

Review Essay

Back to the Future? Recent Books on the Sixties

Gaile McGregor

THE SIXTIES: From Memory to History. Edited by David Farber. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press. 1994.

THE SIXTIES SPIRITUAL AWAKENING: American Religion Moving from Modern to Postmodern. By Robert S. Ellwood. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press. 1994.

SCRIPTURES FOR A GENERATION: What We Were Reading in the '60s. By Philip D. Beidler. Athens and London: University of Georgia Press. 1994.

I accepted this assignment because I thought it would give me an opportunity to address some (to me) rather provocative recent developments in academic fashion. The last few years have seen an increased interest in the sixties among scholars. The factor driving this interest has been identified variously as nostalgia, political reaction, intergenerational curiosity, and millennialism. To my mind, none of these explanations gets at the root causes of the trend, any more than the books themselves have provided a satisfactory explanation for the original phenomenon. Most of what has been written about the sixties fails signally to capture the mood of the period, sometimes because the authors have

tailored their investigations to fit post-facto conclusions, sometimes simply because of a too-narrow focus. At least until recently, researchers have tended most often to concentrate on the political aspects, ignoring the social and cultural background almost entirely. To privilege one facet of such a complex set of events and effects not only elides a good deal of what gave the decade its unique flavor in the first place, but because it programmatizes much that was spontaneous, inconsistent, and unserious, it also distorts the motivations for, and the grassroots feel of, the political experience itself. There was a very real sense in which sixties politics, as a program, wasn't invented until the seventies, retroactively. Many—I might even say most—of us who were involved at the time were there not because we had a clearly worked out political agenda—not, at least, beyond a shared disdain for the “establishment”—but because it was fun, “cool,” exciting, a slap in the face to our boring, morally bankrupt elders. From my own memories of the period, in fact, Leary's vision of turned-on, tuned-in dropouts was a far more accurate description than either the Right's demonizing or the Left's idealizing notions of political activism. Sure, there were professionals among the leadership of the “movement,” but most of us—including many of the then-students who retrospectively constructed themselves as “serious” radicals—were simply along for the ride. At best we were prompted by a gleeful vision of bringing down the edifice; at worst we were just trying to get laid. Most recent books about the sixties dismiss or trivialize this aspect. It's for this reason, I think, that they fail to come to terms with the true meaning of the decade.

This brings me back to my motives for this review. Now more than ever, I think, it's critical that we get past the politically motivated revisionism to see the sixties clearly and whole. And not just for “academic” reasons either. Recent markers in popular culture suggest that we may be heading back into the same mindset again. The upsurge of scholarly interest in the period is, I would claim, merely part of a much broader constellation of social and cultural developments. The revival of escapist fantasies like the western and science fiction; the pop-cultural obsession with youth and with sexuality; the return of “female” monsters to horror films; the proliferation of soft drug use among college students; the fad for body-marking and piercing; the media discourse on juvenile crime (think back to the fifties fascination with “J.D.s”); the success of “natural” (unplugged, country, ethnic) music; the revulsion against “government,” both in real life (Ross Perot) and in fiction (*The X-Files*); the “official” emphasis on family values undercut simultaneously by a systematic deconstruction of patriarchal authority in mainstream film and television: whatever they may signal individually, collectively these developments add up to a revival of sixties-style neo-primitivism.¹ The parallels are striking enough, in fact, as to suggest that much of what is currently being explained as premillennial hysteria could better be seen as early warning signals for a return to the sixties. This possibility makes it, of course, much more important that we understand not only the public facts but the private underpinnings of the original experience.

This said, I am pleased to note that the recent batch of books contributes significantly toward filling in the gaps in our picture of the period. The first, a collection of essays edited by David Farber entitled *The Sixties: From Memory to History*, is impressive both for the range of its coverage and the solidness of the individual items. Alice Echols's paper on the trajectory from "woman's lib" to contemporary feminism, for instance, as one might expect from her ground-breaking earlier work in the area, is thorough, insightful, and refreshingly balanced. George Lipsitz's chapter on youth culture, similarly, again as one might expect (Farber has done a good job of attracting key people to his project), not only provides a useful overview of characterizing beliefs and practices, but puts these in such a context as to reflect provocatively on other, ostensibly divergent facets of the period. (Given my own doubts about the biases of received opinion, I was particularly impressed by his recognition of the personal bases of the impulse to protest which has been so generally politicized by post-facto commentators.) Most interesting of all, for bringing in the sense of everydayness which is usually missing from studies of the decade, is Terry Anderson's discussion of the way countercultural ideals trickled down to change mainstream business practices in the country.

If I have any complaint about this book at all, it would be with its ordering. By beginning with "hard" topics like economics and politics (the first four papers, predictably enough, deal with the evolution of public policy, the war—two chapters—and the civil rights movement) and only then proceeding to more "frivolous" issues like youth and the sexual revolution, Farber reinforces prevailing—and, as I would claim, misguided—views of what was important about the sixties. Granted, the fact that he placed his own wrap-up—an important counterbalancing essay on the way the phenomenon was perceived by the "silent minority"—at the end rather than the beginning of the book suggests that he may have seen the sequence not as privileging the lead papers but as building to a clarifying climax. My own sense, however, is that the earlier entries set the tone for the reader. The unfortunate impression is exacerbated by the cut-and-dried conventional historicism of these chapters, and especially by the writers' propensity to retail facts in such a way as to foreclose rather than stimulating speculation. While it is true that no claims are made to the effect, when a paper fails to get beyond the bland assertion that this happened, then that happened, it can't help but carry the tacit corollary suggestion that that happened *because* this happened. The modus is particularly regrettable in cases like the present, where the causes for the directions recounted may arguably be said to lie elsewhere. Politics and economics may tell an important part of the *what* of the sixties, but the all-important *why* is, I think, more likely to be found in the subsequent chapters on culture and lifestyle. The sixties was not invented in the Oval Office or the Pentagon but in the heads of the people who lived it.

The second book on my list, Robert Ellwood's *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening*, is less commendable from a strictly scholarly standpoint. Rambling,

personal, and at times theoretically naive, Ellwood's study doesn't have either the rigor or the professional "feel" of the pieces in the Farber anthology. Despite this, for me it goes significantly further than the latter in capturing what really made the sixties tick. While ostensibly focussing on changes in "religion" during the period, Ellwood defines his topic so broadly as to encompass a surprising number of the phenomena which, for me anyway, sum up the decade. Anti-war protest, student radicalism, Haight-Ashbury, race riots, the trajectory from Woodstock to Altamont—the key events are all there. Unlike many other treatments of the period, however, it isn't only the historical high points that capture Ellwood's attention. Ranging over a canvas as eventful and lively as a Breughel painting, his narrative is eclectic, broad-ranging, and stuffed full of interesting and surprising facts about everything from the pill to the space program. Summarizing his method are the cameo essays on topics ranging from the World Council of Churches at Uppsala to *Star Trek* and *Sergeant Pepper*, which provide a counterpoint to the chronological narrative.

Even if it didn't add anything to our intellectual appreciation of the sixties phenomenon, I would recommend this book just for the way it evokes the hectic and multiplex flavor of the period. It's fun and it's fascinating—a Baedeker for tourists and a trip down memory lane for those of us who were there. It's almost a bonus that Ellwood has hit upon the key that so many other commentators have missed. Lipsitz put his finger on the same thing in his essay in Farber. "The value placed on altered consciousness in the counterculture," he says, "reflected a belief that social change had to start with self-knowledge" (218). Reading Ellwood, I suddenly became aware of just how much of what was interpreted subsequently as "political" was, to the participants, either part of a quest for transcendence or a kind of mythic acting out. In contrast to those "so-called serious historians" who "reject the hippies as a clownish sideshow and the drug scene as an embarrassment," says Ellwood, for "on-the-scene writers and prophets, the crucial current event was not the campus conflicts or the Pentagon sieges—although they might be symptoms of real revolution—but the emergence of a wholly new culture, based on a new spirituality" (7). I am inclined to agree with him.

Apart from his own retellings, Ellwood also includes sections overviewing important aspects of the scholarly and trade literature that appeared throughout the decade. There is a catch, unfortunately. Because of the specialized nature of many of the topics (an example is his review of the writings of radical and dissenting theologians in the section on 1964-66), and also because of the author's rather personal approach to prioritizing, these listings, while useful for the researcher, are not a particularly reliable guide to the popular tastes of the time. I was delighted to discover, consequently, that the diagnostic potential of reading patterns was the topic for the third of our books, Philip Beidler's *Scriptures for A Generation: What We Were Reading in the '60s*. This isn't, I want to stress, an ordinary bibliography. What Beidler has attempted to do is to isolate the works and the writers that created the mindset that created the sixties. The materials he

cites, in other words, are not merely accounts but events. Interestingly enough, the experience bodied forth by the collectivity bears a striking resemblance to the experience we infer from Ellwood. What I am going to suggest, says Beidler in his introduction, is that we may identify one dominant feature of what might be called “the myth of the ’60s”: the “belief that acts of imagination, inspired modes of thinking *and* doing, might truly change the world.” He continues: “I am also going to suggest that [this] belief was often transacted exactly through the communitarian experience of printed texts” (2). In the pages that follow this pronouncement, he provides not only an aficionado’s checklist of what he describes as the period’s “scriptures,” but a detailed map of the entire intellectual terrain.

Space constraints make it impossible to do justice to either the breadth or the substance of this compendium. Let me merely say that Beidler is to be complimented both for the range and for the eclecticism of his coverage. Texts chosen for primary discussion (dozens of additional sources are mentioned in passing) include everything from the sublime to the ridiculous, the topical to the timeless, C. Wright Mills to Kahlil Gibran. One might, of course, quibble with details. Why single out Robert Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* while ignoring Frank Herbert’s *Dune*? What happened to Burroughs? Where are the French existentialists, Sartre, Camus, and the boys, whom I remember as being such hot topics in latenight dorm discussions? Quibbles aside, though, I was surprised and impressed at how many of the major contributors to the bizarrely variegated intellectual atmosphere of the decade Beidler managed to hit on. I was also impressed by his thoughtful and balanced commentaries, and by the way his capsule descriptions, which deal broadly with the cultural ambience as well as narrowly with particular texts, manage to capture the essence of their subjects. “Serious” thinkers aside—and here I should note that Beidler does do full justice to these—the thing I personally enjoyed most about this compilation was the extent to which it gave due to the sideshows (using Ellwood’s word) that get ignored by most historians of the period. To summarize this more carnivaleque aspect of the book, I can do no better than quote what Beidler himself says of his very first entry, Richard Alpert (Baba Ram Dass), that the “general impression” was of an engagingly “earnest silliness”:

We confront a surfing swami. We approach the door of the Magic Theatre from Hesse’s *Steppenwolf*. . . We find invoked all manner of authority [from] Siddhartha . . . [to] Bob Dylan. Once [this] might have been a catalog of what the ’60s looked for. Now, in this text of hip assimilation, [the list] become[s] a benchmark, as sure as any geologic survey monument of the strange new world of New Age hucksterism into which so much of the spirit of the ’60s vanished (36).

If you haven't gotten the message yet, I really liked this book. Indeed, I liked all three of these books. They worked well as a team. For anyone looking for either a refresher course on, or a first introduction to, the sixties, this group, taken together, would provide an excellent place to start.

One last note before I close. For those of you who might have been inclined to dismiss my earlier claims of cyclicity out of hand, I challenge you to read what Ellwood and Lipsitz have to say—and what Beidler's compendium reveals more directly—about the popular and the personal (as opposed to the purely political) side of the sixties experience, and then give some thought to the themes which have been emerging, not just from youth but from mainstream culture in recent years.

Note

1. For a more comprehensive discussion of cyclic tendencies in recent cultural history, see my earlier paper in this journal, "Domestic Blitz: A Revisionist History of the Fifties," *American Studies* 34:1 (1993), 5-33.