



## A “Student Movement”

### Reading 5

Universities have long been places where ideas, theories, and even long-held truths are scrutinized and often hotly debated with each side mustering proof in support of its position. Such debates are central to the work of a university—the advancement of knowledge and the search for truth. In the spring of 2002, Laurie Zoloth, the director of Jewish Studies at San Francisco State, felt that some students and teachers at her university had crossed an important line between criticism of Israeli policies and bigotry. She expressed her views in an e-mail describing what it was like for her and her students “to walk across campus daily, past maps of the Middle East that do not include Israel, past posters of cans of soup with labels on them of drops of blood and dead babies, labeled ‘canned Palestinian children meat, slaughtered according to Jewish rites under American license,’ past poster after poster calling out ‘Zionism=racism, and Jews=Nazis.’”

Zoloth declared, “This is not civic discourse, this is not free speech, this is the Weimar Republic with brown shirts it cannot control. This is the casual introduction of the medieval blood libel and virulent hatred smeared around our campus in a manner so ordinary that it hardly excites concern—except if you are a Jew, and you understand that hateful words have always led to hateful deeds.”

Todd Gitlin, a professor of sociology and journalism at New York University, wrote the following essay in response to Zoloth’s e-mail:

I read Zoloth's words with horror but not, alas, complete amazement. [Recently,] two students of mine at NYU wondered aloud whether it was actually true, as they had heard, that 4,000 Jews didn't show up for work at the World Trade Center on September 11. They clearly thought this astoundingly crazy charge was plausible enough to warrant careful investigation, but it didn't occur to them to look at the names of the dead.

Wicked anti-Semitism is back. The worst crackpot notions that circulate through the violent Middle East are also roaming around America, and if that wasn't bad enough, students are

spreading the gibberish. Students! As if the bloc to which we have long looked for intelligent dissent has decided to junk any pretense of standards.

A student movement is not just a student movement. It's a student movement. Students, whether they are progressive or not, have the responsibility of knowing things, of thinking and discerning, of studying. A student movement should maintain the highest of standards, not ape the formulas of its elders or outdo them in virulence.

It should therefore trouble progressives everywhere that the students at San Francisco State are neither curious nor revolted by the anti-Semitic drivel they are regurgitating. The simple fact that a student movement—even a small one—has been reduced to reflecting the hatred spewed by others should profoundly trouble anyone whose moral principles aim higher than simple nationalism—as should be the case for anyone on the left.

It isn't hard to discover the sources of the drivel being parroted by the students at San Francisco State. In the blood-soaked Middle East of Yasser Arafat and Ariel Sharon, in the increasingly polarized Europe of Jean-Marie le Pen, raw anti-Semitism has increasingly taken the place of intelligent criticism of Israel and its policies. . . .

This is no incidental issue, no negligible distraction. A Left that cares for the rights of humanity cannot cavalierly tolerate the systematic abuse of any people— whatever you think of Israel's or any other country's foreign policy. Any student movement worthy of the name must face the ugly history that long made anti-Semitism the acceptable racism, face it and break from it.

If fighting it unremittingly is not a “progressive” cause, then what kind of progress does progressivism have in mind?<sup>1</sup>

### *CONNECTIONS*

It has been said that college campuses are “barometers” of where society is heading. Barometers measure atmospheric pressure and are therefore useful in forecasting the weather. To what extent, do issues and trends on college campuses forecast the issues that are likely to become important to the nation as a whole?

Todd Gitlin writes, “A student movement should maintain the highest of standards, not ape the formulas of its elders or outdo them in virulence.” What does he believe that students must do to maintain those standards?

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<sup>1</sup> “The Rough Beast Returns” by Todd Gitlin. June 17, 2002. [Motherjones.com](http://Motherjones.com)

Laurie Zoloth compares her campus to “the Weimar Republic with brown shirts it cannot control.” Chapter 3 of the Facing History Resource Book, *Holocaust and Human Behavior*, explores how Adolf Hitler and his followers used the freedoms they enjoyed during the Weimar Republic to incite hatred against Jews and take over Germany so they could build a “racial state.” The readings show that in times of political unrest, social stress, or economic upheaval, people often feel powerless and angry. How do some leaders turn those feelings against vulnerable minorities?

Laurie Zoloth’s e-mail was read by thousands of people she never met or heard of, because her e-mail was posted on hundreds of weblogs or blogs. Anyone with access to a website can create a weblog that promotes all sorts of opinion and links readers to other online sources. Bloggers not only read Zoloth’s account but also debated its meaning. In response to these conversations, one blogger noted:

In the midst of acknowledging complexities and conducting analyses, it is vital not to ignore that *at least one person* felt threatened and in harm’s way—not *only one person*, but *at least one person*. And when one person feels threatened simply because of who [he or she is], that should be enough for *all people* to take [the person’s] feelings seriously, at least until the situation is understood.

What does the blogger mean by the statement that it is “vital not to ignore that *at least one person* felt threatened and in harm’s way—not *only one person*, but *at least one person*”? To what extent do you share his views?