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Remembering and Forgetting the Sixties

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Abstract

In this section, which will be a recurring feature in the journal, we will focus upon debates surrounding the meaning of the 1960s, particularly but not exclusively in relation to the counterculture. Many of us on both the editorial board and in the wider advisory board have participated in these debates for decades now and the fact that they are still going on, even receiving some prominence in the mainstream press, testifies to the significance of the Sixties as a social, political and cultural force. Indeed, the Sixties are still with us today as culture wars surrounding campaigns for progressive policies, as music that plays on even as it celebrates its role as soundtrack for a generation, as cold war politics in new and even peculiar guise, as symbols of past struggles that provide inspiration for the present. Thus it is that Graham Nash, in working with artist and filmmaker Jeff Scher, has produced a video clip of the song “Teach Your Children” that links 1968 and also events like the Kent State massacre with movement politics today from high school students opposed to gun violence to Black Lives Matter.

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In this section, which will be a recurring feature in the journal, we will focus upon debates surrounding the meaning of the 1960s, particularly but not exclusively in relation to the counterculture. Many of us on both the editorial board and in the wider advisory board have participated in these debates for decades now and the fact that they are still going on, even receiving some prominence in the mainstream press, testifies to the significance of the Sixties as a social, political and cultural force. Indeed, the Sixties are still with us today as culture wars surrounding campaigns for progressive policies, as music that plays on even as it celebrates its role as soundtrack for a generation, as cold war politics in new and even peculiar guise, as symbols of past struggles that provide inspiration for the present. Thus it is that Graham Nash, in working with artist and filmmaker Jeff Scher, has produced a video clip of the song “Teach Your Children” that links 1968 and also events like the Kent State massacre with movement politics today from high school students opposed to gun violence to Black Lives Matter.¹

¹ Jeff Scher, *Teach Your Children*, video, 2018, duration: 2 min 55secs. Available URL:

<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/watch-graham-nash-honor-1968-2018-protests-with-new-teach-your-children-video-706050/>.

Tributes, memorials and testimonies about 1968 abound in this anniversary year and it is fitting that the foundation issue of this journal contributes to the process of remembering the Sixties. The need for nurturing memory is clear as a profound political amnesia fuels politics today. The American War in Vietnam is forgotten as demands of empire point to new conquests (even outer space returns to the agenda), civil rights struggles are thought to be over as school segregation spreads and voting rights get trashed, historic battles against poverty and for equality are sidelined as access to wealth becomes more restricted, and the need for respect, tolerance and diversity gets labelled “political correctness”. The culture wars rage today and this partly involves what the Sixties stands for. A standard intervention came from Bruce Cannon Gibney in his *A Generation of Sociopaths: How the Baby Boomers Betrayed America* (New York, Hachette Books, 2017). An interview with Gibney was posted on this journal’s Facebook page.² In addition, one of our editorial board colleagues, Philip Frazer, sent the following response that highlights problems with Gibney’s analysis:

Every sentence of this featherweight discussion assumes the "boomers" were/are of one mind, one character. As in every age cohort there are multiple subsets; the privileged down to upper middle class types he's referencing did indeed run the US and many other nations including Australia for most of the past 60 years, and like most privileged upper types they ran things to benefit their selfish selves. Simultaneously, the post WW2 generation included many millions of us who recognised that we were coming of age into societies still in political struggle between labour and capital, overlorded by the US imperial project on steroids after its a-bomb orgasms at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We helped elect social democratic governments in Australia, New Zealand, UK, and governments with progressive programs in the US under Kennedy, Johnson,

² Bruce Cannon Gibney (interview), 2017. Available URL: <https://www.vox.com/2017/12/20/16772670/baby-boomers-millennials-congress-debt>.

and Carter. More importantly, we created the movements that were genuinely counter-cultural—environmental, feminist, gender liberational, and artistic—and when our generation's wealthy imperial masters unleashed neo-liberalism, we progressives gave shape to the resistance to that disastrous project in the "developed" world. We must reject this absurd framing of recent history by generations that have names, not just because those names were invented by real estate agents and other crass marketing majors, but because it's an obfuscation of what drives human history, which is the actions of people who have the power and privilege to impose change on the less powerful, and the actions of broad social movements fighting for change that seeks common benefits and, these days, species survival.

Frazer astutely identified the rewriting of history that collapses very different subjects in the 1960s into one class that benefited from rapacious capitalism. It is "history" that obliterates the movements on behalf of the common good that arose in the 1960s and united hippies and civil rights workers, students and Vietnam veterans, women searching for liberation and striking garbage workers in Memphis wearing "I Am a Man" placards, gays and militant clergy like Fathers Daniel and Philip Berrigan. This real history is still being reconstructed and that work is important for people today and the generations to come. In a recent "Diary" in the *London Review of Books* (19 July, 2018) Jeremy Harding took clever aim at "the confident dismissals of 1960s culture to which we're treated every ten years":

This was the moment, apparently, when patience was traded in for instant gratification, a sense of 'us' for a sense of 'me', as western societies were broken on the wheel of self-indulgence. Really? What about the people who opted for public service – health, education, social work – as opposed to the media, where these opinions are aired like rotten socks. Were exasperated Northern Irish youth who rallied to civil rights in the autumn of 1968 more self-regarding than

the men of Whitehall who looked on in dismay before they took the fight to the enemy on Bloody Sunday? Were the young men in the GDR who spoke up for reform in Czechoslovakia and went to jail...really more callow than the elderly men who tell us now that the 1960s were a terrible mistake? What of others in the UK, who worked in the cramped offices of support committees for internationalist causes...? Pundits who denounce the period and the people it produced as self-regarding are among the most narcissistic and me-ist of that generation still standing...

Precisely. The papers that follow are two contributions to the culture wars that seek to revive and keep alive accurate memories of the radical Sixties.