



David Barber. *A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why It Failed.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008. xi + 286 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-934110-17-1.



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Rallying for Student Rights

As SDS members lay snug in their beds, visions of revolutionary vanguards danced in their heads. The chicks in their mini-skirts, the men with their Marx, were just gearing up for the revolution and fight. When at the 1969 meeting there arose such a clatter, race and gender were at the heart of the matter. At least according to David Barber's *A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why It Failed*.

While the subtitle denotes simply a history of the SDS, a group dominated by twenty-something-year-old, middle-class whites, Barber has substantially more grandiose goals in mind for his work. "More than any other organization," states Barber, "Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) represented the trajectory of the white New Left and the white student movement of the 1960s" (p. 4). As he outlines in his introduction, SDS serves as a stand-in for the (white) New Left movement in its totality; so went SDS, so went the movement.

Studies of SDS are not a particularly new genre of history. Todd Gitlin, Jeremy Varon, Kirkpatrick Sales, and Doug Rossinow are but a few of the authors and histori-

ans who have devoted time and effort to looking at this famous organization so closely tied with the politics of the sixties. Where Barber deviates from others, though, is in his analysis of why SDS failed: not because it became too radical and allied itself too closely with black power groups, as Gitlin argued, but rather because it did not accept the leadership of such organizations as the Black Panther Party or the concept of women's liberation. SDSers' insistence on their role as vanguards in the revolution and the importance they allocated themselves prevented them from ascending to a higher consciousness regarding chauvinism and racism. These stances rendered SDS mainstream and square, not radical or revolutionary.

This tragic flaw of SDS, Barber argues, was tied to their views on race and gender, which were antiquated and conservative. Barber chooses to begin his narrative in 1965 and end with the Kent State shootings in May 1970, with each chapter examining the politics and policies of SDS in relation to black organizations, primarily the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Commit-

tee (SNCC) and the Black Panther Party. The chapters are not arranged chronologically, but rather trace the evolution of SDS ideas, theories, concepts, and policies relating to the black movement, imperialism, and women's liberation, with the last chapters looking at the disintegration of SDS as an organization into smaller, more radical factions, such as the successive incarnations of the Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM) versions I and II and the Progressive Labor Party.

In many ways, *A Hard Rain Fell* reflects its subject matter. While Barber argues that the "New Left" was the variable in the movements of the 1960s, he makes some of the same mistakes he charges SDS with (p. 15). First, for Barber's work, the New Left and SDS are interchangeable entities, thus affording SDS an importance that might perhaps be overly generous. If *A Hard Rain Fell* was intended to be a story that took SDS off center stage, it unfortunately falls quite short. In examining the development of early feminism, for example, Barber discusses the beloved community and gender dynamics of the early years in SNCC, but neglects to fully interrogate the gender dynamics of the Black Panther Party and other nationalist groups.

Much like the organization it focuses on, the work is also heavy on theory and light on action. Relationships between the organizations are limited to speeches at conferences, policy statements, and ties between leaders. There is little deviation from a national examination of SDS at its higher echelons or even the concrete projects it embarked on. This is perhaps where this "whiteness" study disappoints the most. In labeling SDS members as "white," Barber neglects to examine who these students were, their socioeconomic background and relative positions in society compared to other white Americans. While SDS was, Barber argues, unwilling to organize among the white working class, a closer examination of the relationship between SDSers and whites outside the organization might have provided more depth to his analysis. SDS did not simply think itself intellectually superior to black organizers; there is a good chance they firmly believed themselves better than most whites, as Michael Lerner observed in a 1969 article entitled "Re-

spectable Bigotry," published in *The New Journal*.

The SDS-centric narrative, for that is what *A Hard Rain Fell* is, also cuts out New Leftists who participated in the activities and politics but were not tied to any particular organization. Mario Savio and such students as James S. Kunen are noticeably overlooked because they were not affiliated with SDS or one of its derivatives. While he alludes to relations between Yippies and SDSers (the 1967 march on the Pentagon), there is no discussion about the relationship between the two or even an explanation of the Yippies as an independent organization.

Whether intended or not, Barber's work raises excellent questions about the nature of the New Left. The assumption that the New Left failed because it did not "fundamentally reorient American values" allowing the forces that "engendered war and racism in America" to win requires defining the meaning of success and failure, as well as determining how to judge the goals of a social movement (p. 4). The New Left itself is a concept that might also need to be refined and more closely examined by historians engaged in scholarly studies of the movement, particularly in addressing definitions along racial, ethnic, and gender lines, not to mention the inclusion or exclusion of gay rights movements, environmentalism, and the "counterculture."

Barber's work succeeds in other aspects as well. It is an excellent top-down source for tracing the ideology and policies of the national SDS, explaining the development of fissures between "political" and "radical" feminists or the differences between RYM I, RYM II, the Progressive Labor Party, and other sundry "action factions" or armchair Marxists (p. 116). *A Hard Rain Fell* serves as an excellent, interesting, introductory primer on the organization, which is in so small part enhanced by Barber's clear writing style and explanations. For maximum impact, though, pair this work with one of the myriad of SDS members' memoirs, by Carl Oglesby, Cathy Wilkerson, or even Todd Gitlin, to name but a few; like an aptly chosen wine, Barber brings out a unique flavor in each of the memoirs. Simply thinking about how many memoirs former SDSers have written gives the reader reason to pause and reflect on Barber's argument.

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