

Mark Rudd, a 'Flawed Example of the Radical Movement'

By Kirkpatrick Sale

New York Times (1923-Current file); Sep 16, 1977;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers New York Times (1851-2006) w/ Index (1851-1993)

pg. 24

Mark Rudd, a 'Flawed Example of the Radical Movement'

By Kirkpatrick Sale

The hullabaloo over the surfacing of Mark Rudd, as I read it, seems intended to suggest that at last the radical movements of the 1960's and 1970's are at an end.

Look, there's Mark Rudd, the very symbol of protest and rebellion, coming back home, tail between his legs, "apparently ready" now, as The Daily News put it, "to fight for political change within the establishment."

The commentators seem to be saying, along with Rudd's father, that once a man reaches 30, as most college students of the 1960's have, he is "too old to be a revolutionary" and should settle down to a more realistic life.

But there are several reasons to think that we would be deluding ourselves if we succumbed to that easy notion.

First, Mark Rudd was always more of a news-media creation than a genuine leader. With his protuberant jaw—Daniel Bell once called it "prognathous"—and his arrogant air, he seemed to typify for the press the attitude of the young protestors of the 1960's.

But though he was clearly an important figure at Columbia in 1968, and unquestionably a "charismatic" type, he was never popular with the student body at large, as many radical figures of his era were, and he was not much liked or trusted even within his own Students for a Democratic Society (S.D.S.) chapter. (In fact, his actions were repudiated more than once by his fellow chapter members before and during the Columbia strike, and at one point in the middle of it all Rudd stormed out of a meeting that had gone against him, shouting "I resign as chairman of this organization.")

What made him famous, and what propelled him to the temporary leadership of the Weatherman faction, was the fact that he led a demonstration in the news-media capital of the world. He knew it, too: Standing for election to the S.D.S. presidency in 1968, he gave as his qualification the fact that "the movement needs symbols, and my name exists as a symbol."

Second, Rudd was a very flawed example of the radical movement, even the part of it that went underground. He was not well read in political literature, as most of those in S.D.S. were, and, though quick to grasp tactical ideas, was ignorant of most of the political theory that was swirling around the campuses in those days.

His role in formulating what became the Weatherman strategy was almost negligible—though he was indeed an ardent, if unsuccessful, salesman for it—and as a Weatherleader he was so timorous that he managed to avoid any noticeable action at all during the



Weatherman Chorus Les Marchands du Temple

Edward Serra

group's stormy "Days of Rage" in 1969 in Chicago, in which radicals protested the Vietnam War.

Even after the Weatherpeople decided to go underground in February 1970, Rudd seems to have been at best a minor figure. Just how long he remained in a leadership role is hard to know, but it is clear that within a few short months his arrogant manner, his sexist attitudes, and his political ig-

norance alienated his colleagues, who had demoted him from the leadership lists by October.

There is not a single word about or from Rudd in all the subsequent Weather Underground communica-

tions, and from what we can tell he remained a background figure throughout. In fact, it seems most likely that Rudd was not even connected with the Weather Underground after about 1972, and has probably been living

these last five years as an unhappy loner.

Third, Rudd's surrender is most likely a personal decision—he can't have liked hiding all that time, and he faces only very minor misdemeanor charges above ground—and cannot be taken as typical of the people in the underground organizations in general. Although three of the Weather Underground radicals have surfaced, and though the "inversion" issue seems to have split the group badly in the last year, the bulk of them still remain in hiding.

Moreover, there seems to be every bit as dedicated an underground now as there was seven years ago, at least to judge from the actions of the F.A.L.N. (Armed Forces of Puerto Rican National Liberation) and the extraordinary number of political bombings carried out by the New World Liberation Front on the West Coast. Of course, no one can know the numbers, but if there are still several hundred of these underground revolutionaries across the country, Rudd is an obvious man out.

Finally, whatever Rudd himself may decide to do, the radical movements that have carried on in his absence are clearly going to proceed apace.

Not that they are exactly a dominant political force, but they are clearly the significant factors in creating social change in the 1970's and seem to be getting stronger every year.

The antinuclear protests, for example, from Seabrook, N.H., to San Francisco represent this cutting edge; and the widespread environmental organizations, and the anticorporate campaigns, and the alternative-technology movement, and the locally based community-action groups in virtually every city of the land—this is where the radicals are today, and it's obvious that there's not a one among them who feels "too old to be a revolutionary."

Mark Rudd's surfacing says a great deal more about Mark Rudd than it does about the movements with which he may have been connected. We should avoid the temptation to let the part, especially such a tiny part, stand for the whole. We might also avoid the temptation to put too much stock in that well-worn adage about how it's all right to be a radical in your youth if you're conservative in your old age. The people who pronounce that one, it turns out, are old conservatives. The old radicals have a different way of looking at it.

Kirkpatrick Sale is author of "SDS" a history of the Students for a Democratic Society, and, more recently, "Power Shift: The Rise of the Southern Rim and Its Challenge to the Eastern Establishment."