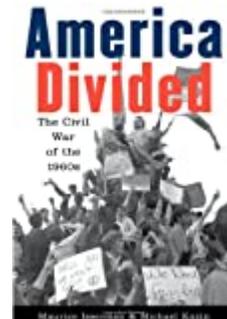




**Maurice Isserman, Michael Kazin.** *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s.* New York and Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2000. x + 300 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-509190-8.



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## Making Sense of the Sixties

The specter of the 1960s still haunts contemporary American society. There is no clear consensus on what exactly happened more than thirty years ago, let alone on the ways those events have shaped the contemporary scene. The sixties remain very much in play, their meaning hotly contested though often without sufficient historical context. This is most apparent in the political arena where liberals and conservatives bicker over militarism, interventionism, materialism, idealism and especially the legacy of the civil rights movement and the expanded social welfare policies of that decade. Both political parties pick and choose what they wish to remember. To Democrats, the sixties were a golden age of government activism on behalf of the dispossessed, destroyed by the conservative white backlash of the seventies, eighties, and nineties. To Republicans, the turbulent sixties signaled the beginning of a long moral slide in the United States and an end to governmental restraint and fiscal responsibility.

The 1960s are also alive and well on the American cultural landscape. The music of that era can still be heard on oldies stations coast to coast and in advertisements

for cars, jeans, and computers. Similarly, Martin Luther King's famed "I Have a Dream" speech has been used by Microsoft to sell its operating system, despite King's publicly stated aversion to materialism. Missing is the historical context from which these voices echo; the social and political meaning behind the familiar melody. As a result, citizens are left in the awkward and disarming position of feeling as if they know a great deal about the era, when in fact, they know very little. Perhaps more than any other period, the 1960s are in need of good historians, scholars who can sort through the rhetoric and emotions, who can move beyond the advertising jingles and misrepresentations to provide historical clarity and context. In their new book, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*, former student radicals turned historians, Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, attempt to clarify and explain the turbulent happenings of the sixties, to move beyond the assumptions and distortion with a reinterpretation of the decade as a complex "dramatization of our humanity" (p. 5). While their attempt is successful on several levels, it is also significantly flawed.

Despite the ill-fitting Civil War metaphor of the ti-

tle (a trope the authors thankfully do not fully develop and abandon after the introduction), *America Divided* is among the best historical syntheses of the 1960s we have, and contains much to recommend it. The book, relying mainly on secondary literature, stays close to the established narrative of the decade and devotes solid chapters to essential subjects like the civil rights movement, Vietnam, the Great Society, youth culture, and the New Left. Three year-specific chapters – on 1963, 1965 and 1968 – depict the way Americans experienced a multitude of events simultaneously. *America Divided* is strongest as political history, providing a coherent explanation and demystification of the rise and fall of liberalism. It also includes an important analysis of the emergence of a new conservatism, an aspect of the decade often overlooked by liberal-left historians. Although it is not woven smoothly into the broader narrative, the analysis of the New Right illustrates the ways youthful activism was not the sole purview of the left. Ultimately, then, the authors are successful in arguing that “liberalism was not as powerful in the 1960s as is often assumed; nor, equally, was conservatism as much on the defensive” (p. 4).

Similarly, Kazin’s and Isserman’s lengthy discussion of the Great Society includes compelling evidence bearing out Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s claim that sixties social welfare programs were “oversold and underfinanced to the point that [their] failure was almost a matter of design” (pp. 187-203). In addition, the authors challenge the notion of a liberal consensus on social welfare policy by detailing the fierce opposition to Great Society programs by conservative Republicans, urban Democrats, and even the poor themselves. These insights alone are significant and counter current assertions by both Republicans and Democrats.

There is much more to recommend in this volume. To their credit, the authors place the civil rights movement squarely at the center of their analysis and allow it to stand on its own terms rather than defining it solely in relation to white New Left student activism or the anti-war movement as other authors, like Todd Gitlin and James Miller, have tended to do. In addition, Isserman and Kazin understand the spiritual and existential restlessness that characterized much of the youth culture activism on the right and left during the 1960s. As a result, SDS’s cry for a more “authentic mode of being” and the counterculture’s experimentation with drugs and alternative ways of living make sense along side the more traditional anti-war and anti-Communist politics of the day. This also helps us link “revolutionaries” and “flower children” to the Young Americans for Freedom and other

right-wing groups, and understand the dizzying outpouring of religious identities that flourished in the sixties.

Even as the book succeeds in synthesizing the existing historical scholarship on “the long 60s,” *America Divided* also inevitably reflects the shortcomings of that historiography. For instance, while the book does place race at the center of its analysis, it fails to go far enough and give a full accounting of the African-American freedom struggle in the North. Northern activists drew inspiration from their southern counterparts, but struggled for racial justice in the unique contexts of their particular communities in ways that were much more complex than Isserman and Kazin’s treatment allows. To an extent, northern struggles over de facto school segregation, police brutality, employment discrimination, and housing connect us more directly to the pernicious and still unresolved issues of racism in American society today than the fights against de jure segregation and the blatant racial discrimination of the South. Central to these northern civil rights struggles was the proliferation of black nationalism, a topic this book largely ignores. Similarly, the authors’ reliance on secondary material keeps them close to the well-worn stories of Berkeley, Madison, Birmingham, and Selma, and thus neglects the way the currents of the sixties played out in other localities. What we are increasingly coming to understand is that there may not be a linear narrative of the sixties that proceeds in an orderly fashion from one locale to another, but rather that there was a more general flowering of a particular set of values and consciousness that manifested itself similarly (or differently) throughout the nation. Lastly, in an aesthetic and stylistic sense, *America Divided*’s text-like tone fails to convey the vitality and exuberance that permeated the decade, the profound, kaleidoscopic, sometimes silly and sometimes just plain weird outpouring of human expression. There is very little in the book from the alternative press, from the artwork of the time and from speeches we have not already heard numerous times before. Perhaps these criticisms are not necessarily the fault of the authors given their methodological emphasis on secondary sources.

There are ultimately more serious and fundamental problems with Isserman and Kazin’s analysis than their reliance on secondary literature. While the authors do emphasize the African-American freedom movement, the New Left, the student movement, the women’s movement, and briefly mention the Stonewall riot, and environmentalism, they fail to survey the full spectrum of activism during the sixties, particularly among non-African American people of color and the working-class. For

instance, nowhere do we find the Chicano Movement (with the exception of Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers Union), the American Indian Movement, Asian American activism, or the GI coffeehouse movement. In addition, the book does not adequately explore the way advertisers and consumer culture appropriated the slogans and stylings of the student movement and counter culture to sell products and bolster consumerism. At the same time, television and film, so critical to the making and unmaking, to the style and presentation of much of the decade's social protest, makes hardly an appearance despite the availability of work on this subject. In these omissions, the authors fail to take up basic connections between our current cultural landscape and that of the past. This leaves the contemporary reader isolated and disconnected from those events and wondering how we got from there to here.

Perhaps the book's greatest failing comes in its analysis of the New Left's critique of American foreign policy and its treatment of official reaction to activism of all stripes. Dwelling primarily on the New Left's opposition to the war in Vietnam, the authors fail to explore the dynamic confluence between these aspiring radicals and developments in other places, particularly China, Cuba, France, and Czechoslovakia. Nor do they sufficiently explain the ideological underpinnings of New Left thought in authors like Franz Fanon, William Appleman Williams, C. Wright Mills, and Herbert Marcuse. As a result, Isserman and Kazin do not fully explicate the broader New Left critique that linked a powerful global "system" of American expansion and "imperialism" not only to Vietnam but also to Japan, Russia, and Latin America. Another puzzling omission is the book's silence on the numerous and well-documented counterintelligence operations that led to official repres-

sion, misinformation, and disruption of a host of progressive movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s by federal, state, and local authorities. This glaring oversight, curious given the authors' backgrounds, leaves a critical gap in our understanding of how and why progressive and radical movements declined and disintegrated, and thus misses an opportunity to link these developments to the lasting mistrust of government that continues to permeate society.

Admittedly, Isserman and Kazin have selected a daunting task for themselves in a single volume and the criticisms here should be viewed in that light. Within the constraints of their methodological approach, the authors do present a refreshingly balanced version of the past that is written in simple, lucid, and straightforward prose. *America Divided* offers a good introduction to the main contours of the era and will be useful in lower and intermediate level undergraduate courses. Nevertheless, while the book is effective as an overview and synthesis of much of what we currently know about this turbulent decade, particularly on politics, and while it does clear away some of the basic misinformation about the sixties floating around today, my feeling is that we are not yet ready for the grand narrative the authors are striving for. There is much research still to be done, much ground yet to be excavated. We do not have all the pieces of this puzzle, and thus cannot present a definitive portrait. So, politicians, pundits, and admen will probably continue to hold sway over the public understanding of the decade, at least for a little while longer. *America Divided* makes it clear, though, that historians are gaining on them.

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