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Remembrance of Things That Last

Anthony Ashbolt

This is an edited version of a paper presented at the Sydney Branch's two day conference on 'Social Protest Movements and the Labour Movement, 1965-1975: which was held at the Women's College, Sydney University, on 22-23 September 2001.

For some years now, the 1960s have been contested terrain. Many commentators have rushed to specious judgements about the radical politics of the era, while others have struggled valiantly to keep memories alive. Much of the politics of the contemporary epoch is being played out through the lens of the Sixties. This seems like a grand and foolish claim but it needs to be understood that the so-called neo-liberal and/or neoconservative agenda (and I will include hawkish foreign policy in this) is substantially directed at burying the Sixties. The gains of the various social movements, in particular the anti-war and civil rights movements, have been under attack since the mid 1970s.

The 'new right', as it was known then, was a revanchist movement seeking to recover and reconstitute traditional structures of authority. Subsequently, the fall of the Soviet Union and the triumph of neo-liberalism in much of the west, signalled an end not only of the Cold War but also, of course, an end of history and specifically the sort of history which concerns utopian dreams of a *different* society and concrete struggles for a better society. Yet, paradoxically, the neo-liberals and their fellow travellers on talkback radio (whose ack of an ideological perspective is matched by their lack of ethics) prattle on about the new chattering class of left liberals, a class which supposedly dominates the policy process. At the very time they and others are noisily burying the radical Sixties, its victory is announced. This dialectical dance (and note that they use the Marxist architectural framework of class) neatly obscures the contraction of the public sphere, the withering away of democratic politics, the transformation of citizens into consumers and the atrophy of social networks of solidarity.

There is no point being nostalgic about the past but it is important to remember history and, in terms of this conference, to revive memories of the 1960s as a decade when the structures of power in advanced capitalist society (and also in the Third World) were under assault, when democracy came alive in the streets, when those marginalised because of their race, gender or sexuality found a voice, when we knew that we were participating in the making of history. There are, of course, those who see only negatives flowing from this. Take the distinguished historian Stephen Ambrose and his remarks about the anti-war movement in America:

The antiwar movement had a chance to create a genuine party of the left in America, but instead it took its opportunity to print a license to riot, to scandalize, to do drugs and group sex, to talk and dress dirty, to call for revolution and burn flags, to condemn parents and indeed anyone over thirty years of age, in an excess of free will and childish misjudgment seldom matched and never exceeded.¹

I can't recall it being that much fun but perhaps we were more sober and staid in Australia. The Ambrose quote is from the Foreword to a book by Adam Garfinkel, *Telltale Hearts: The Origins and Impact of the Vietnam Antiwar Movement*, the central argument of which is that the antiwar movement prolonged the war. This preposterous claim is fast becoming the new orthodoxy, as there has been a spate of books rewriting the history of the war from the vantage point of imperialism. It is thus more urgent than ever that we keep alive our memories and our knowledge of the Sixties and of the events surrounding that decade. The rewriting of history is helping fuel a bellicose American foreign policy, something with which those of us once active in the antiwar movement are only too familiar. The historical distortions and mythologies are also evident in Australia. Take the recent ABC television series *Australians at*

War. Its elevation of the Vietnam vet to the figure of tragic hero came at the

expense, yet again, of the Vietnamese people. Its general grasp of history was fragile and solipsistic, while its treatment of the antiwar movement was both cursory and derisory.

As memories fade, mythologies abound and the radical sixties are to be held accountable for every contemporary sign of moral degeneracy. Yet underpinning the politics of the period was a profound sense of morality; a moral urgency which confronted the evils of racism and imperialism and injustice. From the southern preachers like Martin Luther King to Catholic priests like the Berrigans (or in Australia, Edmund Campion and Charlie Bowers), the overtly religious dimension of protest should not be forgotten. Yet morality is not the exclusive preserve of religion and we all, even those in the counterculture, operated within a definite ethical framework. To be sure, a prudish morality was questioned, lifestyles were opened up and there was cultural experimentation which may have seemed on the surface to be amoral and, for some, immoral. Yet even the slogan "make love not war" (which may sound corny now) resonated with moral urgency. Hippies developed a living critique of the spiritual wasteland of urban America, first in the cities themselves and then in the country. Whatever the inadequacies of that critique, it still has force today and may have helped change the way we eat or grow vegetables or think about the environment. So too, the ideas of the new left and civil rights movement reverberate today, even in what is meant to be something entirely new the anti-globalisation movement. After all, affinity groups are back - do the young anti-globalisers really think they invented them or the idea of loose free-floating coalitions (which were a feature of the Berkeley campus in the 1960s)? Histories of Sixties radicalism in America tend to bypass the labour movement. It is received wisdom that the labour movement there was pro-war. Yet this is not entirely accurate and the labour movement had been involved very much in civil rights campaigns. (One only thinks of Miles Horton and the Highlander Folk School which trained both labour and civil rights activists and of the song *We Shall Overcome* which started out as a spiritual, became a labor movement song, only to re-emerge as the signature tune of the civil rights movement). Moreover, Students for a Democratic Society began life as the youth wing of the League for Industrial Democracy, a social democratic organization with strong links to the union movement. And it is no coincidence that the San Francisco Bay Area became effectively the western centre for social, political and cultural dissidence, as that region had a strong labour, pacifist, Communist and anarchist heritage. Indeed, the Communist Party in the Bay Area (and the west coast as a whole) was more progressive and more in line with the social movements of the 1960s than elsewhere in America. Thus it was that the leader of the civil rights campaigns in 1964, particularly those concerned with the Sheraton Hotel and Auto Row was Tracy Sims a young black woman member of the DuBois Club (the youth wing of the Communist Party); so, too Bettina Aptheker, another DuBois Club member was a leader of the Free Speech Movement; and the manager of Robert Scheer's Berkeley peace campaign for Democratic congressional nomination in 1966 was Carl Bloice, a prominent local Communist. The distance between the old left and the new was not as great in the Bay Area as elsewhere in America. Moreover, the new left was never entirely new anyway and even in America eventually returned to the class politics which had informed the old left.

Similarly, in Australia the trade union movement and Communist Party played a significant role in the social protest movements, particularly the civil rights and antiwar movements but also later in the environment movement. Indeed, the Green Bans can be regarded as Australia's signal contribution to environmental action internationally. Those who imagine that the antiwar movement was simply a young people's movement forget the early involvement of trade unions and organisations like Save our Sons. Too much has been made of the generational aspect of sixties radicalism. Sections of the student population did arise as rebellious fractions of schools and universities. Almost invariably, however, there were older mentors present to provide guidance and wisdom. This is true even of the counterculture - in America, the whole Haight-Ashbury phenomenon was really started by people already in their thirties or older, and was propelled by a cast of characters like Allen Ginsberg, who were hardly all young (which is not to deny the overwhelming presence of the young by late 1966). In Australia, Ian Channel proved inspirational to many much younger than himself. In short, the movements of the Sixties (and in terms of periodizing the Sixties in Australia, I do take it up to 1975) were crossgenerational even though the young did have special roles to play.

To remember the Sixties is to remember a time of dynamic political activism, exciting cultural

experimentation, intellectual engagement with the issues of the time (how many of us became Marxist through our initial involvement with the antiwar movement which compelled us to understand the nature of imperialism, the nature of capitalism itself and before long we were reading not only Marx but also Marcuse, Lukacs, Gramsci, Fanon, Sartre, Adorno ...this is all before fashion overtook sense and designer label thinking began to pose as radicalism).

Remembering history is an act of passion not of nostalgia. As racism, xenophobia and jingoism once again gain a grip on the people of America and Australia, it is timely, indeed, to cast our minds back to the days when our ideals and our energy and our sense of moral urgency helped stop a war, helped curb the tide of racial intolerance (if only momentarily), helped save a historic part of Sydney, helped inject some intellectual vitality into the universities and even the media, helped guarantee some extra rights for workers, women and oppressed minorities. We may have reached out at times for the impossible, for an unachievable utopia. In doing so, however we kept alive the idea of the good society, an idea which is urgently in need of revival.

1. Stephen Ambrose, 'Foreword', Adam Garfinkel, *Telltale Hearts: The Origins and Impact of the Vietnam Antiwar Movement*, London, Macmillan, 1995, p.V