing in some areas that would provide valuable insight. However, questions on totally new subjects beyond the scope of concern were not asked.

The interviews were conducted in a quite background as that is a pre requisite to obtain full and complete information and also proper note taking (Gubrium and Holstein 2002). With these cautionary measures taken, there was no major problem encountered during the course of the interview. It was ascertained during the interview process that question wording and researchers body language played a very significant role in eliciting response from the participants, when the interviewee deviated from the focus of the question or happened to be silent for a while (Collier et al 2004). An encouraging body language and verbal gestures, also rewording the questions helped to sort out such aberrations.

### **Interpretation**

In interviewing the respondents on the interpretation and perception of radicalism, the themes that were pronounced were the ideas of narrow-mindedness, activities requiring emotionally charged individuals. Radicalism was associated with holding a prominent belief for change. It was viewed as an extremist stand in any sphere, predominantly religious and political. Radicalism was also identified with holding an ideology and a commitment on an extremist stand. Respondents did not see radicalism in a negative light but were of the opinion that it is often labelled and projected as a negative irrational indulgence. Radicals are also often stigmatized and accused of creating divisions in the society. However, when asked about benefits that accrue from engaging in radical activities the respondents pointed out that it may give an individual a sense of belonging, identity and strengthens one's social network. Also, one may acquire a status, power and enjoy other economic benefits if the radical group he/she belongs to is identified in the political or social scenario. Gandhi, RIF, Nazi and groups such as Al Qaeda were associated with such conceptions of radicalism.

With regard to the role universities play in relation to radicalism, the respondents opined that universities as places of learning encourage open thinking and therefore would inspire radical ideas. LSE was seen as less radical in action but more radical in thought. As it is a prominent international university, it attracts a large pool of international students who are motivated and have ideas of changing society. In this way, LSE provided an open environment and a democratic space for taking different standpoints. Student demonstrations, protests against fee hike and religious celebrations were seen as instances of radical activities happening on the campus.

With regard to individual stand as seeing oneself as a radical or non-radical, there was a clear division among the respondents. Whereas a few of them identified themselves as strong radicals having participated in protests, demonstrations in the past, there was a section of respondents who were not certain of their stand and were of the opinion that it would depend on the perspective of the individual looking at their involvement and certify whether that would be radical or non-radical. When questioned about their involvement in radicalism in future, they said that it would depend on how pressing the issue was and would go for it if there was no alternative otherwise. Most people were of the opinion that radicalism is justified under circumstances when there is an emergency and when all other alternatives seem to fail.

### **Conclusion**

The beginning of radical student movements can be traced to Berkeley in 1964 when students started supporting civil rights campaign. The outcome of student movements has reverberated beyond the university campuses. In the current context, student movements have become an on-going feature of the university life as the larger issues, be it social, environmental or rights issue finds space for expression in the campuses. LSE is a perfect example of a university that offers a vibrant space for such expressions, its location in the urban centre of London as it attracts students across continents, provides a fertile ground where multiple issues originating anywhere on the globe can find local translations among the student groups in the campus. Though it offers a vantage point to study radicalism, a limitation of this study is that it poses a general problem of external validity. The results obtained cannot be generalised beyond the confines of LSE campus. It would be interesting to take a more representative sample and implicate the study across universities campuses drawing on a comparative perspective to understand the causes and consequences of student radicalism.

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