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The Elusive Sixties

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Long Time Gone: Sixties America Then and Now is a new addition to the already voluminous and ever swelling list of histories of the 1960s. The decade will not go away. It retains its allure and remains contentious ground for scholars and others. And its implications remain stubbornly elusive, including its place in the larger sweep of American history. The elusiveness, allure, and contention are evident in *Long Time Gone*, a collection of original essays edited by Alexander Bloom. A brief description of why this is so is a necessary prelude to discussing Bloom's book.

One reason the decade remains elusive is because there were so many sixties, as distinctive as they were intertwined. One's view of the era depends on which "sixties" one is talking about, committed to, nostalgic for, or infuriated by. Is it the triumphal Civil Rights era of the early to mid sixties recalled by African Americans and their white allies? Or the sixties marked by Lyndon Johnson's simultaneous and failed wars on poverty and the Vietnamese? Those dual failures, not only of Johnson but of post World War Two liberalism as well, breathed new life into conservative political and religious movements that thirty years later remain powerful forces in American society. Or the decade experienced by working class whites, dubbed "Middle Americans" and the "Silent Majority" in the sixties? This group felt alienated and excluded by Great Society programs that focused on the poor and minorities, and scandalized and threatened by a youth culture's often insolent challenges to their religious, sexual, and gender role verities. Or the era of assassinations that by 1968 brutally demolished the hopes of millions for a more tolerant and just America? Or, finally, is it one of the multiple faces of the sixties seen by Vietnam War veterans, by those in the antiwar movement, by feminists, by gay rights activists, by Washington policy makers, by government agents who spied on dissidents, by iconoclastic rock musicians, by New Leftists and hippies?

Then there is the mystery about the origins of political and cultural rebellion among young whites. There are no other comparable instances in American history of reform or radical movements led (much less created) by so great a percentage of a generation of young peo-

ple. Why then and why them? The motivation of black college students to organize the sit-in movement in 1960 can be traced to the long history of white racism and brutality visited on African Americans. Similarly, the vital role played by young feminists in the women's liberation movement toward the end of the decade was inspired by discrimination and worse at the hands of men. But how to account for the rebellion of young, white New Leftists and cultural radicals who frequently hailed from secure, affluent upper middle class backgrounds and were blessed by unprecedented opportunity? What were their motives? Why did so many of them view their "plight" as students and their bright economic future as exploitative and alienating? How can understanding this issue shed light on the American experience during, before, and since the sixties?

The fragmentary quality of sixties movements and moments, is addressed by Bloom in the Introduction to *Long Time Gone*. Bloom, a professor of History and American Studies at Wheaton College, writes that "lost in the modern imagery of 'sixties' life is the interconnection of the political, the cultural, and the social." One "intention" of the collection is to describe what happened in the sixties and disclose how the "lives, ideas, and actions" of individuals were "wound together–the personal became political and the cultural and political seemed to be two parts of a whole" (p. 8). One of the ways Bloom and the contributors to *Long Time Gone* hope to redress this problem is to "reestablish this sense of the 'sixties' experience. Thus, a number of the essayists have introduced personal stories...to try to recapture the inner resonance of life in the 1960s, that intimate interconnection among elements that seem so disparate today" (p. 8). Along with describing what happened in the sixties, Bloom hopes the book will uncover "the meaning of these issues for our contemporary world," while also dispelling the "myths" (he doesn't specify them) surrounding the sixties (p. 8). Toward these ends the contributors range from those who were alive and active in the sixties to younger scholars currently at work on that decade.

Does *Long Time Gone* achieve these goals? On the whole, the authors, particularly the more established ones, do a fine job on one of them: describing what happened in the sixties. This is not surprising. The essays by established scholars, while technically "original" (that is, written expressly for this collection), are rehashes of their former work, each of them a major contribution toward understanding the sixties. Essays by Wini Breines (" 'Of This Generation': The New Left and the Student Movement"), Sara Evans ("Sources of the Second Wave: The Rebirth of Feminism"), John D'Emilio ("Placing Gay in the Sixties") and Tom Wells ("Running Battle: Washington's War at Home") fall into this category. Scholars will find little new in these articles, though undergraduates would benefit mightily from exposure to them (or better still, to the originals).[1] In addition, there is an important essay by the journalist Tom Wicker, "Lyndon Johnson and the Roots of Contemporary Conservatism," as well as an informative article, "Negroes No More: The Emergence of Black Student Activism," by a younger scholar, Karen Miller.

For the most part, Bloom's hope of reestablishing the "sense of the sixties" through personal stories, falls rather flat. With two exceptions, they are mostly throwaway "I was there" lines unintegrated into the overall discussion. One of the exceptions is Barry Melton's essay, "Everything Seemed Beautiful: A Life in the Counterculture." In the sixties, Melton was a guitarist with the politically-minded folk and rock group Country Joe and the Fish. A defense lawyer for the past two decades, Melton does a wonderful job of recreating a rock and roll life amid the fads, flowers, flashbacks, and fleshpots of San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury. And he avoids the intellectual cul-de-sacs common to so many sixties memoirs. Although Melton is keenly aware of the youth culture's (and his own) excesses, he abstains from the hand wringing "sorry we overdid it" apologies of some former sixties radicals. Nor does he impale his remembrances on a maudlin longing for the good old days expressed by others. "I sure don't want to go back to the 1960s," he concludes with balance, "but I'm glad I was there" (p. 157). Julian Bond's article ("The Movement We Helped To Make") is similarly evocative. Bond, the director of communications for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee from its founding in 1960 to 1965, describes with a calm passion (if I might put it that way) the first sit-ins, the creation of SNCC, the enormity and effectiveness of that organization's mobilization of thousands of activists in a murderously hostile South and the repeated efforts of Georgia legislators in 1965 to bar him from a seat in that state's House of Representatives that he had legitimately won.

Bloom's most important stated goal, that the essays decipher the "meaning" of the sixties then and for now, is unsuccessful in some ways while achieved nicely in others. That is hardly surprising in a volume written or co-written by eleven authors. On the positive side are the previously mentioned essays by some of the established scholars. Breines is characteristically astute in describing the origins of the New Left and student movements. In her conclusion she notes (how couldn't she?) that the

New Left "did not prevail," even in "its basic critique of the university;" indeed, today its ideas "seem quaint." Yet she points out as well (quite correctly) that despite the contemporary triumph of American capitalism at home and abroad, along with the country's orgy of promiscuous consumption and the disengagement of most citizens from public life, "the New Left's analysis was not wrong. The Port Huron Statement is as relevant today as it was almost forty years ago. New Left concerns about participatory democracy and bureaucracy, meaningful work and fairness, concentrated power, and the rights to a decent and meaningful life have never been addressed." Her main suggestions about why this is so are rather weak–political and economic power are more concentrated now than in 1960, and the majority's relative paucity of community ties and its feelings of powerlessness have "deepened" over the past three decades (pp. 42-43).

One could reasonably argue, however, that even if these conditions are more acute now than ever before (and logically more necessary to rebel against), they have been fundamental elements of American history and culture since at least the last third of the nineteenth century. They did not appear out of nowhere circa 1960 and from there become more lethal in ensuing decades. The sway of what C. Wright Mills over forty years ago called the "power elite," and the "loneliness," "powerlessness," and "estrangement" decried by Students for a Democratic Society in the Port Huron Statement, existed long before the sixties (as did racism, poverty amid plenty, and other issues that helped galvanize the New Left). Neither the New Left, its failure, nor the fact that most Americans refuse to seriously address the issues it raised, can fully be comprehended by focusing exclusively on what happened during and since that decade. To be properly understood, the New Left, the counterculture, and the conditions each reacted against should be placed in a broader historical context. And that means digging within but deeper than post-World War Two society. These were uprisings against values and conditions whose seeds were sown long before 1945, just as the most vital ideals and ideas of the youth culture originated well before the twentieth century.

Despite this reservation, Breines' essay is thought-provoking and informative, as are those by Wicker, Wells, Evans, and D'Emilio. Wicker's beautifully written article on the relationship between Lyndon Johnson's administration and the rise of contemporary conservatism is especially incisive. Wicker argues that just as much (or perhaps even more) than the tragedy and ultimate unpopularity of America's war on Vietnam, it was Johnson's Great Society programs aimed at minorities and the poor that soured those who were conservative and/or middle class in the sixties. In addition, Wicker points out that in fashioning his War on Poverty Johnson was keenly aware of the rock-ribbed American hostility toward government sponsored social welfare programs. Unless, of course, they benefited wealthy corporations and middle class homeowners. In order to get congressional approval for his array of anti-poverty programs, therefore, Johnson diluted them. The vision and political acuity that should have made Johnson one of the nation's most esteemed presidents (instead of one of its least beloved) banged up against these limitations. "Just as Johnson's downfall was rooted in his achievements," concludes Wicker, "so his splendid vision was frustrated by the limits he believed he had to impose on it" (p. 121).

Tom Wells' piece on the war at home caused by the war in Vietnam is a trenchant analysis of the duel between Washington policy makers and the antiwar movement. Wells shows not only how often antiwar activists actually impeded potential escalation of the war, but how ignorant policy makers were about the motives of the activists–"there is a communist under every bush," noted one such policy maker (p. 89). Wells also demonstrates how unaware those in the antiwar movement were about their actual impact. Their misplaced sense of impotence pushed some of them to the edge, especially the Weathermen faction of SDS, who didn't have far to go to begin with.

Sara Evans' essay on the rise and implications of the feminist movement and John D'Emilio's on the surge of gay rights activism are also outstanding. D'Emilio suggests that the gay rights movement, rather than being simply a sort of tag-on as an end of the decade event, has been more like a custodian of what was best about sixties' activism. His notion that it has helped keep the sensibilities and activism of the sixties alive is nicely advocated. And Evans' article demonstrates once again why she is the premier historian of the relationship between the New Left and Civil Rights movements on one side and the rise of women's liberation on the other.

Despite these splendid contributions, *Long Time Gone* is marred by a few defects. Some concern the causes of what happened in the sixties, others the consequences. One of Bloom's stated goals was to demonstrate how the "personal became political" in the sixties and thereby defined both the tone and texture of the era as well as its ongoing impact on the country. Yet, this notion, which has become something of a cliche, is hardly self-evident

or even logical. Nor does it necessarily define what was distinctive about the decade. To cite just one example in the book, Sara Evans points out that as "women focused on personal issues and the body, they forced new issues on the political agenda…." (p. 202).

Obviously this is an accurate description of what happened. Yet, the pervasive discrimination and frequent brutality to which women were (and too often still are) subjected were legitimated by the culture and often reenforced by the rule of law. How else, then, could these "personal" issues be addressed and redressed without becoming part of political discourse and thus subject to legal remedy? That the "personal became political" here (as it did in other ways for mid nineteenth century transcendentalists and turn of the century progressives, including feminists) is not at issue. That this somehow accounts for the historical uniqueness of the sixties or the significance of its various movements, is.

The same holds true for some issues pushed by the New Left. Without question, a sense of personal "powerlessness" and "estrangement" helped galvanize the New Left to political action. Personal issues and political postures were frequently entangled. But these "personal" feelings were inseparable from political arrangements, institutionalized among other places in the Constitution of the United States, that were deliberately designed to keep the exercise of genuine political power (as distinct from the right to vote for those who can exercise it) away from the mass of citizens. How else could this sense of powerlessness, the feeling that individuals lacked control over the public decisions that affected their lives, be addressed except through political action?

The danger in suggesting that the New Left, the counterculture, the woman's and other sixties movements were defined by an entwining of the personal with the political is that it makes it easy to dispose of them. Their grievances can be waved aside as divorced from "practical" political considerations (i. e., politics as practiced by the usual interest group suspects). From there it is easy to judge sixties movements as utopian or irrational. Either way the place of a radical movement in the country's history, along with the legitimacy of its challenges to an elitist economic and political culture during the sixties, can be conveniently cast aside. And not for the first time–recall how the Populist movement was dismissed by "consensus" historians of the 1950s as an apolitical eruption of "status anxiety" and paranoia.

A variation on the theme of the personal becoming political, one that reduces it to near absurdity, is explored in the essay "The Freedom Singers, The Living Theatre and Public Performance," by a younger scholar, Bradford Martin. Martin claims that performances by SNCC's Freedom Singers early in the decade and those of the Living Theatre in the late sixties were significant because "both pursued an impulse to stage performances and actions in public spaces…. Public performance encouraged a convergence of everyday life, politics, and artistic concerns…in a way that expanded the boundaries of what was considered political" (p. 160). During the sixties the work of some rock singers, actors and other artists became infused with political content of one sort or another. But to claim, as Martin does, that politically-informed public performances maximized "art's potential for social impact since it minimize[d] mediating factors between performers and audience," requires evidence not found in the essay. Worse, his belief that the songs sung by Civil Rights activists, including the Freedom Singers, helped push the movement "into public space" and thereby "signaled the end of the McCarthy-era stranglehold on public dissent," (p. 173) begs the question: what "space" other than "public space" could be occupied by a movement dedicated to challenging laws and mores that mandated racial segregation?

Another cliche about the uniqueness of the sixties dots the book: that the participation of young people in various movements and protests was emblematic of their "idealism," their desire to bring American realities in line with American ideals of equity, fair play, democracy and so forth. Here too there are problems of logic and of defining how the era was distinctive. The number of young people involved in every facet of sixties events that upended the status quo, from the Civil Rights movement to rock and roll, was unprecedented. Are we to suppose, then, that their generation was inherently more moral, or committed, or idealistic than those who came before or since? If so, why? If not, how can we account for their idiosyncratic behavior? Sadly, this crucial issue is not addressed in *Long Time Gone*.

If the rebellious members of that generation were indeed uniquely idealistic it could not have been solely because they were offended by the specific issues they rebelled against. Those issues were as generic to the nation's history as they were endemic to the sixties. If a reason for rebellion was Vietnam in the sixties, then why not Korea in the fifties? If it was poverty and the unfair distribution of wealth in the sixties, why aren't we witnessing a revolutionary surge in 2001? And if it was racism in the sixties, why not a rebellion by committed youth at any point in the country's history? Clearly, the

upheaval of the young in the sixties was an extraordinary event of major historical significance. But why it happened and what it meant remain, to paraphrase the words of one of that era's rock songs, not exactly clear.

The consequences of the sixties on contemporary America are generally well crafted in *Long Time Gone*. A glaring exception, one that crops up in various articles, is dealt with in depth in an otherwise fine essay by Christian Appy and Alexander Bloom, "Vietnam War Mythology and the Rise of Public Cynicism." Appy and Bloom suggest that the lies and deceptions of government officials about the purposes and progress of the war helped sow the "seeds of...cynicism" that make contemporary Americans "wary, cynical, and pessimistic–untrusting of our leaders and unsure about the future of the nation" (pp. 71-72). Wariness and cynicism were proper responses to the deceptions about Vietnam foisted on the American public by officials in the sixties and early seventies. But to suggest that cynicism toward politics and wariness of government in general some thirty years later is a result of the Vietnam tragedy is to forget that Americans have a two hundred year old tradition of mistrust toward government and politicians. The Vietnam era may have confirmed that such mistrust is warranted, but it did not create it.

Finally, *Long Time Gone* would have benefited from more careful copyediting. Some essays are studded with repetition. For example, Bradford Martin's claim that singing freedom songs created a "sense of unity" among activists is stated on page 161, repeated on pages 164 and 165, reiterated twice in a single paragraph on page 167 and, in case the reader somehow managed to miss the point, re-asserted in two consecutive paragraphs on page 168. And there are some errors of fact. Students for a Democratic Society was created in 1960, not 1962 (p. 4). On page 49 of the Appy and Bloom article they write that two million Vietnamese were killed during the war, while on page 61 they claim the number was three million.

On balance, however, *Long Time Gone's* value far exceeds its shortcomings. It is a volume that faculty teaching undergraduate courses on the sixties would find valuable.

Note:

[1]. Wini Breines, *Community and Organization in the New Left, 1962-1968: The Great Refusal* (New York: Praeger, 1982); Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Vintage, 1979); John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); and Tom Wells, *The War Within: America's Battle Over Vietnam* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996).

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