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

Julie Stephens

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Anti-Disciplinary Protest

Sixties Radicalism and Postmodernism

The sixties was a time when the boundaries between the political and the aesthetic were deliberately blurred and, according to some critics, the time when the possibility for grand social transformation died. Stephens questions the frameworks that inform commonplace understandings of this period, arguing that the most distinctive forms of sixties protest are often marginalized or excluded from view. She looks at the problematic contemporary and retrospective accounts of sixties radicalism, and traces the modernist and postmodern impulses that can be discerned in the anti-disciplinary protest of the time. Stephens develops a new theoretical framework for conceptualizing the relationship between the sixties and later political and theoretical developments. Drawing on broad-ranging, lively and often rare sources, this is a provocative contribution to contemporary social theory and cultural studies.

Julie Stephens is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Social and Cultural Studies at Victoria University of Technology. She is an associate editor of *Arena Magazine*. She has published articles in a range of journals and has recently been a Visiting Fellow at the University of California, Berkeley, and at the London School of Economics.

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[More information](#)

Contents

Preface *vii*

Introduction: Resurrecting the Death of the Sixties *1*

1 Paradigms of Sixties Radicalism *10*

2 The Language of an Anti-Disciplinary Politics *24*

3 Consuming India *48*

4 Co-opting Co-optation *73*

5 Aesthetic Radicalism *96*

6 Genealogies *120*

Notes *128*

Bibliography *153*

Index *165*

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

On 4 April 1989 Abbie Hoffman said of the sixties: 'We were young, we were reckless, arrogant, silly, headstrong – and we were right! I regret nothing'.¹ He was on a panel reviewing the decade's aftermath at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee, along with Bobby Seale and Timothy Leary. It was during a time when the debate about the nature and legacy of the sixties was at its most fervent in the United States. This was to be Abbie's last public appearance. Eight days later he committed suicide.

The breach between the wild enthusiasms of Hoffman's public utterances and his private despair in some respects stands as emblematic of the axes of enchantment and disenchantment, of hope and of loss, around which so much of the discussion of the radicalism of the sixties revolves. This book addresses some of the ways in which this polarized thinking shapes commonplace connections made between sixties radicalism and the current political field. In the most familiar depictions of the decade, a trajectory moves from the emancipatory promises of the sixties to the apparent end of all possibility of a transformative politics. This end is seen to represent the contemporary situation. I am concerned to disrupt this narrative and to examine some of the political consequences of these taken-for-granted understandings.

While the definition, the periodization, the categorization, the location (national or global) and the outcomes of the sixties can all be contested, the decade nevertheless is invoked as though its meaning is common, shared and self-evident. In a recent collection of essays entitled *Reassessing the Sixties*, Todd Gitlin makes the point that even now, thirty years on, leading politicians in the United States are called to account for their role in the sixties, what

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)*viii Preface*

they did or did not do (did you inhale, fight for your country?), to take positions on the decade and to answer true or false questions about it. Why should the sixties be so significant in determining current definitions of political identity? For, as Gitlin observes, there is no precedent for this phenomenon. No politician in the sixties was similarly pressured to take a position on the thirties, another period equally noted for its radicalism.²

This book begins with the premise that the sixties continues to occupy a special place in our historical and cultural memory and that representations of the decade frame the very way we think about the contemporary political/theoretical landscape. Clearly, the sixties has been overworked, with sociological, biographical and political literature on the topic and a boundless media fascination with the decade. Yet it continues to resurface as a reference point in cultural debate. Take for instance the recent defeat of the Conservative Party in Britain. In the immediate aftermath of the election of Tony Blair's New Labour, the spectre of the sixties rose once again. Various recollections of the decade suddenly appeared in the national press and discussion about the so-called sixties generation and its legacy briefly dominated television and radio. This coincided with an exhibition of photographs, poster art and psychedelia entitled 'Les Sixties: Great Britain and France 1962–1973' at Brighton Museum and Art Gallery and an accompanying book, *The Sixties: Britain and France, 1962–1973. The Utopian Years*,³ once again confirming the impression there is something about the decade that continues to trouble and allure.

Perhaps the words of a Sullivan County official in Bethel, New York, sum up the tenacity of the sixties as a cultural yardstick. The County repeatedly failed to prevent tens of thousands of pilgrims returning every year to the site where the 1969 Woodstock music festival was held, despite blocking access roads, digging ditches and even dumping chicken manure on the field. Finally, it admitted defeat and decided to turn the whole area into a shrine. As the County Manager Jonathan Drapkin, who was thirteen at the time of the festival, said: 'I'm not a flower child or a hippie, but Woodstock was the equivalent of the Civil War for the people who lived through it'.⁴

This book is not another attempt to enshrine the sixties. However, it is testimony to the stature of the decade in the contemporary imagination. It differs from other reinterpretations in a number of significant ways. While any rendering of historical events necessarily contains its own narrative logic, what follows is not intended to be a chronicle of the radicalism of the sixties. Rather, the concern is with questioning the ways sixties radicalism has been formulated in many of the retrospective accounts of the decade. The concept of an 'anti-disciplinary politics' is developed to identify a type of protest often marginalized or overlooked in scholarly and popular readings of the sixties. And, in rejecting the link frequently made between the failure of sixties radicalism and post-sixties political despair, this book proposes an alternative

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Julie Stephens

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface ix*

framework for understanding the relationship between the sixties and later political and theoretical developments such as postmodernism.

While I come to different conclusions to many other commentators on the sixties, I share similar preoccupations and motivations: namely, the desire to theorize the disappearance of mass political involvement without either being blind to present struggles or representing political disengagement as somehow an inevitable and conclusive historical development. Nostalgia seems to be another occupational hazard for those writing on this topic. I have had to strain against an urge to celebrate some of the sources I have used in the course of this investigation. Unlike James Farrell, who feels that there has been too much concentration on the ephemera of the counter-culture and not enough on its 'ethical core',⁵ in my view the leaflets, posters, poetry, travel journals, underground publications and roneoed sheets of the day provide an unparalleled glimpse of a version of sixties protest not always given serious attention in accounts of the decade. Far from cringing as expected when sifting through such material, or when confronting the spectacularly profane visions of the Diggers or the Yippies, it was difficult not to be affected by the energy, insight and irreverence of writings which even today are thoroughly destabilizing. I hope that the extracts included in the following chapters remind others, as I have been reminded, of what indeed is possible, and not, as we are told so frequently as this century draws to a close, of the limits of possibility.

The course of this book has spanned one birth and two deaths. At no stage has it been easy. It could not have been completed without the excellent support of Phillipa McGuinness at Cambridge University Press, who remained committed to and enthusiastic about the manuscript over what seemed to be a very long period of time. She encouraged me to persevere and for this I am very grateful. As always, others have helped along the way. At an early point in this project, when everyone was offering an anecdote about the sixties, the following people volunteered source material: Bernadette Delaney, Fabian Hutchinson, David Potts, Max Ryan, John Sinclair and Bryan Smith. Thanks go to Mark Kitchell for lending me a copy of his fine film *Berkeley in the '60s*. Others have provided criticism, information or comment which at different stages was crucial to the development of my ideas: Peter Beilharz, Verity Burgmann, Michele Grossman and Lenore Stephens. Dennis Altman and Todd Gitlin commented on a much earlier version of this study, when it was a PhD. Special thanks go to Dipesh Chakrabarty, who has provided valuable input at significant points in this book's progress. The early inspiration and encouragement of Dipesh continue to shape my thinking despite the different paths we have followed.

Ron Adams, who was Head of the Department of Social and Cultural Studies at Victoria University of Technology for most of the writing of this

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Julie Stephens

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*x Preface*

book, has provided consistent enthusiasm for this project and for intellectual endeavours in general, at a time of great difficulty for Australian universities. The staff at the Baillieu Library (University of Melbourne), the Victoria University of Technology Library at St Albans, the British Museum and the Bancroft Library (University of California, Berkeley) have also been of assistance. Ann Jungman and Veronika Fukson provided generous hospitality while I was collecting material in London and Berkeley respectively.

Others have countered my own anti-disciplinary tendencies. I am grateful beyond words to Sally Nicholls who when faced with a difficult task has proved to be a meticulous and gifted editor. Sharon Mullins and Jane Farago of Cambridge University Press have also provided important support. Erik, Yanni and Violaine Lloga came to the rescue when the technology failed me, as it always does, in the final stages of revision.

It is much more difficult finding the appropriate way of thanking the people closest to you. Margaret Stephens has helped at so many crucial moments along the way that her contribution to this book is impossible to quantify. So too with Boris Frankel. His commitment to this book and his confidence in its intellectual and political merit have proved unflagging. As a critical reader his input has been invaluable, just as his humour has enabled me to always keep the wider context in view. More than that, Boris has provided me with constant loving support of the most precious kind. This book is dedicated to him.