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# The Student and New Left Movements

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# **A Turbulent Decade:**

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## **Social Protest Movements and the Labour Movement, 1965-1975**

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## CHAPTER TWO: THE STUDENT AND NEW LEFT MOVEMENTS

### ANTHONY ASHBOLT\*

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 perhaps foolish claim but it needs to be understood that the neo-liberal and/or neo-conservative agenda (and I will include hawkish foreign policy in this) is substantially directed at burying the sixties, the radical sixties. The gains of the various social movements, in particular the anti-war and civil rights movements movements, have been under attack since the mid-1970s.

The new right, as it was known then in the mid-1970s, 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 lack 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 current policy process. At the very time they and others are noisily burying the radical sixties, they announce its victory. This dialectical dance (and note that they do use a Marxist architectural framework) neatly obscures the contraction of the public sphere, the withering away of democratic politics, the transformation of citizens into consumers and the atrophying of social networks of solidarity.

There is no point in being nostalgic about the past but it is important to remember history and 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 American 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,

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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.

Personally I cannot recall it being that much fun. Perhaps we were more sober and staid in Australia. The Ambrose quote is from the Foreword to a 1995 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 common sense, with a constant rewriting of history. 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 in the 1960s should not be forgotten.

Yet morality, of course, is not the exclusive preserve of religion and we all, even those of us 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 or, 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 later 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 America 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 needs only think 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 labour song, and ended up as the signature tune of the civil rights movement). Moreover, Students for a Democratic Society began life as the youth organisation of the League for Industrial Democracy, a social democratic organisation with strong links to the trade 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 1960s social movements than elsewhere in America. Thus it was that the leader of the civil rights campaigns in 1964 in San Francisco, 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. Also, Bettina Aptheker, another DuBois Club member, was a leader of the Free Speech Movement. And Carl Bloice, manager of Robert Scheer's Berkeley peace campaign for Democratic congressional nomination in 1966, was 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. Far 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 begun 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 youth in Haight Ashbury 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 cross-generational, 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 and intellectual engagement with the issues of the time. Many

of us became Marxist through our initial involvement with the antiwar movement which compelled us to understand the nature of imperialism, and thus the nature of capitalism itself and before long we were reading not only Marx but also Marcuse, Lukacs, Gramsci, Fanon, Sartre, Adorno. This is well 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 into the media and 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.

## **GREG MALLORY\***

I am a Queenslander, but I have dual membership: I am a member of the Sydney Branch, Labour History Society and also a Vice-President of the Brisbane Labour History Association. So that is part of the reason why I am here. But the main reason is because I have wanted to talk about the sixties for a long time, particularly in the last couple of years of discovering the material contained in the University of Queensland Administration Archives.

This paper consists of three parts. Firstly, the major events that occurred on the Queensland campus between 1966 and 1971; secondly, the attempt to bring some history together to get people to talk about what happened in the sixties, 25 years down the track in 1992, when we organised the Brisbane Radical Reunion; and finally, the discovery of the University of Queensland Administration files.

I started off at the University in 1966 as a pretty naïve Christian Brothers' boy and was not really politically active at all. I came from a Labor Party family, but my first impression was seeing people being bashed in the streets at St Lucia, trying to actually march down the street in protest against the Vietnam war and being bashed by Queensland police. What emerged from that was a huge civil liberties struggle which basically led to September 8, 1967, when virtually the whole of the University moved from the St Lucia campus to Roma Street in the heart of the city. On that Friday afternoon, 114 were arrested, 4000 people marched and 3000 followed. There were about 7000 full-time students, so virtually the entire University moved from the St Lucia campus onto the streets. That was in response to the fact that you could not march in Queensland, you could not protest and so really, as well as being an anti-Vietnam movement, it was a movement for the right to march, the right to hand out leaflets in Queen Street in the city. So there was a whole range of other issues that Queenslanders had to contend with.

\* Activist at the University of Queensland campus, 1967-71; Secretary, Queensland University Labor Club, 1968; organiser of Brisbane Radical Reunion, 1992.