

Then and Now: New Examinations of the Sixties

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Then and Now: New Examinations of the Sixties

Steve Hewitt

John A. Andrew III, *The Other Side of the Sixties: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of Conservative Politics* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 1997).

Doug Dowd, *Blues for America: A Critique, A Lament, and Some Memories* (New York: Monthly Review Press 1997).

Ron Jacobs, *The Way the Wind Blew: A History of the Weather Underground* (New York: Verso 1997).

Staughton Lynd, *Living Inside Our Hope: A Steadfast Radical's Thoughts on Rebuilding the Movement* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1997).

James Tracy, *Direct Action: Radical Pacifism from the Union Eight to the Chicago Seven* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1996).

THE DECADE HAUNTS US STILL. The 1960s — a time of change, hope, happiness, repression, violence, and death — is beginning to collect biographers. The variety of both those writing about the period and what they have to say demonstrates that the meanings of the era are being constantly contested. Since 1980 it has been the American right that has dominated public interpretations of the period. Thus the 1960s have been dismissed as a period of excess that spawned a wide variety of social problems over the last three decades. Even prominent participants in some of the movements now under fire have joined the chorus of critics.¹ These assaults have been given a public prominence because of the ability of the political right to

¹Two examples being Peter Collier and David Horowitz, editors of *Ramparts* magazine in the 1960s. It is an understatement to say that their views have changed considerably since then. Peter Collier and David Horowitz, *Destructive Generation: Second Thoughts About the Sixties* (New York, 1989).

win majority support from the 50 per cent of the United States' electorate that bother to vote.

Despite the right's domination of the public forum, alternative voices and accounts of the period are appearing. These works represent a mixture of memoirs and histories by academics, participants, and interested observers. Although the exclusive focus of these books is not on the 1960s, it dominates in some way all of the accounts. Some cover the same territory in different ways. Others provide new insight into different areas. One of the best to appear in all respects is former member of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), Todd Gitlin's *The Sixties*, an excellent blend of politics, culture, memoir, and social history.² Less successful is Charles Kaiser's popular history, *1968 in America*, which despite its claim to the contrary, is primarily a history of the American political elite.³

The crop of books being reviewed here is divided between the work of historians looking back and the memories of actual participants. In the latter category are James Tracy's *Direct Action*, John A. Andrew III's *The Other Side of the Sixties*, and Ron Jacobs' *The Way the Wind Blew*. All three target very different aspects of the 1960s. Jacobs and Tracy chronicle protest opposites on the left. The latter looks at the work of pacifists, especially in the first half of the 1960s, whereas Jacobs's study begins at the end of the 1960s and continues into the subsequent two decades and quite different dynamics. Andrew's study examines those at the opposite end of the political spectrum from the first two groups, specifically the American right-wing youth organization Young Americans for Freedom.

Pacifism and violence represent polar opposites to countering the power of the American state. Studies of these two approaches are similarly diverse. By far the more successful of the two is the work of academic historian James Tracy. In fact, Tracy's work is important for several reasons. First, he demonstrates that the 1960s was not the era of isolation that many have portrayed it in the past. He meticulously traces the roots of some of the radical pacifists who came by their values through religion and who would be involved in the anti-Vietnam war movement in the 1960s. The best example of such a person is Dave Dellinger, who found himself as a defendant in the famous trial of the "Chicago Seven" in 1969, but who had also served time in prison in the 1940s as one of the less well-known "Union Eight," a group opposed on the basis of religious principles to the American military draft. Dellinger was of a different generation than his Chicago co-defendants. Neither a member of the "Old Left," a term usually applied to Communists, or of the "New Left," such as the younger men on trial with him, he belonged to an "Older Left," one with ties to the Social Gospel movement.⁴

²Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (1987; New York 1993).

³Charles Kaiser, *1968 in America: Music, Politics, Chaos, Counterculture, and the Shaping of a Generation* (New York 1988).

⁴For a study of the "old left" see Robert Cohen, *When the Old Left Was Young: Student Radicals and America's First Mass Student Movement, 1929-1941* (New York 1993).

One of the strengths of Tracy's book is the quality of the analysis that he brings to bear. A unique part of this approach is his effort, albeit brief, to employ the tools of gender analysis upon the almost exclusively male collection of leaders. The pacifist material produced frequently reflected male-gendered language and concerns and reflected traditional gender stereotypes which, as Tracy notes, was common to many of the movements on the left in the 1950s and 1960s.

One further interesting aspect drawn out by Tracy, and something that deserves more attention, is how even protest from the left was couched in traditional American icons of individualism and freedom and enmity toward the all-powerful state. Some of the rhetoric and tactics, such as refusing to pay taxes, of course with the important pacifist component left out, would not seem out of the ordinary with today's far right in the US, especially the anti-government ramblings of the various militia movements.⁵

If Dellinger's involvement in the "Chicago Seven" trial bridged the generations between the "Older Left" and the New Left, it also marked a transition between pacifist tactics and the use of violence to bring about radical or revolutionary change. The latter approach, and the new era ushered in by the 1970s, is documented in Ron Jacobs's disappointing book, *The Way the Wind Blew*. While useful as a basic chronicle and chronology of the Weathermen, later known as the less sexist Weather Underground, that is the extent of its value. It provides a conventional narrative account of this controversial movement. Jacobs, in opposition to many pacifists from the era, argues that this change in tactics did not symbolize a break from the values of the New Left, specifically the Students for a Democratic Society, but instead represented a new phase.

The book fails in several respects. First, there is the aforementioned lack of analysis, especially regarding the motivation of those who became involved in the movement, and in some cases lost their lives, had their lives destroyed or destroyed the lives of others. Jacobs notes in his introduction that he is consciously seeking to avoid dwelling on the "personalities" of those involved, (vii) but following this course also prevents a greater understanding of the motivation of the movement's members. The strong participation of women in this movement, for example, cries out for greater analysis.

More significantly, Jacobs fails to take a stand on the validity of the use of violence by the Weather Underground. This retreat on his part is regrettable. As critics on the left noted at the time, the turn to bombs represented a dead end. Employing violence also meant dancing to the tune of the American state, specifically the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Such tactics would inevitably be unsuccessful from the simple point of view that those advocating them were outgunned. Certainly, an escalation of violence, one of the goals of those who planted bombs did occur, but inevitably this would be and was used by the powerful to tarnish the

⁵For more on the language and activities of the far right, see David H. Bennett, *The Party of Fear: The American Far Right from Nativism to the Militia Movement* (New York 1995).

wider movement for social change. In fact, had the Weather Underground not existed the FBI might have invented it as part of the Bureau's Counter Intelligence Program against the New Left (COINTELPRO-NEW LEFT). Evidence already exists of the FBI promoting violence in the African-American community in an effort to discredit organizations such as the Black Panthers. Indeed the FBI even played a role in the creation of an "account" of the New Left that appeared in the mid-1960s and which openly advocated violence.⁶

Finally, the study of the Weather Underground suffers from the conventional nature of the sources used by the author. Relying on newspapers and published material probably contributes to the overemphasis on chronology and narrative at the expense of analysis. One obvious source missed by Jacobs is the FBI's files on the Weather Underground that have been cleared under the Freedom of Information Act and are available to researchers. While not without problems, such sources can often yield tremendous information as police forces often played a pack rat role collecting any relevant material.⁷

At the opposite end of the political spectrum from the focus of the books by Tracy and Jacobs is the Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), the subject of John A. Andrew's *The Other Side of the Sixties*. The YAF began in 1960 as a counter-balance to what was deemed as the overwhelming hold that "liberalism" had on the United States. Never appealing to anything but a small group of right-wing ideologues, the movement has been resurrected by Andrew principally because many YAFers played a significant role in the arrival of Ronald Reagan to office in 1980.

Andrew's study is a useful exploration of the mentality of leading elements of the American New Right. It was a movement driven, according to the author, by three main motivations: libertarianism; a reaction against the increasing secularization of society; and anti-communism. If Andrew's book serves no other purpose it, like other recent works, is a useful reminder of the strength of anti-communism in the United States in the second half of the 20th century.⁸

Throughout the book Andrew attempts to construct a parallel between the right and left — the YAF is the Students for a Democratic Society of the right. Both raged against the status quo. Each remained absent from the circles of political power. And so it goes. Andrew, however, exaggerates the parallels. While, as he suggests,

⁶Noam Chomsky, "Introduction" in Nelson Blackstock, ed., *COINTELPRO: The FBI's Secret War on Political Freedom* (New York 1976), 9-12. Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* (Boston 1990), 37-99; Phillip Abbott Luce, *The New Left* (New York 1966).

⁷Athan Theoharis, ed., *The FBI: An Annotated Bibliography and Research Guide* (New York 1994), 60.

⁸John Kenneth White, *Still Seeing Red: How the Cold War Shapes the New American Politics* (Boulder, Colorado 1997); Ellen Schrecker, *Many are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (New York 1998).

YAFers may have remained outsiders on the American political scene — witness their hero Barry Goldwater's disastrous 1964 presidential campaign — the situation was not the same when it came to their relationship to some institutions of the American state. YAFers, for example, warmly embraced "Operation Abolition," a propaganda film designed to portray those involved in anti-House Un-American Activities Committee protest in San Francisco in 1960 as Communists. Similarly, they distributed 250,000 copies of J. Edgar Hoover's "Communist Target — Youth," a publication reflecting the same themes and goals as the film. William F. Buckley, the movement's inspirational father and wealthy sugar daddy, was recruited by the CIA while at Yale and also served as an informer for the FBI.⁹ Tom Huston, a prominent YAF member, had a brief career in the Nixon administration as the designer of a coordinated intelligence effort to be directed against the anti-war movement and one which would have violated both the civil liberties of the targets and American law. Even J. Edgar Hoover found Huston's scheme excessive.¹⁰

In suggesting that another parallel between the YAF and the SDS was that both faced state repression, Andrew goes several steps too far. He seeks to equate tactics used against the right with those used against the left. In the case of the former, the Kennedy administration used the Internal Revenue Service to investigate the financial backing of elements of the far right. Andrew, however, admits the YAF was not subject to this treatment. Rather, it faced the "administration's scrutiny." (153) Such actions, while certainly reprehensible, pale in comparison with what the FBI did against organizations on the radical left. To compare is to trivialize the latter and exaggerate the former.

There is one parallel that Andrew scrupulously avoids taking to its logical conclusion. That is the link between the YAF and the current far right, including the latter's predilection for anti-statism and occasion forays into terrorism. The connections are not at all farfetched. Elements of the YAF flirted with the even more radical John Birch Society, which in some ways is the ancestor of today's radical right. Right-wing fears in the 1960s of a movement towards "world government" parallel the paransia of today's far right about "the new world order" and the United States being lorded over by the United Nations.

Andrew uses the present to launch into the past. This approach is not much different than that used by Staughton Lynd and Doug Dowd in their work — except they actually lived through many of the times and events they are discussing.

Lynd and Dowd should befuddle many. The media seems to take great pleasure in portraying activists of the 1960s who eventually gave into the system: the Yippies

⁹ Andrews mentions the work for the CIA but not Buckley's service as an informer for the FBI. For more on both of these careers see Sigmund Diamond, *Compromised Campus: The Collaboration of Universities with the Intelligence Community, 1945-1955* (New York 1992), 151-178.

¹⁰ Athan Theoharis, *Spying on Americans: Political Surveillance from Hoover to the Huston Plan* (Philadelphia 1978), 13-39.

to Yuppies syndrome. Those who remained true to their values, such as Lynd and Dowd, do not fit the stereotype. Both came to their activism before the 1960s from the "Older Left" tradition and each remained true to and consistent in his beliefs.

Lynd, the son of Quakers, has long been involved in protest and activism. *Living Inside Our Hope* is not a memoir but a collection of essays, some with autobiographical themes, but all written with an eye to the future, especially the future of the United States and the American left. In various places, snippets of his life of activism appear: as a historian at Yale University campaigning against the American involvement in Vietnam or other countries, or in his current role as a lawyer for poorer Americans working against the overwhelming power of corporations. Because it is a collection of diverse essays written over a number of years the book frequently has a disjointed quality to it. Nonetheless, Lynd's passion remains undiminished throughout. His recipe for the future is less about rhetoric and theory and more about actually leading by example and listening to the concerns of ordinary working Americans. In that sense he sees the principles of his sixties — "nonviolence," "participatory democracy," "an experimental approach to learning," "accompaniment," "anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism" as remaining relevant compasses three decades later.

Less concerned about movements of the future and more interested in telling the story of the past is Doug Dowd. His work is more of a traditional memoir, mixing his own personal life with the broader trends in 20th-century American history. Trained as an economist and later an economics professor at Cornell University, Dowd has created an accessible and entertaining read, albeit one whose history is rather conventional. Indeed an even better book would have reversed Dowd's approach — which is to discuss the wider trends in 20th-century American history with personal anecdotes — and instead fill the book even more with his own life and less with the general material. His life is one of meaning and his references to other activists in the sixties, such as the late Jerry Rubin, are worthy of further elaboration. Although covering more than the sixties, it is that decade that is at the centre of his study.

The crop of books reviewed here includes works that vary in quality and interest. Certainly more work needs to be done and will be aided by the increasing flow of material from various archives. The next stage of scholarship will be a critical one. Work on that unforgettable decade needs to be done by those who have had absolutely no connection to the period — who did not live through the era, were not involved in events — work to be done by those to who the sixties are a decade like any other in the sense of being part of the past. There is no guarantee, of course, that such work will be any better or more "objective" than what is already in the public domain. But new perspectives are needed as history of the 1960s continues to be written and re-written.

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