Laura Bieger, Christian Lammert (eds.)

Revisiting the Sixties

Interdisciplinary Perspectives on America’s Longest Decade
North American Studies

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Preface

Laura Bieger and Christian Lammert

It is hard to think of a decade in U.S. history that conjures up a more vivid iconography than the Sixties—decade of the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War, of charismatic leaders and their assassinations, of Woodstock and the Summer of Love. If the objective of this book is essentially historical it aims to bring out the mixed, ambivalent legacy of the Sixties. And yet there is an unease with the kind of periodizing that we perform by using a decade as our designation. Hayden White contemplates this problem in his contribution to this volume, suggesting that, despite all pitfalls of historiographic reasoning, the sheer number of youths and their condition of adolescence can be regarded as the substance of the Sixties from which we can begin to speculate about their meaning. Drawing from this substance, life in the U.S. became thoroughly politicized as unprecedented numbers of people involved themselves in debates over the meaning of ‘America,’ thus generating a spirit of possible change and laying the foundations of the liberal consensus against which a conservative revolution would cast itself with a vengeance in the decades to come—with the effect of dividing U.S. society in deep and troubling ways. Two essays of this volume, the ones by Andrew Gross and Casey Shoop, trace the rise of the New Right from within the Sixties’ social texture, arguing that this often underrated correlation is among the most pertinent legacies of the period—one that asks us to rethink not only our understanding of Cold War conservatism but also of postmodernism’s intricate relation to it.

If the notion of ‘revisiting’ implies a departure from the present, in our particular case this present is marked by the severe crisis into which U.S. society has fallen since the banking and the housing crisis of 2008/09 at the very latest. An earlier volume of this series, American Dream? Eine Weltmacht in der Krise (2011), was dedicated to exploring this contemporary crisis in its economic, political, social, and cultural ramifications. Two years later this troubled state prevails, suggesting that it may very well be, as the volume’s
editors Winfried Fluck and Andreas Etges suggested, a systemic crisis rather than one of those periodical phases of ‘creative destruction’ that modern societies, according to some of their theoreticians, regularly undergo. Assessing the Sixties against the backdrop of this crisis unmistakably informs the essays of this volume. A first wave of scholarship, emerging in the conservative climate of the Reagan presidency, thought of the Sixties as “a name given to a disruption of the late-capitalist ideological and political hegemony, to a disruption of the bourgeois dream of unproblematic production, of everyday life as the bureaucratic society of controlled consumption, of the end of history” (Sayers et al. 1984, 2). These early Sixties scholars embraced the implied promise of renewal “without apology” (this was the subtitle of the first major anthology *The 60s*, published by the editors of the leftist journal *Social Text*). Later accounts have significantly changed in outlook and in tone.

What the current crisis has added to this scholarly disenchantment is two-fold. It has generated a widely shared sense of an imperative need for social activism to counter current problems that takes us back to earlier models—and thus to the Sixties’ unapologetic spirit of rupture and renewal; and it has made scholars ever more cautious with regard to the ways in which these models are entangled—for example, with the rise of New Right conservatism and of neo-liberalism. In doing so, the current crisis has closed, at least in this volume, the ‘generational gap’ that Rick Perlstein has detected in Sixties scholarship: between the period’s veterans and non-veterans in the sense that the former are inclined to mythologize and exceptionalize its meaning while the later contest and revise these tendencies (Perlstein 1996). In the spirit of tracing legacies that are quintessentially mixed and most often ambiguous, the essays of this volume revisit the Sixties both as a distinct historical ‘situation’ (Jameson’s 1984, 178) and with an eye on what prepared the changes erupting at this time and their vast significance for the further course of the ‘American experiment.’ Outstanding as this period certainly was in terms of changing civic, social, cultural, political, intellectual, artistic, and economic life in the U.S. and beyond, one might as well wonder to what degree we are still living on the outskirts of what we have provocatively called the ‘longest decade,’ and whether the current crisis of the ‘American way of life’ and the political system sustaining it will finally bring the era to a close.

In the opening essay Hayden White elaborates how the wave of adolescents that for him constitutes the substance of the Sixties challenged the social imaginary in ways that “generated a spate of laws and legislation which effectively created a generational divide hitherto unheard in American
history,” arguing that this divide continues to structure our perception of the decade. The following two essays turn to the formation of the New Left and its contested legacy: Eli Zaretsky places it within the three intersecting trajectories of the Civil Rights, the Anti-War, and the Women’s Liberation Movements to reassess the commonly assumed notion of its failure, while Blair Taylor traces the “long shadow” of the New Left from its traumatic beginnings in the Sixties up to Occupy Wall Street. Nancy Fraser distinguishes two legacies of feminism—an economically-minded struggle for redistribution and a culturally-minded struggle for recognition—to elaborate feminism’s ambivalent relation to that “epochal shift in the character of capitalism” often referred to as neo-liberalism. Winfried Fluck’s contribution turns to the German university system, arguing that while the student movement brought an end to the ‘Mandarin system’ of academic autocracy that still dominated German universities in the Sixties, its radicalization corroded entire structures of higher learning and was eventually stopped by an emergent professionalization that, although ambivalent in its overall effects, for Fluck provides the only alternative to the radicalized politics into which student activism had evolved by the end of the decade. The next two contributions take us back to the U.S. by focusing on the two presidents most closely associated with the Sixties: Andreas Etges elaborates how John F. Kennedy’s irresistible appeal to Americans of the Sixties was the result of a carefully crafted image, and Lora Ann Viola discusses the infamous Gulf of Tonkin Resolution to demonstrate how Lyndon B. Johnson’s foreign politics were undergirded by a deliberate and calculated use of deception.

The contributions of the second half of the book are more culturally invested: Andrew Gross explores Barry Goldwater’s ‘pastoral individualism’ in tandem with Harlan Ellison’s science fiction novella “A Boy and His Dog” to elucidate the formation of Cold War conservatism through what he calls the ‘idyll of the apocalypse.’ Casey Shoop reads Thomas Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49 as mourning a contemporary loss of the real that is crucial for both understanding the New Right’s challenges to the logic of postmodernism and Pynchon’s literary and political concerns, specifically with paranoia. Florian Sedlmeier positions Ralph Ellison’s posthumously published and notoriously unfinished Three Days Before the Shooting… as a privileged text for exploring the emergence of African American literature. Simon Schleusener’s essay engages with cinematic explorations of insanity, asking how and with what effect they participated in questioning traditional standards of normality. Sulgi Lie reads Antonioni’s Zabriskie Point not as a mimetic survey of the Sixties
but as a dystopian diagnostics of a late-capitalist future dawning at this time and bound to absorbing political utopias beyond its own contemporaneity. Turning in a similar spirit to an early-capitalist past, Vivien Green Fryd discusses Faith Ringgold’s *Slave Rape Series*, conceived amidst the social unrest over women’s and black civil rights, as a vital counter-memory of slavery. The last two essays are concerned with acts of remembering the Sixties themselves. Martin Lüthe explores Motown’s soul music of the period as a collective memory for an aging generation of middle-class American progressives that showcases processes of nostalgization, simplification, and normalization in the service of enshrining a mystical notion of ‘blackness.’ And Elisabeth Paefgen discusses the television series *Mad Men* as a contemporary, ongoing act of remembering the Sixties that artfully exploits our affinities with the period to bring out its multivalent and distinctly gendered sadesses.

Most of the contributions to this volume were first given as papers in the context of a lecture series at the John F. Kennedy Institute at Freie Universität Berlin. In organizing and realizing this series, we were able to draw from the multidisciplinary spectrum of the Kennedy Institute, in which disciplines of the humanities and the social sciences exist side by side and are in a constant dialogue with one another. We were also able to draw from vital traditions of intellectual exchange: with colleagues from the Freie Universität, an international community of scholars, and affiliated research institutions such as the Einstein Group “Crisis of Democracy” headed by Nancy Fraser. We thank the Graduate School for North American Studies, the Einstein Foundation, and the Alumni Association of the John F. Kennedy Institute for their generous support. Michele Chinitz and Mario Rewers have helped by translating the German contributions for this publication. Michele Chinitz, Christian Güse, and Simon Rienäcker have been indispensible in proofreading and editing the articles. Dominik Fungipani has been equally indispensible in setting the manuscript and getting it ready for print.

This volume is published in the year of the fiftieth anniversary of the John F. Kennedy Institute, which was founded in 1963, in the same summer in which its namesake visited Berlin and gave speeches at the Schöneberger Rathaus and the Freie Universität Berlin. Dedicating a lecture series to the Sixties has been a tribute to this anniversary. Luckily, in the case of the Kennedy Institute the legacy of its founding period has been mixed but not ambivalent. As Winfried Fluck reminds us in his contribution to this volume, the history of the Kennedy Institute has been turbulent and even truly melodramatic at times, leading to the brink of closure, and upward from
then on. In any case, its history is closely intertwined with this ‘longest decade’ in American history that continues to remain active and alive in our crisis-ridden present in ways that we set out to explore with this volume.

Berlin, August 2013

Works Cited


My title promises a revelation of the “substance” of “the Sixties” in the United States, what that raucous and potentially revolutionary decade was really about. But obviously no one believes in “substance” in the old-fashioned, metaphysical, or Scholastic sense, as the magma that holds a thing together and constitutes an “essence” without which it would not be what it in fact is. By substance I mean something like the modern chemical idea of the elements of a thing in a (molecular) combination such that if you remove one, the thing ceases to be what it had formerly been. In other words, what I propose is to identify at least one of the elements of the Sixties that, if removed from its makeup or cancelled out in some way by retrospective revision, would deprive the concept, idea, or figure of “the Sixties” of its most prominent identifying traits.

Now one of the elements of “the Sixties,” without which it could not possibly have been what it appears to have been, is the sheer quantity of persons between the ages of twelve and 21 (some 70 million) believed to have been undergoing a process known as “adolescence” in the period between 1960 and 1969.\footnote{According to the World Health Organization, “[a]dolescents are different both from young children and from adults. Specifically, adolescents are not fully capable of understanding complex concepts, or the relationship between behavior and consequences, or the degree of control they have or can have over health decision making including that related to sexual and reproductive health.”} Take away these adolescents or reduce their number by half and you

\footnote{I should note here that, although the term “the Sixties” indicates a plurality, it has become conventional to treat it as a collective singular—as if the congeries of phenomena it references were united by a single substance or shared a single essence. Needless to say, the “substance” alluded to has more in common with the modern chemical idea of substance than with the older, Aristotelian and metaphysical notion thereof.}

\footnote{This is an example of an impossible contradiction cited by Kasabova in “Memory, Memorials, and Commemoration,” 331.}

\footnote{According to the World Health Organization, “[a]dolescents are different both from young children and from adults. Specifically, adolescents are not fully capable of understanding complex concepts, or the relationship between behavior and consequences, or the degree of control they have or can have over health decision making including that related to sexual and reproductive health.”}
would have had something quite other than “the Sixties.” The period might have been just as raucous, contentious, contested, and so on, but it would not have been whatever it is that we think the Sixties to have been. You cannot think away these 70 million youths and their condition of adolescence without changing our notion of the possibilities of what actually happened during the decade that carries the nick—or proper—name of “the Sixties.”

This is obviously not an empirically testable idea but more of an intuition based on my own experience of the Sixties, quite a bit of reading about it, and continuous thinking about it since I first began to realize (in the Seventies?) that what I had lived through in the decade preceding had been nothing other than—“the Sixties.” And the more I pondered the adequacy of this nickname for that decade, the more it seemed to me that the Sixties had “substantially” been a generational experience of a particular kind—the kind indicated in that locution “adolescence,” invented by social scientists in the early twentieth century to name the experience of young persons put “on hold” on the way from puberty to adulthood in a modern urban setting. But more than that: It was the sheer number of persons considered to be adolescent during the Sixties—70 million persons out of a total population that increased from 123 million to around 193 million—that makes of it a statistically significant decade.4

I think now that the name “adolescent” reflected a deep ambiguity about the value or worth of this generation of young persons on the part of their elders, their teachers, and the legal system. In any event, it seems to me that the very term “adolescent” carries with it an ambivalence that has permeated the attitude of Americans towards other processes of development such as economic, legal, educational, and military institutions since World War II, as America has transformed into a society organized for war on a worldwide scale, and a national mode of organization has given way to a global and

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4 “Advances in neuropsychological research have produced a new body of knowledge showing that teen brains remain immature through early adulthood. These new studies have zeroed in on the areas of the brain where impulsivity, risk taking, and poor social judgment are regulated. Because adolescent brains are not fully developed, they do not achieve critical mechanisms of impulsivity and behavioral control until perhaps age 20 or beyond.” Jeffrey Fagan, “Adolescents, Maturity and the Law.”
transnational one. In the half-century after World War II, America achieved the status of a fully-realized capitalist system, only to discover that the utopia promised by capitalism created as many divisions between the haves and have-nots of society as the God of Calvinism. One of the biggest casualties of this process of division has been the youth, which has effectively been expelled from the labor force of every industrialized nation in the world.

America has always been celebrated for its *youthfulness*, its newness, freshness, prospects for the future, and so on. At the same time, however, due to its Puritanical heritage, it has also been heavily suspicious of youth, for its disorderliness, its passion, its lack of discipline, its delinquency. The party of Puritanism values nothing more than (male) adulthood, the state of maturity, conformance to the Law, devotion to duty, self-discipline, and work “for the greater glory of God” rather than for the enjoyment that material wealth makes possible. At the same time, however, “the Protestant ethic” which had once instilled “the spirit of capitalism” with moral fiber and resistance to material self-indulgence, now gave way to a new “ethic” of narcissistic self-regard and a culture of consumerism necessary to keep the capitalist machine geared to the infinite increase in the rate of profit even at the expense of the health of the Earth itself.

In the immediate postwar period, the older Puritan ethic remained the official doctrine of the religious, legal, and educational institutions, but the practices required by a society increasingly geared to consumption as an end in itself were at direct odds with this way of thinking. The generation of the Sixties was the first to grow up with exposure to new media whose main purpose was to fuel an orgy of consumerism while maintaining illusions of the traditional family, work, and knowledge, values of an older preindustrial and even agrarian kind. It is small wonder that “adolescence” loomed in the imaginary of middle-class parents as both an extended age of childlike innocence and a stage of life providing temptations and dangers to youth formerly unknown. “Adolescents” were an ideal target group for an advertising industry aimed at creating a huge population of consumers with adult desires and, because they tended to be still dependent on their parents, with the leisure to spend most of their time thinking about or actually indulging the manufactured fantasies of the modern (noir) city. At the same time, the American war machine’s expanding investment in military adventures, such

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5 “The Andy Griffin Show”—presenting a world of sunny, rural, and preindustrial village life—was the most-watched TV program of the Sixties.
as those of the Cold War, Cuba, and Vietnam, meant that these adolescents had to be propagandized to die for their country as well.

It was in the Sixties that adolescence achieved a legal status that constituted a reason for establishing a host of social, medical, and educational “services” meant to treat adolescence as a kind of illness and the adolescent as a kind of “delinquent” arrestable on suspicion of being inclined to commit a crime, even when he or she had not actually committed one. It is little wonder that the kind of crimes committed by American military forces in Vietnam were laid to their contamination by the adolescent culture of “sex, drugs, and rock ’n’ roll” promoted by the American “culture industry” since the late Fifties. In 1957 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of a ban on display of Elvis Presley’s hips, and in January 1959 the Mutual Broadcasting Company forbade the playing of “rock ’n’ roll” records on its member radio stations. All of this resistance to the new music and recreational practices of the Sixties generation faded away once the monetary gain from their promotion had been recognized. The original culture of resistance was progressively assimilated to mainstream (white, corporate, market) by commodification and mediatization, which may account for the increasing violence of exploited minorities for whom assimilation meant dissolution of ethnic, gender, or class identities.

In many respects, the socio-dynamics of the Sixties can be comprehended as a result of a new generation's lived experience of what Marxist historians call “contradiction,” social psychologists have labeled as “double-bind,” and others, of a more artistic or literary bent, call enigma, paradox, or irony. And no one lived this experience of contradiction more than that cohort of Sixties' young people—70 million in number—caught in the web of contradictions called “adolescence.” Quite simply, what Gregory Bateson called the “double-bind” consisted of that quintessential social situation—explained by Aristotle.

6 “More importantly, the 1950s themselves were not entirely a golden age, despite the gains. The infant and child mortality rate at the end of the decade was still four times as high as it is today. In 1955, two-thirds of black children and more than one-fifth of their white counterparts lived in poverty. Nearly a million children with disabilities were denied public schooling as uneducable, and 40 percent of kids dropped out of school before graduating high school. Happy sitcom reruns to the contrary, the parents of 50 years ago were not insulated from fears about youth violence or children’s poor academic achievement. In 1955 alone, Congress considered nearly 200 bills aimed at combating what was seen as an epidemic of juvenile delinquency. Flesch's 1955 bestseller, Why Johnny Can't Read, announced that ‘3,500 years of civilization’ were being lost to bad schools and incompetent teachers. It is neither feasible nor desirable to return to the patterns of mid-20th century childhood.” Mintz, “The Evolution of Childhood” (emphasis mine).
Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Marcuse as the very basis of life in society—in which, by trying to live up to one principle of law, morality, or custom, you inevitably and even necessarily violate another. Thus, for example, the double bind of the bourgeois father’s order to his son to “be like me” and, at the same time, “be an individual.” Or: The idea that one has to be ruthless in the pursuit of economic gain but, at the same time, “love thy neighbor.” “Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains”: how is this possible, asks Rousseau. To which the Puritan capitalist answers: to him who has, it shall be given; and to him who has not, it shall be taken away even that which he has.

The condition of “adolescence” differed from the notion of childhood by the ambiguity of its moral significance. Presumed to be a stage between childhood and adulthood, a stage “on the way” to adulthood, the “teen-ager” was supposed to have all the duties of an adult—including the duty of work and military service—but none or only some of the rights.7 The pathos of this condition of contradiction endured by young people in postwar America was the theme of many books and films of the early postwar period, such as the James Dean movie Rebel Without a Cause (1955), J.D. Salinger’s novel Catcher in the Rye (1951), and above all Joseph Heller’s Catch 22 (1961). Heller’s message is contained in the “catch” built into the rule which allows one to apply for relief from combat on grounds of insanity, but presumes that anyone applying for such relief must be sane, must be therefore faking his condition, and consequently can be denied his request. A whole culture of contradiction—in the form of enigmas, paradoxes, puzzles and mysteries—is posited as the basis of Thomas Pynchon’s novel The Crying of Lot 49 (1966), in which one enigmatic situation is “resolved” by being passed over to another situation equally enigmatic, in a kind of (noir) detective story—an inquiry into the nature of the “legacy” America provides its citizens—without an identifiable crime, on the one hand, or a solution of this crime, on the other.

7 It was generally thought that the Vietnam War was fought by young men of color under twenty years of age, but fact sheets issued under the name of “The Westmoreland Papers” had it that the average age of the military serving in Vietnam was 22 with 80% “Caucasians.” Nonetheless, the number of casualties and wounded in this war was unacceptable precisely to the white, middle class parents who wanted to protect their children from military service. The Draft was discontinued in 1973 and the military services embarked on a path of “professionalization” which would effectively remove military service from the concerns of middle class parents by the time the wars of the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan and Iraq happened. Vietnam War statistics can be found online through the World History Center.
The contradictions of adolescent life in the America of the Sixties can serve as another instantiation of the paradigmatic contradictions contained in the Constitution of the United States. In the Bill of Rights appended to this document, certain rights (of assembly, conscience, and expression, to bear arms, enjoy “due process” in courts of law, etc.) are extended to all citizens, but with the tacit proviso that these rights pertain only to adult, white, male property owners. Women, people of color, children, homosexuals, the poor and homeless, and all of the “Others” in American society were consigned to a subaltern position in the social system. And although there were movements aimed to secure these rights for those denied them, it was not until the Sixties that women, people of color, and youths took to the streets to militate for them and laid the groundwork for later political action that would in fact extend them (at least, in part) to women, people of color, youths, etc.

Was it the general weight of adolescent disillusionment that reactivated the various subaltern groups to demand their rights in the Sixties and beyond? Surely it was the experience of young people in the exercise of their rights to assemble, to protest, and to criticize government agencies for their prosecution of a war against the Vietnamese people and their experience of police and military forces’ brutality in opposing them, which dispelled the illusion that “the law” was on the side of the righteous rather than a force for the defense of the property of the wealthy. By the end of the Sixties, every adolescent knew what every occupant of a ghetto, slum, or barrio had long since known: If you report a crime to the police, you are as likely to be accused of a crime as given aid in seeking relief from one.

The white, suburban middle class of America did not know this, but their adolescent children found it out soon enough whenever they tried to exercise their rights of assembly, free speech, and opinion in public protest of policies and programs they deemed unjust. And the sheer weight of numbers—that 70 million persons of different genders, ethnicities, social class membership, languages, etc.—made of adolescents a force that could not be and ultimately was not ignored by the forces of law and order. This is attested by the number of laws and statutes passed in the Sixties and Seventies directed at the repression of adolescent and other “deviant” (or in Nixonian language “hedonistic”) activities.\(^8\)

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\(^8\) The so-called “war on drugs” was launched by President Richard Nixon in 1972 and mandatory sentences of a minimum 15 years became conventional across the United States by 1973–74.
The quotation used as an epigraph for my essay is ironic, being an example of substantialist thinking which presumes that childhood and adulthood are utterly different “properties” and so could not exist in the same “being” without producing a monster, such as a child with adult properties or an adult with childlike features. But in fact adolescents have been constituted as a genus of childlike human beings which, according to the doxa of a certain modernity, possess many of the physical properties of adults but few if any of the mental and moral virtues thereof and therefore have to endure the legal status of children. These “adolescents” are treated in law and in fact as being “delinquent” in some way, as “lacking” in the mental and moral virtues that would allow them to assume the rights of a fully gown American citizen. It is my contention that the onset of a wave of adolescents—the 70 million of them in the decade between 1960 and 1970, added to a population of roughly 150 million souls—so disrupted the social imaginary of American society that it generated a spate of laws and legislation which effectively created a generational divide hitherto unheard in American history. It was this divide, I think, that accounts in large part for the ambivalence with which historians and other social analysts have typically viewed “the Sixties.”

With these remarks in mind, I am prepared to try to follow the instructions for our lecture series, which are: [1] to take a closer look at the Sixties from different disciplinary perspectives, focusing on important events, developments, and persons in the cultural, social, political, and economic life, and [2] discuss the legacy of the Sixties for present America. Since my discipline is history, this means that I should try to deal with “the Sixties” historically, which is to say, “contextualize” the Sixties, set this moment of American social-cultural history into its original spatial and temporal context, and determine what if anything of it remains alive and active as a component of America’s “present.” But there is a “catch” attached to any attempt to execute these instructions. As I have argued elsewhere, “context” is an ambiguous concept: how extended in space and time would this context be? Moreover, where does the event end and the context begin? Finally, what is the nature of the relationship between the event and its context? Is it causal, mutually implicative, structural, expressive, or what?

9 Thus, in one of the most recent overviews of the late twentieth century in America (Rodgers, Age of Fracture), the Sixties are treated as a period of transition between Postwar and Postmodern U.S. culture and society. Most of the assessments by writers who participated in the events of the Sixties tend to give it a positive valuation. See, for example, Sixties without Apology, ed. Sayres et al.; especially Jameson, “Periodizing the Sixties”; and Perlstein, “Who Owns the Sixties.”
Beyond all this, what are we to do with the term “legacy”? Is it to be construed in its legal, its biological, or its historical meaning? Which is to say: Is “the Sixties” to be treated as a part of the genetic endowment of “America” which subsequent generations must live with or is it to be thought of as a cultural matrix which can be accepted or rejected as an element of American character, as one chooses an ethics or a career, or a new hair style, an automobile, or a religion? In other words, does “the Sixties” belong to the (economic, technological, physical) Base of American life in the twenty-first century or does it belong to the social and cultural Superstructure? Is it something we cannot deny as an element of our current makeup or is it something we can take or leave according to whatever uses we can make of it in “present America”?

The “catch” is that much of this depends on how we construe the “science” of historical studies. Or rather, what kind of science do we think historical studies to be? These questions are especially relevant to the way we think about “the Sixties,” because it was during the Sixties that, in America especially, “history” lost its status as an authoritative story of how the national identity was formed and historians ceased to be accepted as custodians of the genealogical record of the nation.

Already by the end of the nineteenth century, history had lost its capacity to distinguish adequately between scientific and mythical accounts of the past and serve as an antidote to the new kind of ideologies spawned in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. In the first half of the twentieth century, (positivist) philosophers had deprived history of its status as a science of general laws of causality, experimental control of data, and ability to predict the future. Then, the ease with which professional historians all over the world adapted to the ideological requirements of the totalitarian states of the interwar period undermined history’s status as the enlightened or progressive discipline it was thought to be during the liberal nineteenth century.

History’s failure to adapt the methods of the “behavioral” social sciences emerging from World War II resulted in its derogation in the Sixties and Seventies to the status of an advocate of the social status quo, a story told by (white, upper class, European) men, about men, to other men—which explained how whatever happened to be the case, in any given disposition of power, wealth, and privilege, had its good reasons and could be questioned only at the risk of disrupting cosmic order. In short, by the end of the Sixties, straight history—bourgeois history, professional history—had become the conservative science par excellence. Whence the sudden revival in the Sixties
and into the Seventies of interest in new or older, alternative modes of historical inquiry: Marxist, Maoist, history from below, everyday life history, *longue durée* (or what might be thought of as an anticipation of ecological) history, people’s history, women’s history, gay history, postcolonial (and, later, subaltern) history, and the like.¹⁰

History—understood as at once a distinctive mode of human being in the world, a reserve of knowledge or at least information about the human past, a basis for an a-religious and non-metaphysical but nonetheless *foundational* science of humanity—now appeared to be as “mythical” or at least as arbitrary as the ideologies and fables it had once claimed to have displaced. History now seemed to be whatever one wished to make of it, a kind of fiction or myth in its own right, which succored that strain of Existentialist thought (especially of Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Camus; of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Dostoyevsky) that flourished in U.S. intellectual circles in the immediate postwar period and that had already achieved a popular currency in novels and films. In fact, existentialism was intrinsically a-historical inasmuch as it presupposed a past made up of discrete *actes gratuites* (or random events) that bore no substantive relationship to one another and were to be considered “real” only to the extent that they had been retrospectively chosen as one’s own. Any custom or practice distilled into institutional procedures was held to be “inauthentic” insofar as it had only its age to commend it.

These attitudes towards the past and (establishmentarian) history color any possible thought we might advance regarding “the legacy of the Sixties for present America”—because the dominant attitude of “the Sixties” towards the past rendered the very idea of a “legacy” suspect. Inherited institutions, values, and authority were suspect precisely because they had been handed down from the past.¹¹ The youth and especially the middle class youth of America who were on their way to maturity during the Sixties not only did not feel particularly grateful for their inheritance from the past, but they had more than enough reason to regard their future as having already

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¹⁰ It was this dispersal and ambiguation of the very idea of history that led members of the academic and intellectual establishment to accuse “the Sixties” of a want of historical consciousness. Members of the Old Left—intellectuals still linked to one or another versions of the older Communist International—were similarly critical of the lack of a proper historical consciousness amongst the utopian visionaries of “the Sixties.” But by “proper” historical consciousness they meant “Marxist” historical consciousness—condemned by Foucault as irredeemably of and therefore limited in relevance to the nineteenth century only.

¹¹ “Never trust anyone over thirty,” was a popular motto and graffito of the period.
arrived. Beneficiaries of an extraordinary postwar economic boom, targets of advertising blitzes designed to confuse identity with commodity consumption, products derived from child-care theories and psychological/pedagogical ideas designed to reinforce ego and link growth to pleasure, the youth of the Sixties—along with the rest of the population but especially women—were encouraged to pursue “youthfulness” as an aim good in itself rather than think of it as a stage of life on the way to maturity. The triumph of what psychoanalysis called the pleasure principle over the reality principle, along with the idea that society itself and especially the institution of the nuclear family were the principal causes of mental illness, celebrated in books like N.O. Brown’s *Life Against Death* and R.D. Laing’s *The Divided Self*, along with a general turn to mood-altering or “recreational” drug-use, created an atmosphere of anti-repressiveness which increased in direct proportion to the attempts of the law to control it.

But then the early Sixties revealed the illusionary nature of these utopian visions of the future. First, there was the string of the assassinations of esteemed leaders: President John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. Next, there occurred a succession of events which revealed the extent to which America was becoming a war society: the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962; the escalation in 1965 of what had been a virtually secret war in Vietnam; a sharp increase in the Draft along with American troop casualties in Vietnam of 14,000 in 1965 alone. Then a chain of race riots, which had begun during WWII but continued in Detroit, Los Angeles, and a number of smaller cities into the Sixties, bared the truth about America’s chronic racism. Events like these showed the extent to which the roseate life of the American middle class, increasingly suburbanized and dedicated to consumerism as a way of life, had been purchased at the expense of groups—women, people of color, young persons, children, homeless, etc.—that had been routinely excluded and exploited by a system designed to serve the white, wealthy, and ensconced upper class. The disparity between the golden “promises” contained in the myths of America and the realities of a capitalist system, devoted to the increase of the rate of profit at any cost, constituted the “substance” of the Sixties in America and accounts in large part, I wish to argue, for both the political activism of its adolescents and the harshness of the system’s reaction to their demands for reform.

The Woodstock Music Festival of August 15–18, 1969 in rural New York State, with its manifest disregard for the values, customs, and laws of

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12 For more on this theme of psychoanalysis and history, see Brown, *Life against Death*. © Campus Verlag GmbH
“straight” society, was for the establishment a fulfillment of all of its worst fantasies about “flaming youth.” Woodstock was an event that was for, by, and in praise of youth, sexual license, drug-use, and a pastiche of other “alternative” cultural practices. Again, the sheer size of the event—with some 500,000 participants, 34 musical acts, public nudity, sexuality, and profanity—made of it a politically rebellious, not to say revolutionary event. The popularity of the event and its rapidly achieved status as a symbol of a new consciousness among youth, combined with its celebration of a new kind of music, new kinds of media, and a whole new semiotic, gave it a political heft and weightiness that immediately resulted in legislation (the Nixon war on drugs of 1971 and years following) that could only be interpreted as against youth, against pleasure, and for the military-police state that many citizens saw emerging with the Vietnam War.

Obviously, there are many similarities between the protests, riots, and demonstrations of the Sixties in America and earlier internal and fratricidal social conflicts. But one difference remains between the Sixties and earlier periods of discontent, and this is the element of youth-as-adolescent, which remains an inextinguishable part of Sixties’ social protest, the image of a utopian ideal of sexual freedom, the vision of a community of love and political freedom, and a culture antithetical to the inherited “American dream” celebrated in the Hollywood films of the Fifties. Already at the beginning of the Seventies, the forces of conservatism had cast criticism of the Vietnam War, the use of drugs, and the sexual revolution as a veritable “plot against America,” driven by the kind of “moral poverty” (Secretary of Education William Bennett) that could best be countered by harsh new laws, mandatory sentences for offenders who used drugs for “recreation,” and prosecution of those who had sought to evade military service by flight abroad.

The irony of the “war on drugs” launched in the Seventies by Nixon and Company lay in the fact that the Sixties generation had grown up witnessing the promotion by the medical profession and the advertising industry of a whole new array of mood-altering drugs (Librium, Valium, Xanax) guaranteed to make those who could afford them “normal” once more and free of the kind of anxieties that a modern way of life inevitably fomented.13 Increasingly harsh measures were brought against users of “illegal” drugs such as marijuana, cocaine, and heroin. Indeed, by 2005, more than half of the 7 million American adults jailed or on parole were serving sentences much more severe

13 As cited in Wikipedia, “Diazepam [Valium] was the top-selling pharmaceutical in the United States from 1969 to 1982, with peak sales in 1978 2.3 billion tablets.”
than anything laid upon “white collar” criminals in high finance and the professions. It is hardly accidental that of the inhabitants of the U.S. prison and jail system, most are poor and some 80 percent are people of color.

But there is one event which can serve as a symbol of the substance of the Sixties and can serve as a fitting symbolic end to the decade: I mean the Stonewall riots which followed upon a police raid on a Mafia-owned homosexual bar in Greenwich Village, in Manhattan, on the night of June 25, 1969. This event may be thought of as the rebellion of the most abject fraction of that wide constituency of “delinquents,” members of American society defined by their presumed “lack” of what it took to grow into a law-abiding and law-enforcing adult male, patriarch, gun-owner, and parent. The Stonewall Inn was known to attract a young, poor, and marginalized homosexual, transvestite, and transgendered clientele; it was also known to be a bar which regularly paid off the police for the right to host homosexuals illegally and which connived with the police to stage regular raids of the premises in which homosexuals would be beaten, arrested, and jailed as a matter of routine. This double exploitation of homosexuals, by organized crime on the one hand and the police on the other, was emblematic (in my opinion) of the treatment of all marginalized groups in U.S. society, of which, as I have argued, the millions of adolescents forced to defer the full exercise of their rights as adult citizens constituted the largest group.

On the night of June 28, 1969, however, under sustained intimidation and brutalization, the patrons of Stonewall not only fought back, they forced the retreat of the police and sustained their rioting for three nights, with growing crowds of sympathizers and news media willing to document the brutality and injustice with which the rioters had been treated. The event inaugurated the Gay Pride movement and promoted the demand for not only full rights of citizenship for gays but also for the recognition of a humanity that had been denied them from time immemorial. This event, coming at the end of the chronological Sixties, along with the Woodstock Festival following in August of the same year, really marked the beginning of the last phase of the symbolic Sixties. It would take another five years before the Vietnam War would end, the Draft closed down, the first of a series of economic crises, and a media blitz designed to turn America into a culture of consumers that could supposedly solve its problems by “going shopping” (Bush, Obama in response to the recession of 2008) would succeed in pulling the teeth of the political and social movements unleashed in the Sixties by young people who had lived the “double bind” of adolescence.
Works Cited


Introduction: Rethinking the New Left

Of the three lefts that have run through American history—the abolitionists, the socialists and Communists and the New Left—the third was at once the most short-lived and the most enduring. If it seemed like an explosive burst of rebellious energy that burnt itself out by the early Seventies, it also set the contours for what remains the left of our day. Of the three it is also the most difficult to comprehend, in part because it is so new, and its historiography is just beginning. By the New Left I mean what was called “the movement,” the activists of the Sixties who intervened in the three great mass movements of the time, civil rights, anti-war and feminism. In calling itself “new,” the New Left sought to distinguish itself from the “old left,” i.e., the Popular Front. The difference lay in the different stages of capitalism from which the two lefts arose. From the “old left” point of view, “the emancipation of man from nature” depended on building up collective institutions, such as trade unions, and on gaining influence and ultimately control over the state. By contrast, the New Left arose not from the accumulation of labor, but from the release of (first-world) labor from direct engagement in material production, in other words from the scientific, technological and educational revolution that has produced the wealth of our time.

Like its predecessors, the New Left emerged at a critical turning point in American history. The key to understanding the crisis lies in the unraveling of the post-World War Two order, the so-called “American Century.” The years between World War Two and the Sixties had been the high point of American hegemony. At the end of the war the U.S. possessed two thirds of the world’s gold reserves, produced half of the world’s manufacturing output, half of its ships, and was by far the world’s largest exporter (Kennedy 1987, 358). The men who built the postwar order—almost all of them bankers and

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1 This essay is adapted from my Why America Needs a Left: A Historical Argument (2012).
Wall Street lawyers—believed that the Depression “had been due largely to the breakdown of the global trading and financial system, and the consequent fragmentation of the world into would-be autarchic national economies or empires” (Arrighi 2009, 341). They sought to build an international order centered on a hegemonic nation with the moral authority and military might to enforce stability. As it developed, this order included a stable international trade and monetary system, but also access to oil and other commodity resources at stable prices. The result was huge defense spending, known as “military Keynesianism,” the “invisible government” of the CIA, and a series of wars and interventions mostly aimed at blocking state-centered development in the Third World (Keohane 1984, 137).

Beginning in the late Fifties this settlement began to crumble. On the one hand, the European recovery—signaled by the creation of the Common Market in 1957—meant that Western European economies were gaining independence from the U.S. Japan, similarly, was emerging from U.S. tutelage and becoming an economic rival. On the other hand, following Stalin’s death in 1953 the Communist world also began to lose its coherence. The Sino-Soviet split and the rise of neutralism, especially in Yugoslavia, were symptoms. Most importantly, a whole host of third world countries including Egypt, Indonesia, Ghana, the Congo, Guatemala and Iran challenged America’s global supremacy without becoming Communist; the 1955 Bandung Conference of neutrals offered an alternative to World War Two’s bipolar settlement. The New Left emerged at this juncture, its very name signaling that it too was moving beyond the cold war framework.

The New Left also emerged at a turning point in American economic history. Military Keynesianism was industrially based. The U.S. used its global reach to secure markets and raw materials, and to prop up weak trading partners, but the gains of empire were returned to America’s domestic economy where they were used to moderate the business cycle, insure relatively high employment, and sustain a social wage through infrastructural spending, provision of services, and income support. The years in which the New Left emerged and flourished, however, saw the beginnings of the shift away from industry and toward finance, consumerism and marketization. The great megaliths of the Keynesian era—automobiles, consumer durables, steel, oil, and electricity—turned into multinational corporations, and began to invest abroad. An economy based on goods production aimed at the masses gave way to one oriented to services tailored to the individual. The end of colonial empires and the rising importance of global trade brought racial, ethnic,
and national differences into new prominence. Higher education expanded, just as market forces helped consolidate a generation-specific youth identity, creating the social basis for a new kind of left.

The New Left can scarcely be said to have self-consciously understood the shift that the U.S. went through in the Sixties, since the greater part of the change was not manifest until the following decade, the era of “deindustrialization” when the U.S. went off the gold standard, and neo-liberalism triumphed. But the radical youth of the Sixties did grasp that the country was at a turning point. With the benefit of hindsight we can see that the centralized mass production economy of the post war years was going to develop spontaneous, decentralized forms of self-organization, whether marketized or not. We can also see that the relative global position of the U.S. was going to decline, as the world became increasingly polycentric, if not Asia-centered. But the meaning of these changes remained to be decided. Would they deepen the project of bringing equality to people of subordinate status or would they serve as a way of disguising exploitation. This was the question faced by the New Left.

The solution urged by the New Left was that the country would support, albeit critically, the newly emerging and democratizing forces of Asia, Africa and Latin America, which, at that point, often took a revolutionary turn. Domestically, too, there were two possibilities latent in the disintegration of centralized, state-centered Keynesianism and the emergence of new, decentralized forms of self-organization. On the one hand, self-organization could mean marketization, finance-driven, neo-liberal growth; on the other, it could mean non-market forms of local, spontaneous, democratic coordination, such as those championed by the New Left. In the latter case, the country would search for new participatory forms of self-organization, guided by principles of equality. The “failure” of the New Left, insofar as it has been a failure, has meant that the country domestically and internationally has not pursued the progressive possibility.

Largely originating in the universities, originally especially the universities of the Deep South, the students of the New Left were in a good position to shape which direction the country would take, if only because, as UC Berkeley Chancellor Clark Kerr said, the universities had replaced the automobile as the driving force in the economy. In fact, however, if the New Left can be considered a student movement, it was one that rejected meritocratic competitiveness and technocratic specialization in favor of a larger conception of equality and an extra-academic tradition of critical thought.