

## second thoughts on the 1960s

SECOND THOUGHTS: Former Radicals Look Back at the Sixties. Edited by Peter Collier and David Horowitz. New York: Madison Books, 1989. \$22.95 cloth, \$12.95 paper.

Everybody knows by now about former *Ramparts* editor and New Left theoretician David Horowitz's waterfall-equipped mansion and his buoyant conversion from Black Panther cheerleader to Ronald Reagan spear carrier. In *Second Thoughts*, he and long time partners Peter Collier have rounded up a couple of dozen other ex-movement leaders and intellectuals to talk, supposedly, about the Mistakes they made Back Then and the hard realities as they know them now. A crew of neo-conservatives offer some welcome, gleeful I-told-you-so's, and much score for the lack of complete apostasy.

*Second Thoughts* is less about the Sixties than it is about the moral and economic failures of third world communism and the very belated discovery of that fact by some remarkably intelligent people. But as one of the old conservatives, Hilton Kramer, tells the middle-aged Youths (in order to mock them the better) the Sixties were not primarily about the love affair between a small group of radicals and Korean seer-leader Kim II Sung. What is strangely absent from this book—with a couple of notable exceptions—is a sense of historical perspective about what people were up against in the Sixties and what besides Third World Marxist liberation movements animated the spirits of 60s people.

Despite their second thoughts, much in this volume remains resolutely vintage Horowitz and Collier at their worst. Horowitz and Collier explained their conversion experience most dramatically in their well known "Lefties for Reagan" piece that appeared in the *Washington Post Magazine*—"casting our ballots for Ronald Reagan was a way of finally saying good-bye to all that—to the self aggrandizing romance which corrupt their Worldism; to the casual indulgence of Soviet totalitarianism; to the hypocritical and self dramatizing anti-Americanism which is the New Left's bequest to mainstream politics." The grandiosity of the 60s rears on its hind legs. The pendulum widely swings. The Manichean worldview remains, only the two sides have switched.

Some in this volume do not approach Horowitz and Collier's almost parodic—undoubtedly for these two excellent showmen, deliberately so—conversion stories. A few maintain the commitment to poor and oppressed peoples that impassioned many 60s activists. Samuel Leiken and Barry Rubin telling recall their journey to and from an ill founded love affair with Fidel *et al.* But throughout *Second*

*Thoughts* a kind of moral vacuum emerges in which American culpability for travesties abroad are dismissed and tragedies at home are simply ignored. Throughout the testimonials is a strangely overwrought breastbeating, as if it were the New Left's sole fault that evil feasted in Southeast Asia after America's battlefield defeat. Even odder is the logic, not shared in by all, that since the New Left was wrong about Cuba, China and Vietnam then the Right must have been right all along.

Todd Gitlin in his critical but also nostalgic and very much pro-left history, *The Sixties*, also discovered that "the idea of a unitary Left destined to save the world because it was born on the side of the angels is a grotesque blindness" (437). Gitlin, however, finds ample room to the left of Reagan in rethinking his position. In one of the funniest moments of *Second Thoughts*, Nathan Glazer, in response to the hopped up, better-dead-than-red fervor he hears, once again urges moderation: "I believe the point of view that claims a monolithic and unchanging Communism as a permanent and overwhelming danger is somewhat overstated" (200).

With a couple of exceptions, one does occasionally get the feeling that the Second Thinkers' sometimes overblown pledges of allegiance and apologies for their Maoism, Castroism and Hoism mask much more complicated and confused feelings about the real Sixties and its legacies. And in this blank space lies much of the confusion—as champions of a new conservative majority know—of a great many Americans.

The treatment of the women's movement in *Second Thoughts* exemplifies the confusion most contributors to this book reveal about the real role social change movements of the 60s played in real people's lives. There is one piece on feminism by the only woman (out of the 31 contributors) in the book. Her piece is an idiotic send up of feminist thought: "The preliminary result of the politicization of internal life may seem liberating but the end result is enslavement . . . feminism is utterly and foolishly amoral" (150-151). With only a couple of exceptions the men contributors have nothing to say about the women's movement. Hilton Kramer, Norman Podhoretz, and Irving Kristol criticize this lack of second thoughts about the women's movement and the entire gestalt of the 60s. They'd like to see a real conservatism bloom—not just an anti-Marxism. Like much of the nation, very few of the Second Thinkers are ready for such a change.

This book, all second thoughts and almost no real insight, says little to nothing about the rupture in consciousness that occurred in the 1960s. The ferocity of nuclear brinkmanship, wrenching poverty, American apartheid, Asian land wars, gun boat diplomacy, the desiccation of public life, the corporate degradation of the land, water and air, McCarthyism, sexism—the whole post-war zeitgeist in which domestic inequality, international ferocity and cultural repression and conformity were, if not simply the natural, unchallenged order of the day, at least an uncompromising presence. All this remains outside this book. Most Americans who were a part of the protests of the Sixties have not forgotten all of these things against which the New Left contributed a hammer blow.

*Second Thoughts* neatly outlines the excesses of New Left internationalism. It is much less good at explaining why such excesses would occur. And nobody tries to figure out how a re-evaluation of America's role in the world contributed to new understandings about power relations and life itself, inside America.

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