

Introduction

Resurrecting the Death of the Sixties

In the months that followed the highly theatricalized fusion between politics and art, the combination of street theatre, worker militancy and apocalyptic rhetoric that was the movement of May '68 in France, numerous publications about the events rapidly appeared. By the end of that year no fewer than fifty-two books were in circulation,¹ and since then, the flow of publications has remained steady. Beyond France, the radicalism which has become analogous with the whole decade of the 1960s has generated an equally impressive stream of self-reflections and reinterpretations. While, no doubt, this says much about the 'deliriously commemorative logic' of current publishing practices, to use Peter Starr's words,² it also suggests a widespread cultural preoccupation with this brief yet remarkable period. In the profusion of popular and scholarly literature looking back on 'the sixties' that has emerged over the last three decades (and especially over the last ten years), the sense that this time in particular provides the key to understanding our contemporary situation is obsessively reinforced.

While the countless rememberings and revisions of the decade of the sixties weave their way through different material, events, perceptions and often contrary political agendas, they share a common fixation with the apparent failure of sixties radicalism. The thread linking much of the material seeking to express, celebrate or purge the perceived troubling aftermaths of the decade is the conviction that the sixties marked a breakdown in the revolutionary model of political change and, at its most dramatic, heralded an end to any possibility of grand social transformation.

The demise of sixties radicalism is often the central premise on which standard representations of the decade rest. The voluminous biographical,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62976-8 - Anti-Disciplinary Protest: Sixties Radicalism and Postmodernism

Julie Stephens

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 *Anti-Disciplinary Protest*

sociological and political reinterpretations of the topic are pervaded with a similar sense of failed hopes, loss, and bewilderment as to why the promise of the sixties seemed so suddenly to disappear. This is the case even with those commentators eager to dissociate themselves from what I shall subsequently call this 'death of the sixties' narrative. In seeking to prove that there was 'no simple return to normalcy'³ in the decade's wake, or to record the continuing political dedication of former sixties activists,⁴ perspectives which focus on the achievements of the sixties can equally be situated within this paradigm of failure/success.

The point of this book is not primarily to debate the truth value of such proclamations. This has been done by others, most effectively by Todd Gitlin, who, in one of the most nuanced readings of sixties activism, attempts to reclaim the 'actual sixties' from 'The Sixties'. As Gitlin puts it, fragments of media-images (for instance, Kennedy's assassination, Martin Luther King Junior's 'I have a dream' speech) are 'scooped together as if the whole decade took place in an instant'.⁵ Nevertheless, there are historical problems with the failed revolution scenario. It is premised on the assumption that in the sixties there must have been a very precise and widespread commitment to a tangible revolution in the orthodox political sense of the term: this of the decade that also fostered ideas of permanent revolution and employed that concept as much in a metaphoric as in a literal sense. So what is at stake in giving priority to the most conventional forms of sixties radicalism in this death of the sixties narrative?

My interest is in pursuing such questions by examining the range of stories that are being told about the sixties, particularly those retrospective accounts making a connection between the demise of sixties radicalism and the current political and theoretical field. On the one hand this link is constituted as causal, with the current political landscape being characterized as dominated by a mood of political disengagement traced directly back to the failures of the sixties. According to this logic, sixties activists are blamed for their Utopianism and for their inability to prevent the commodification of all their values. In this script, mainstream society is the victor; monolithic and ever able to absorb dissent. Current popular representations of the topic in newspapers, magazines and the electronic media are shaped by such views and readily provide a series of commonplace explanations for the failure of sixties radicalism. Post-sixties political disengagement is thus presented as a pragmatic and realistic response to the conditions of advanced capitalism. As I will later discuss, this perspective pits the presumed childish aspirations and excesses of the sixties against the dispiriting but adult character of later decades (namely the eighties and nineties).

On the other hand, the link between the contemporary political arena and the death of the sixties is constituted in philosophical and theoretical terms. No less causal, this view places great emphasis on the failure of May '68,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62976-8 - Anti-Disciplinary Protest: Sixties Radicalism and Postmodernism

Julie Stephens

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction 3*

on the fact that the dramatic alliance between students, workers, artists, anarchists and intellectuals failed to overthrow State power or bring about a revolutionary transformation of French society. This failure is not located in the shortcomings of the activists themselves but rather in the impossibility of grand revolutionary projects or more particularly in macro-political theory of the Marxist kind. Thomas Docherty, among others to be cited in the pages which follow, puts it thus:

A key date here of course is 1968. The seeming availability of a revolution which brought workers and intellectuals together all across Europe represented a high point for a specific kind of Marxist theoretical practice. But when these revolutions failed, many began, at precisely that moment, to rethink their commitment to the fundamental premises of Marxist theory.⁶

Unlike the explanations which have gained such popular currency – although there are obvious overlaps here – an explanation which sets so much store on May '68 leads to two different but related conclusions: one contending that this failure marks an end to all opposition, and the other that this end opens up the opportunity for alternative forms of political engagement. My fascination is with the former as it is this view that dominates accounts which link the emergence of postmodernism with the death of the sixties. My particular interest is in the sense of impasse which is said to have been generated by the failed radicalism of the sixties.

To return to an earlier point, these popular and theoretical explanations of the post-sixties era share a concern with the most conventional forms of sixties radicalism. Only those actions which were extensions of a traditional revolutionary perspective and aimed to convulsively overthrow State power come into view. On the other hand, the challenges posed by the psychedelic wing of the movement, by the counterculture or what Jerry Rubin called the 'Marxist acidheads',⁷ are either marginalized, ignored altogether or relegated to the status of an amusing curiosity. The counterculture as a phenomenon has generated a set of highly contested meanings which will be discussed in Chapter 1. According to Brent Whelan, it is less the case that the critics have forgotten the late sixties counterculture but rather that 'they have actively rejected the object and excluded it from serious consideration'.⁸ There are exceptions, notably Whelan's own fine analysis, but on the whole this appears to be the case.⁹ In James Miller's preface to the 1994 edition of *Democracy Is in the Streets*, where he looks at the sixties from the perspective of the nineties, he acknowledges this process of exclusion as one of the gravest omissions in his own text. Operating then with a consciously conventional notion of politics, he comments that: 'Given the political focus of my narrative, it was all but impossible to convey adequately the era's

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62976-8 - Anti-Disciplinary Protest: Sixties Radicalism and Postmodernism

Julie Stephens

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 *Anti-Disciplinary Protest*

carnavalesque atmosphere of confusion – an air of chaos that was depending on one's aspirations, either fearful or liberatory'.¹⁰

One of the purposes of this book is to overcome such shortcomings and to rethink the connection between the so-called failure of the sixties and the disenchantment with politics that is forever being held up as the prevailing cultural mood of the late twentieth century.¹¹ In an attempt to theorize the strain of sixties radicalism that boasted no list of demands, no party, no aims and ideology, no leaders and no followers,¹² I focus on the distinctive rituals and language of protest of the 'psychedelic Bolsheviks',¹³ who, according to their own self-image, were beyond the picket sign because, in Jerry Rubin's memorable words: 'our nakedness was our picket sign'.¹⁴ This will entail an examination of what I call an 'anti-disciplinary politics', a language of protest which rejected hierarchy and leadership, strategy and planning, bureaucratic organization and political parties and was distinguished from the New Left by its ridiculing of political commitment, sacrifice, seriousness and coherence. The concept of an anti-disciplinary politics refuses many of the problematic distinctions which shape the familiar paradigms of the sixties, most notably the boundary between so-called political radicalism and cultural radicalism, between the activist and the hippie. This sixties critique of the 'discipline' of politics will be detailed in the first two chapters and is crucial to what follows.

It makes little sense to turn towards the individuals and groups committed to the notion that 'there must not be a plan! as it is always the plan that has done us in',¹⁵ and to accuse them of failing to fulfill their revolutionary aims due to inadequate planning, incoherent ideologies, confused strategies or impractical goals, as other commentators have done. However, in giving consideration to the politicized counterculture the issue is not to restore it to its rightful place in sixties narratives but to call into question the frameworks which so inform our commonplace understandings of this period and its relationship to what are perceived to be the anti-political inclinations of later decades. In the current political/theoretical landscape, the impulses to political disengagement, represented at one level by a certain tendency of postmodernism and at another by popular conceptions of the dominant cultural mood, have been shaped as much by the success of the anti-disciplinary politics of the sixties counterculture as by the failure of more traditional conceptions of protest.

As Gitlin suggests, no neat inventory of gains and losses can ever hope to capture the uneven, inconclusive and unexpected legacies of the sixties.¹⁶ In developing an argument about the enduring forms of anti-disciplinary protest, the point is not simply to add something to the success side of the tally sheet. Yet it would be misleading to refuse to situate this text in relation to the death of the sixties narrative. I do not concur with the view which, on the basis of May '68 or such like, concludes that there has been a return to

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62976-8 - Anti-Disciplinary Protest: Sixties Radicalism and Postmodernism

Julie Stephens

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction 5*

the status quo since the sixties. Fundamentally, the position outlined in the following pages is closer to the one put by those who contend that the prior order has been revolutionized since the sixties often in ways which bear little resemblance to the expressed intentions of the actual participants. As Carl Boggs has shown, the 'total break thesis' informing what he calls the revisionist histories of the New Left, the notion that the popular struggles associated with the 1960s came to an 'explosive and sudden halt' somewhere between 1968 and 1970, is simply not supported by the social movement activity of later decades.¹⁷

This does not mean that I am suggesting that the failure scenario is wholly false. Rather, I intend to propose that post-sixties political disenchantment can be traced to the re-enchantment of politics attempted by the late sixties counterculture. The protest which moved politics outside the traditional political domain by collapsing the distinction between politics and art, politics and culture, politics and everyday life, and the actions which fostered a politics of deliberate ambiguity and play successfully paved the way for forms of political disengagement and re-engagement which were seen to contradict the hopes of the sixties. I will argue that the anti-disciplinary politics of the sixties counterculture has also contributed to the widespread popular and theoretical acceptance of the postmodern notion of the present political field as impasse. Following Starr, this has direct political implications.¹⁸ Allowing the existing political mood to be dominated by a sense of an end with no new birth in sight¹⁹ justifies the 'significant displacement of political energies',²⁰ the expansion of the political to encompass everyday activities and the contraction and disappearance of politics as we have known it throughout this century.

The kinship I suggest between sixties radicalism and postmodernism raises questions about which sixties and which version of postmodernism will be discussed here. On the former, reference will be made to the sixties as a period in the history of the West (indeed, most of the events and writings to be examined here do fall within the time from 1960–70), but the intention is not to offer a comprehensive history of the decade, nor to reproduce yet another chronology or analysis of the New Left, the Civil Rights Movement, the counterculture, the drug culture, the music or the fashions. Rather, 'the sixties' will refer to a particular constellation of ideas about political action and social change which does not discretely fit into the categories usually employed to understand the radicalism of the decade.

Such an exercise is necessarily selective. This book concentrates largely on an American experience of the sixties. This may seem a strange choice, writing from Australia, but in a sense the American influence is most starkly evident when viewed from outside the United States. Paradoxically, it would seem that during the very period when the question of what it meant to be an 'American' was being renegotiated within the United States, American

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62976-8 - Anti-Disciplinary Protest: Sixties Radicalism and Postmodernism

Julie Stephens

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Anti-Disciplinary Protest

cultural influence elsewhere was on the ascendancy. This was especially true of Australia, where an Americanization which had begun during the Second World War accelerated during the sixties. The effects on the Australian counterculture are recorded by Dennis Altman, who observes: 'In many ways the counter-culture was a product of the United States, and it was exported to countries like Australia much as are other cultural phenomena'.²¹ A similar point is made by Robin Gerster and Jan Bassett. The authors comment that 'even the Australian anti-war movement, so rhetorically antagonistic to Uncle Sam, derived much of its impetus from the American counterculture'.²² They document the ways in which Australian student and underground newspapers of the time were simply 'crammed with American material'. Of the examples they provide, the Australian publication, *Tharunka*, is a case in point, strongly relying on American material and reprinting in full such things as Jerry Rubin's 'Yippie Manifesto'.²³ Similar exchanges of information are documented by Ron Verzuh between the United States and Canada where, even though 'the scene was somehow different' from the United States, the same headline getters, Berkeley People's Park, Chicago or Woodstock, 'had an immense influence'.²⁴ The British Underground equally adopted motifs, language and modes of cultural protest which were generated in the United States. Elizabeth Nelson, in a study of the underground press in the British context, remarks:

And ironically, for the British counter culture, which was trying to reject what it saw as straight society's acceptance of the 'American way of life' – including American 'consumerism' – it became involved itself, to a large extent with what might be termed the 'American view of the alternative future'.²⁵

The degree to which key battles in America (for example anti-war demonstrations or the violence at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago) became the focal point for protests and for underground reportage in Britain at the time is underscored by Richard Neville in his recent and characteristically irreverent reminiscences, *Hippie Hippie Shake*. Neville gives numerous examples of this American influence. Take, for instance, People's Park in Berkeley in May 1969, where a coalition of students and non-students struggled against the University of California authorities, the Berkeley police and, later, the National Guard to retain control of an empty lot they had transformed into a park. A broadsheet outlining the National Guard's ten-day siege of 'occupied Berkeley' swiftly arrived from America. Neville duly inserted it as a poster in *Oz 21*. As he records, it was on the streets of London 'before the tear gas had evaporated'.²⁶

This influence in part can be accounted for by the creation, marketing, dissemination and consumption of culture in the sixties, which took on a

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62976-8 - Anti-Disciplinary Protest: Sixties Radicalism and Postmodernism

Julie Stephens

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction 7*

global character with remarkably American overtones. The decade marked the beginning of a new dimension in the globalization of cultural styles and identification,²⁷ and this applied no less to the counterculture than to popular mainstream culture. While 'the movement' (the self-conscious term coined by the American New Left to designate its supporters) perceived itself to be genuinely 'international', the circulation of alternative ideas, images, pamphlets, items of clothing and understandings of protest became implicated in less alternative (read commercial) forms of internationalization. International connections made by individual activists – as in the case of the friendship between Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a key figure in May '68 in France, and Abbie Hoffman, an American Yippie – an ever-globalizing consumer culture and the transnational distribution of certain underground publications all contributed to a wide dispersal of the radical style of 'an American sixties'. Consequently, the national and international characteristics of sixties movements are difficult to untangle.

At the time, in the United States, the sixties experience was felt to be especially 'American'. This is recorded by a number of commentators both retrospectively and in the literature of the day. Gitlin looks back on what he describes as the utterly American élan and language of the movement²⁸ while, in an early investigation of the decade, Stuart Hall, in reference to the 'expressive' politics of the hippie culture, notes that *Time Magazine* and the mass media in general couldn't help recognizing a 'pure American species' under the long hair, the beads and the kaftans.²⁹ According to Marshall Berman, this species was part of a fervently American spirit of development. Actions like the 1967 'storming of the Pentagon', the march on Washington to protest US involvement in the Vietnam War which came to take on an iconic significance for the anti-war movement, demonstrated, in Berman's view, the strong similarity of spirit that existed between 'the megalomaniac in the White House' and those protesting outside the Pentagon, shouting the words of the latest Doors' song, 'We want the world and we want it NOW!'³⁰

Others reflect on a particularly unconventional form of American patriotism expressed by the counterculture in the sixties.³¹ And such perspectives are frequently supported by the testimonies of sixties radicals who reported having felt more authentically 'American' than their parents and the institutions they opposed. Jackie Goldberg in the film *Berkeley in the '60s* traces her activism to feeling so committed to the system of American democracy she was willing to do anything to preserve it.³² However, I am less interested in the self-perceptions of American radicals than in America as the focal point in the sixties for the transcontinental movement of activists and the dissemination of images and ideas of youth protest to the rest of the world. Nevertheless, it is important to note the special relationship to the sixties that still exists today in contemporary American public life. Gitlin's comments about the way leading US politicians are meant to account for their role or

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62976-8 - Anti-Disciplinary Protest: Sixties Radicalism and Postmodernism

Julie Stephens

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 *Anti-Disciplinary Protest*

position in the sixties, even now,³³ underscores the very specific meaning and significance the sixties decade has come to have, and how important the American sixties has become to any discussion of the decade as a whole.

This book selects and discusses material from this American sixties, taking this experience to be also located outside the United States. An additional reason for such a choice of material is that America features so strongly in the literature of the last decade that looks back on the sixties. However, this selection runs the risk of homogenizing the local characteristics of sixties movements so, wherever possible and whenever relevant, the specificities of place will be noted. It is not my intention to document the significant global aspects of sixties protest. The general strike in France in May '68 alone sparked consequential demonstrations of solidarity in Mexico City, Berlin, Tokyo, Buenos Aires, Berkeley and Belgrade, and general strikes in Spain, Italy and Uruguay followed.³⁴ Consequently, this remarkable context and the resonances between the protest that emerged in so many different places at the same time should be kept in mind throughout the analysis to follow.

Briefly, Chapter 1 problematizes the conventional paradigms of sixties radicalism on which so many of the retrospective accounts of the decade are founded. Questions of periodization are discussed alongside debates about defining and categorizing the counterculture, youth culture and 'the sixties'. The chapter concludes by detailing the development of the concept of an 'anti-disciplinary politics' and establishing its relevance to this study. Following from this reconceptualization of the radicalism of the period, Chapter 2 investigates various expressions of anti-disciplinary protest in such things as the theatrical antics of the Diggers and Yippies, and in events like the 1967 attempted levitation of the Pentagon. In an effort to chart the new language of protest that was being forged, elements of the countercultural lexicon such as the idea of 'free' are analysed as is the anti-disciplinary attack on rationality and political coherence.

The sixties celebration of different modes of rationality was projected on to a place which came to have a metaphoric significance. Chapter 3 maps the remarkable ways 'India' was constituted in the sixties through rituals of travel, reading and imagining. The countercultural India is traced to and contrasted with understandings of the subcontinent championed by the American transcendentalists. The way India was 'performed' in the sixties through the use of Sanskrit terms, such as 'mantra' and 'karma', and the commodification of India is also explored. Chapter 4 refuses the commonplace link often made between the commodification and failure of the sixties, arguing that the anti-disciplinary attempt to move beyond language and rationality demonstrated a full awareness of the dangers of sixties protest becoming normative. This chapter documents the effort by groups such as the Yippies to co-opt co-optation and transcend the logic of recuperation so dominant at the time. The attempt at a different solution to this problem of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62976-8 - Anti-Disciplinary Protest: Sixties Radicalism and Postmodernism

Julie Stephens

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction* 9

incorporation offered by the Weathermen (later the Weather Underground) is also examined.

The desire to break down the distinction between politics and culture, politics and art and politics and everyday life was another way of trying to protect against capitalist appropriation. Chapter 5 focuses on various expressions of this desire arguing that postmodern impulses can be read in the blank parody of certain individuals and groups in the decade. Attention is given to the borrowing of motifs from popular culture (the figure of the outlaw, for example) in sixties protest and the way anti-disciplinary versions of politics proved both alluring and enduring, often displacing more conventional Left understandings of political activism. Chapter 6 returns to the death of the sixties narrative and its problematic role in genealogies of postmodernism concluding with an alternative reading of the relationship between sixties radicalism and the contemporary political/theoretical field.

Like the difficulty in determining which 'sixties' will be discussed, the question of which 'postmodernism' to feature in this text equally requires certain principles of selection. Here, the focus will be on the manifestly anti-political tendencies of this elusive cultural phenomenon. I will argue that in so much of the literature on the topic the very constitution of postmodernism as a 'break', and as representing an end to emancipatory possibilities, has also come to function as a justification for political disengagement. According to Michel Foucault, who is so often aligned with this sense of impasse, the point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous and that 'if everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do'. In calling for a hyper and pessimistic activism he stresses that the ethico-political choice we have to make every day 'is to determine which is the main danger'.³⁵ This study is about identifying one such danger in reading sixties radicalism and postmodernism as heralding an end to politics and an end to the promise of social transformation.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62976-8 - Anti-Disciplinary Protest: Sixties Radicalism and Postmodernism

Julie Stephens

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Chapter 1

Paradigms of Sixties Radicalism

The outcome and meaning of the movements of the Sixties are not treasures to be unearthed with an exultant Aha!, but sand paintings, something provisional, both created and revised in historical time. (Todd Gitlin)¹

Functioning like a shorthand, 'the sixties' has come variously to denote acts of protest and rebellion, a distinctive cultural mood, a special style or atmosphere and more recently a set of consumer items referring back to a specific period of time. As the decade is selectively remembered and recast, so its meaning and significance shift and change. However, interest in the sixties and what the decade represents does not seem to have diminished as we move further away from it in historical time. On the contrary, in the profusion of literature on the topic commentators identifying themselves with either the Left or the Right often share a conviction that the true significance of the sixties is yet to be unearthed. Nevertheless, despite the range of definitions given to this chameleon-like object of sociological investigation, understandings of the sixties rarely move beyond certain rigid and frequently problematic conceptual boundaries. This chapter attempts to trace some of the factors which have contributed to the emergence of a new socio-historical concept called 'the sixties' and examines why it has supplanted other ways of knowing the same phenomenon. Particular attention is given to the resurrection of the sixties in the eighties and the ways in which earlier theoretical frameworks resurface in contemporary narratives of sixties radicalism.