

Do You Remember the Sixties? The Scholarship of Resistance and Rebellion

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REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

Do You Remember the Sixties?: The Scholarship of Resistance and Rebellion

Roberta Lexier

Dubinsky, Karen, Catherine Krull, Susan Lord, Sean Mills, and Scott Rutherford, eds., *New World Coming: The Sixties and the Shaping of Global Consciousness* (Toronto: Between the Lines 2009)

Palmer, Bryan D., *Canada's 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2009)

ACCORDING TO THE NOW-FAMILIAR ADAGE, if you remember the Sixties, you probably weren't there. Nevertheless, for quite some time individuals have attempted to chronicle the history of this period and analyze its significance and legacy. Until recently, academic work on the subject has been undertaken primarily by participants in the movements that purportedly comprise the Sixties and has focused almost exclusively on the student movement in the United States; the Sixties has traditionally been tied directly to the American Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and its history has been written as a combination of personal reminiscence and archival research.¹ As such, a particular narrative about the era has emerged that largely excludes non-American forms of political and social activism along with activities before 1960 and after 1969. This story contends that the activism associated with the Sixties began in the early 1960s as very small and relatively conservative, became, especially after 1968, increasingly large, radical, and confrontational, and ultimately fractured and dissolved shortly thereafter in response to

1. See, for example, Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York 1987); Irwin Unger, *The Movement: A History of the American New Left, 1959–1972* (New York 1974); and Cyril Levitt, *Children of Privilege: Student Revolt in the Sixties, A Study of Student Movements in Canada, the United States, and West Germany* (Toronto 1984).

ideological divisions, unresolved contradictions, and the rise of new movements rooted in identity politics.²

Recently, however, scholarship on the Sixties has expanded dramatically and various academics have challenged existing assumptions in order to tell a different story. British historians, for example, now portray the so-called New Left as an intellectual movement that emerged from the Communist Party and included an older generation of political radicals rather than simply young people or students. It began, they argue, in 1956 when many individuals abandoned the Communist Party in reaction to revelations regarding Stalin's purges and the Soviet invasion of Hungary, and it continued through to at least the mid-1970s when political activism entered into a period of decline.³ Similarly, American New Left historian Van Gosse insists that the Sixties should be conceived of as a wider collection of social movements that all share a commitment to a radical form of democracy and a questioning of Cold War liberalism and would extend from the end of World War II until the 1970s,⁴ while Arthur Marwick attempts to chronicle various events and activities in Britain, France, and Italy, as well as the United States, in an effort to expand the narrative of the period.⁵ In addition, a significant number of early career scholars and graduate students who did not live through the period have initiated a wide range of studies on the period and, with the benefit of distance and space, have begun to construct a different narrative.⁶ Nonetheless, while academics seek to explore and explain the complexities of the Sixties, conceptions of the era continue to be dominated by the narrative of the American student movement.

New World Coming: The Sixties and the Shaping of Global Consciousness demonstrates the recent popularity of the Sixties and highlights some of the new directions being taken by academics from a number of different fields. It emerged from a conference held at Queen's University in June 2007, which brought together approximately four hundred participants to discuss the meanings and legacies of the era from a global and interdisciplinary

2. See Levitt; Gitlin; Unger; and Douglas Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America* (New York 1998).

3. See Lin Chun, *The British New Left* (Edinburgh 1993); Dorothy Thompson, "On the Trail of the New Left," *New Left Review* 1/215 (1996), 93–100; Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham, NC 1997); Ellen Mieksins Wood, "A Chronology of the New Left and Its Successors, Or: Who's Old Fashioned Now," *Socialist Register* (1995), 22–49; and John Saville, "Edward Thompson, the Communist Party and 1956," *Socialist Register* (1994), 20–31.

4. Van Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left: An Interpretative History* (New York 2005).

5. Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c.1958–c.1974* (Oxford 1998).

6. In Canada, work by Stuart Henderson, Christopher Powell, Jessica Squires, Sean Mills, Ian Milligan, myself, and others is representative of this new scholarship.

perspective. In particular, conference organizers asked how the story of the Sixties might change if the focus shifted “away from the main centres and major events that have thus far dominated representations of the period.” (2) As such, the book that emerged from this event is intentionally broad, both thematically and geographically; it includes contributions on politics, culture, and gender and the efforts and experiences of individuals and groups from all around the world. Overall, while the editors resist the temptation to tell a singular story about the time and its actors, emphasizing instead its complexities, they nevertheless argue that the articles demonstrate that “the challenges that citizens made to dominant power structures, cultural systems, and everyday activities of their daily lives in this era were conceptualized in a global sphere.” The local and daily experiences of individuals all around the world, they insist, were part of a larger emergence of a “nascent global consciousness.” (3)

In many ways, *New World Coming* accomplishes these laudable goals. The vast majority of contributions collected by the editors represent the latest efforts to rethink and rewrite the Sixties. Articles examine a wide range of topics and perspectives, including intersections between activists and the nation-state, global connections among revolutionaries, the use of various cultural forms as a means of resistance, representations of rebellion, and the politicization of the body. In particular, the collection provides important analyses of race, class, gender, nationality, and other major issues that are often overlooked in the existing literature. Authors add a number of untold stories to the narrative of the period and expand conceptions of what constitutes collective action. In addition, investigations into the legacy of the Sixties highlight the numerous ways that social and political activism transformed the global landscape. Moreover, while personal reflections of movement participants have long dominated scholarship on the period, the contributions of activists Lee Maracle and Jaime Veve nevertheless provide an important opportunity to consider individual motivations, as well as the importance and influence of rebellion and resistance in society.

Many of the articles also successfully explore familiar topics in new and interesting ways. For instance, while the Black Power Movement in the United States has received significant attention from scholars in the past, Van Gosse effectively challenges existing assumptions regarding separatism and highlights the important ways in which Black Power activists sought to come to terms with the nation and state power. These efforts, he argues, were linked with national liberation struggles occurring around the globe during the postwar era. As well, reaffirming arguments made elsewhere,⁷ he insists that the so-called New Left did not mark a decisive break with the Old Left; Sixties radicalism, he claims, is grounded in a long history of radical democratic struggles that reach from the English, French, American, and Haitian revolutions through the 19th and 20th centuries. (36–45)

7. See Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left*.

Similarly, Rabab Ibrahim Abdulhadi and Amanda Third offer new interpretations of the Women's Liberation Movement in different parts of the world. Abdulhadi argues against the apparently problematic narrative of the Sixties, which is dominated by the white, heterosexual, male activists in the United States, and instead demonstrates the important connections between decolonization struggles and everyday resistance undertaken by women in Palestine. These women, she argues, were important and equal members of the movement and, in opposition to the traditional narrative that emphasizes the negative experiences women had as part of Sixties social activism, took many different paths to consciousness and liberation. (13–23) Third, by contrast, explores existing assumptions regarding the “whiteness” of the Women's Liberation Movement in the United States and explains how efforts to create a common “sisterhood” among all women undercut attempts to analyze racial difference and consolidated its image as a white movement. (274–283) These are but a few examples of the important ways that the articles in this collection contribute to a rethinking of the traditional narrative of the Sixties.

Additionally, in opposition to the traditional Sixties scholarship, which centres around experiences in the United States, *New World Coming* provides extensive coverage of social and political activism around the world. While some authors, including Gosse and Third, provide new analyses of American social movements, others shift their focus to the many countries and regions that are generally excluded from the literature. For example, some contributors examine various forms of resistance and rebellion across Europe, including Germany, Italy, Sweden, Scotland, and the Netherlands. Others engage with stories from Africa, such as John S. Saul's work on the anti-apartheid movement in Southern Africa, Andrew M. Ivaska's exploration of soul music in Tanzania, and Tobias Wofford's discussion of the First World Festival of Negro Arts. Many articles, including those by Matthew Rothwell, Maria Caridad Cumaná González, Joana Maria Pedro, and Jamie Pensado, focus specifically on Latin America, while Rabab Ibrahim Abdulhadi and Cary Fraser analyze decolonization movements in the Arab world and Kyoko Sato engages with cultural developments in Japan. Finally, a number of contributors examine events and issues in Canada from a variety of perspectives. Overall, *New World Coming* is incredibly successful at incorporating new approaches and a wide range of national contexts into the existing literature on the Sixties.

However, most of the articles included in the collection are quite short and provide only a snapshot look into particular issues and events; readers are sometimes left with more questions than answers at the end of many pieces. Moreover, these contributions represent a wide range of academic standards. Some, such as Dan Berger's discussion of the Republic of New Afrika and Sean Purdy's exploration of media coverage of slums, ghettos, and favelas, are based on extensive primary research and provide significant evidence to support their claims. Others, including Tity de Vries's work on the Dutch Sixties and Julie Boddy's investigation into labour unions, contain few citations and seem

to be based largely on secondary sources and existing evidence. In addition, articles that began as keynote addresses at the New World Coming conference, while useful and informative, appear to be transcriptions of the speeches rather than original contributions for the book. Examples include pieces by George Katsiaficas, Ian McKay, Alice Echols, and Rabab Ibrahim Abdulhadi.

Furthermore, the structure of the collection sometimes seems a bit forced. The book is divided into five distinct sections: Nation-Decolonization-Liberation; Cultural Citizenship; Mobilizing Bodies; Legacies of the Sixties; and an Epilogue. Yet, many articles that deal with similar issues or themes are divided into different parts. For instance, Abdulhadi's piece on Palestinian women is included in the first section despite its connection to contributions on women's activism in the third part. Similarly, many of the articles in the second section, which ostensibly explores cultural forms of resistance and rebellion, revolve around the nation-state and national identity, which is purportedly the focus of the first part of the book. Kyoko Sato's work on Japan and Andrew M. Ivaska's discussion of soul music in Tanzania are but two examples of this apparently capricious division. Ultimately, relationships between the nation-state and Sixties radicalism appears to be one of the major themes of the entire collection, though this is never acknowledged by the editors and is, to a certain degree, marginalized by the decision to separate articles into distinct sections. This issue might reflect a larger problem associated with existing historiographical categories and divisions, which may not be relevant to Sixties scholarship, and may, as a result, create organizational confusion. Also, there are numerous articles that explore the importance and influence of the Cuban Revolution on social and political activism around the world; however, these articles are separated into the different parts and are not fully integrated into one story. Finally, images that are a major component of Lincoln Cushing's work on political graphics in the Sixties are placed in the following section, approximately thirty pages after the article. While this is a relatively minor consideration, it is nevertheless awkward for readers who are forced to search for the posters in order to understand Cushing's analysis.

Perhaps more substantially, the articles are inconsistent in their use of a transnational perspective, making it difficult to fully substantiate the argument that a "global consciousness" emerged during the Sixties. Some authors, including Rabab Ibrahim Abdulhadi, Ian McKay, Van Gosse, Jennifer Ruth Hosek, Matthew Rothwell, Michael D. Kirkpatrick, Joana Maria Pedro, Edwin Martini, and Cary Fraser, effectively explore the interconnections between local experiences and international activism. As such, they seem to support the argument presented by the editors; challenges that citizens made within their own communities appear to have been conceptualized within a larger transnational sphere and as part of a growing global awareness. (3) However, other contributions, such as those from Kimmo Rentola, Guido Pavini, Julie Boddy, Kyoko Sato, Sheila Rowbotham, Amanda Third, Michael Egan, Kristin Ireland, and Alice Echols, focus specifically on particular national contexts

and do not place their analyses within a larger international framework. These pieces, then, imply, perhaps unintentionally, that experiences differed greatly among various countries and communities and were not necessarily linked by a larger "global consciousness." Ultimately, while the articles contribute tremendously to an increased understanding of the complexities of the Sixties, and highlight the various stories that can be told about the period, they are generally too disjointed to fully support a single argument regarding the international importance and legacy of the era.

In contrast to the global perspective presented in *New World Coming*, Bryan Palmer's study specifically examines the Canadian context during the Sixties. Yet, in doing so, he partly challenges the traditional narrative of the period by offering a new story and a unique perspective. In particular, he seeks to explain how the Sixties transformed the country and why the era unfolded as it did in this particular national environment. Through an examination of the early 1960s and the ruptures that followed, Palmer argues that the legacy of the Sixties in Canada was to destroy existing definitions of national identity and prevent the formation of a new self-image. "[T]he 1960s," he insists, "were not only the final, but also a decisive, nail in the coffin of entrenched understandings of a particular kind of national identity.... Canadian identity was to be forged decisively anew in a truly ironic clash of the breakup of what was once thought to be and the development of an ongoing anxiety over what it was that indeed could be labeled Canada." (19, 21) Ultimately, he concludes that the irony of the 1960s was that, as a result of the complex and competing challenges of the era, it became impossible to unify Canadians around a shared definition of the nation. (429)

Canadians have, for quite some time, been obsessed with the difficulties associated with finding a common national identity, and Palmer contributes to this discussion and debate. According to him, Canadians continued, until the 1960s, to define their nation in terms of its British heritage. However, developments in the postwar period, including urbanism, immigration, secularism, technology, and consumption, highlighted the compromises and contradictions at the core of this identity. (13–21) As a result, he insists that this longstanding definition of nationhood came apart in the 1960s. He chronicles, then, the discomfort created by increasing American influence, especially in the economy and foreign policy, shifting notions of sexuality and race, the evolving role of the media and celebrity, and significant challenges posed by the counterculture, labour activism, youth protest, the Quiet Revolution in Quebec, and the politicization of First Nations peoples. In doing so, Palmer may help to explain why Canadians seem to be paralyzed by an identity crisis.

Yet, this argument is somewhat problematic in that it assumes a certain level of consensus among Canadians prior to the 1960s and does not adequately confront existing assumptions about the postwar period. Traditionally, this era, especially the 1950s, has been characterized as a time of cultural harmony,

social conformity, and political consensus, which only changed with the upheaval of the 1960s.⁸ Recent scholarship, though, has challenged this conceptualization and has demonstrated that the decades preceding the Sixties were also a time of intense social and cultural contestation; conflict in Canada did not begin in the 1960s.⁹ In addition, even if it is true that the majority of Canadians accepted their Anglo-European identity prior to the 1960s, there have always been groups, particularly French-Canadians, Aboriginal peoples, and immigrants, who have objected to this definition of nationhood and have helped to shape the country in important ways. Palmer does not adequately address such inconsistencies and instead bases his argument on an assumed harmony that never really existed in Canada; national identity was never particularly well defined, uncomplicated, or universally accepted.

Nevertheless, Palmer contributes a great deal to the literature on Canada during the 1960s. His chapters provide detailed discussions of a number of different topics that have previously received little, or simply cursory, attention from scholars. His discussion of the George Chuvalo-Muhammad Ali boxing match in Toronto in 1966, for instance, is particularly interesting and includes some useful analysis of issues of race and multiculturalism in Canada. As well, while Palmer, as a labour historian, has elsewhere offered an overview of youth activism within unions during the Sixties and the widespread use of wildcat strikes throughout the decade,¹⁰ it is important to incorporate such discussions into a wider overview of the period and his knowledge of this topic is immediately apparent. Furthermore, his explorations of certain social movements, including the counterculture, student protest, the Quiet Revolution, and the Red Power Movement, present useful introductions to these topics, though further work is required to address the particular perspective that Palmer, as a leftist and theoretical historian, brings to his work. For example, in his analysis of the Sixties student movement, he relies too heavily on a Marxist approach and focuses almost entirely on the Trotskyites and other ideologically driven activists; the student movement was much more moderate

8. See, for example, Robert Bothwell, Ian Drummond, and John English, *Canada Since 1945: Power, Politics and Provincialism* (Toronto 1989) and Doug Owram, *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby Boom Generation* (Toronto 1996). For a critique of this conceptualization, see Alvin Finkel, "Competing Master Narratives on Post-War Canada," *Acadiensis*, 28, 2 (2000), 188–204.

9. See, for example, Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, eds., *Cultures of Citizenship in Post-war Canada, 1940–1955* (Montreal and Kingston 2003); Valerie Korinek, *Roughing It in the Suburbs: Reading Chatelaine Magazine in the Fifties and Sixties* (Toronto 2000); and Magda Fahrni and Robert Rutherford, eds., *Creating Postwar Canada: Community, Diversity, and Dissent, 1945–75* (Vancouver 2007).

10. See Bryan Palmer, "Wildcat Workers in the 1960s: The Unruly Face of Class Struggle," in *Labouring in Canada: Class, Gender, and Race in Canadian Working-Class History*, eds. Bryan Palmer & Joan Sangster (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 373–394.

and internally focused on university campuses than Palmer implies. Palmer's argument sometimes gets lost in his details and should be stated more explicitly throughout the entire monograph. His discussion of some subjects, such as the Munsinger case, is sometimes confusing, and the book is far too long to be useful in its entirety to any but the most dedicated readers. Nonetheless, *Canada's 1960s* provides an incredible amount of information on important issues related to the 1960s.

Comparing *New World Coming* and *Canada's 1960s* raises some interesting questions regarding the national approach taken by Palmer. According to the editors and contributors of the former book, local activities were almost always rooted in the larger global activism of the period. Could the developments that Palmer discusses also be connected to the wider international perspective? In other words, were the challenges and contestations that led, according to Palmer, to the destruction of a particular form of national identity unique to the Canadian environment or part of widespread global efforts to redefine the nation-state in an increasingly decolonized world? While Palmer has already attempted to cover too much in his study, and adding another layer of analysis would unnecessarily complicate matters even further, it might be useful to consider what might be unique about the Canadian narrative and what might be similar to other forms of Sixties activism. Would asking such questions alter Palmer's argument in any meaningful way?

In addition, both monographs contribute to one of the major issues frequently addressed in the Sixties literature: how should the period be defined and delineated? Is the era, for instance, equivalent to the decade of the 1960s, from 1960 to 1969, or is it a time of social and political activism that may extend beyond these temporal limits? A number of scholars, including Todd Gitlin, Irwin Unger, and Douglas Rossinow take the former position. For them, the Sixties is viewed as a time of political activism tied directly to the student movement in the United States: the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was founded in 1960 and dissolved in 1969.¹¹ Similarly, while Cyril Levitt examines the history of Canada and West Germany as well as the United States, he argues that all three student movements followed a similar trajectory and thus the period can be conceived of in decadal terms; the Sixties began, he argues, in 1960 and ended in 1969–70.¹² This position, however, has recently been characterized as exclusionary and elitist and definitions of the Sixties have since changed.

Rather than viewing it as a ten-year period between 1960 and 1969, defined entirely by the student movements, other scholars take the latter approach and extend their definition beyond these boundaries. For example, Arthur Marwick, in his study of the cultural revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, asserts that the Sixties began in 1958 and ended in 1974.

11. See Gitlin, Unger, and Rossinow.

12. Levitt.

According to Marwick, a critical moment of change took place in the years 1958–59 with the emergence of a youth cultural market and the rise of the civil rights movement in the United States.¹³ As well, while he maintains that many of the trends of the Sixties continued into the 1970s, and perhaps even to the present day, he marks the end of this period in 1973–74, when ordinary people began to feel the devastating effects of the oil crisis, when many demands made in the Sixties were achieved, and when the anti-war movement began to feel close to victory with the resignation of Richard Nixon and the cutting of American aid to Saigon.¹⁴ Van Gosse also argues that viewing the Sixties as the period between 1960 and 1969 emphasizes one particular wing of the New Left, the white student vanguard, while pushing other movements to the background. Instead, he insists, the New Left should include the civil rights, early ban-the-bomb, student, anti-Vietnam War, Black Power, Aboriginal, Chicano, women's, and gay liberation movements and would extend, then, well beyond the limits of the 1960s.¹⁵

To varying degrees, *New World Coming* and *Canada's 1960s* enter into this debate to help explain the limits imposed on their work. Bryan Palmer, for instance, takes the first approach and defines the period in decadal terms. The early 1960s, he argues, set the stage for "later, more tumultuous, developments" and therefore provide insight into the era. (23) As well, Palmer insists that the October Crisis in 1970 transformed the 1960s in Canada, as "[p]lacards and slogans and youthful radical zeal were replaced by tanks and troops." (24) In response to arguments that the New Left continued to be important in Canada into the 1970s in the form of "nascent party formations," he counters that such developments require further study and, in his opinion, represent "a different chapter in the politics and culture of dissent." (23) Based on the topics Palmer has chosen to cover in his monograph, including the youth movement, the Quiet Revolution, and the labour movement, such limits appear logical and defensible. Most of the activities associated with these examples of rebellion and resistance took place between 1960 and 1970, and much of their energy had declined by the end of the decade. As well, his analysis of increasing US influence in the economy and foreign policy, evolving attitudes towards sexuality and race, and the growing importance of media and celebrity in Canada in the early 1960s places developments in the late 1960s in a wider context and highlights the longer trajectory of changes during the entire decade.

However, this delineation may also overlook and, in fact, actively exclude some important developments and movements in Canada that could arguably be part of the Sixties. For instance, while Palmer briefly discusses the emergence of the Women's Liberation Movement in the late 1960s, (297–304) he would have to extend his study well into the 1970s to gain insight into the

13. Marwick, 41–111 and 194–228.

14. Marwick, 7.

15. Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left*.

importance and legacy of such actions and activities. Other important examples, such as gay and lesbian and environmental movements, are excluded from Palmer's study, which seems to imply that they were not part of the important debates and challenges that he insists helped to undercut existing definitions of Canadian national identity. While it would be impossible for any author to fully examine every single social and political movement in Canada during the 1960s and 1970s, and the limits that Palmer placed on his own project are entirely justifiable, the definition of the Sixties used in this monograph also restricts, in important and meaningful ways, the narrative that can be developed.

The editors of *New World Coming*, by contrast, actively object to the limits of the decadal approach. Instead, they appear to accept the notion of the "long Sixties" and insist that it includes at least three decades rather than one. Although they never delineate which three decades comprise the period, they define the Sixties as a time when "individuals and groups assumed an active responsibility for the societies they lived in" and sought to become "subjects rather than objects of history." (4) Furthermore, while they acknowledge that many people do not see their radicalism as part of the "sixties generation," they argue that the era is important because of the way that it continues to resonate in the present and can invoke both fear and inspiration. (5) Since the editors actively seek to challenge the existing narrative of the Sixties and argue against a single account of the period, this approach is reasonable and rational.

Nevertheless, this definition of the era is relatively vague and imprecise. Even though the editors argue that we "need the sixties," (5) they never fully explain what the term means and what it might entail. This is important because it raises questions about what might be included in this collection. If the period is defined by citizens taking an active role and seeking to become subjects rather than objects in their community, where might the boundaries be drawn? Are there temporal limitations to the Sixties or only theoretical restrictions? From the editors' comments, it is unclear which three decades might comprise the Sixties and how this period might differ from other times when individuals actively sought to affect the world around them. While it is not necessarily essential to provide a clear and precise definition of the Sixties, and the decision not to do so might be warranted in a compilation that seeks to demonstrate the complexities of the era, some further explanation would help to clarify the limits of the collection and its relationship to other work on the period.

As interest in the Sixties continues to grow, and a new generation of scholars persists in confronting and challenging traditional conceptions of the period, a greater understanding of its complexities and legacies will be achieved. The recent publication of *New World Coming: The Sixties and the Shaping of Global Consciousness* and *Canada's 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era* demonstrates the intense fascination with this era and reflects current efforts to rethink the narrative and the meaning of this

time of conflict and contestation. The former, a collection of more than forty diverse articles by both established and new scholars, seeks to directly challenge existing assumptions about the Sixties and highlight the connections between local activities and global trajectories. The latter, which is written by an active participant in Sixties social movements and focuses specifically on the Canadian context, argues that the developments of the period destroyed existing conceptions of national identity and, by emphasizing disagreement and dispute, prevented the formation of a new definition of the country. To varying degrees, these two works accomplish their goals and contribute to a greater understanding of this important period in modern history. However, there is still a great deal to learn about the era, and scholars must continue to reflect upon local and global connections, delineations of the period, and the meanings and legacies of various forms of social, political, and cultural resistance. As memories of the Sixties fade, critical analyses of its movements and activities will provide greater insight into an important era of challenge and change.

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