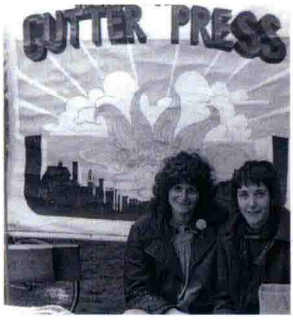

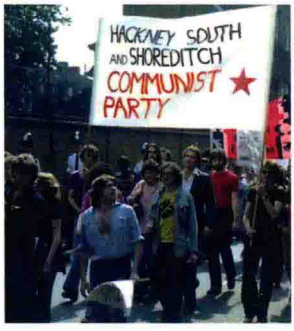

YOUNG LIVES ON THE LEFT

SIXTIES ACTIVISM AND THE LIBERATION OF THE SELF

CELIA HUGHES

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Abbreviations

AEU	Amalgamated Engineering Union
CAST	Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre
CCC	Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies
CMPP	Camden Movement for People's Power
CND	Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
CVSC	Camden Vietnam Solidarity Campaign branch
DPA	Di Parkin Archive
GCA	Geoffrey Crossick Archive
GLF	Gay Liberation Front
GRA	Geoff Richman Archive
IMG	International Marxist Group
IS	International Socialists
JHA	John Hoyland Archive
LSE	London School of Economics
LWLW	London Women's Liberation Workshop
MNA	Mica Nava Archive
MRC	Modern Records Centre, Warwick University
NAC	National Abortion Campaign
NLF	National Liberation Front
RSSF	Revolutionary Socialist Student Federation
SDS	Students for a Democratic Society/*Sozialistische Deutsche Studentbund*
SMA	Socialist Medical Association
SLL	Socialist Labour League
SW	Socialist Woman
VSC	Vietnam Solidarity Campaign
VSO	Voluntary Service Overseas
WLM	Women's Liberation Movement
YCL	Young Communist League
YCND	Youth Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament
YS	Young Socialists

Contents

Introduction

This book tells the story about the making of a post-war radical self. It presents the early life histories of women and men who came of age in radical left circles in 1960s England. As teenagers, apprentices and undergraduates, these individuals immersed themselves in a New Left landscape that grew up around Britain's anti-Vietnam War movement, the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC). Initiated in June, 1966 by individuals around the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation and the International Marxist Group (IMG), from 1967 until 1969 the VSC was the heart of a growing activist scene, fuelled by the student movement and the expanding membership of the two far left groups, the International Socialists (IS) and the IMG. At the height of the anti-war campaign, young activists belonged to a minority network which enabled them to move freely between leftist groupings inside metropolitan and provincial universities and local urban neighbourhoods through to the counter-cultural scene and the old working-class world of labour inside the docks, factories and the tenants' movements. Within this fluid scene, they found possibilities for transcending the boundaries of nationality, class, gender and sexuality that continued to define post-war English life.

Young Lives on the Left is a history of modern radical subjectivities. It explores the English experience of activist life previously neglected in histories of 1968 focused on Western Europe and North America. One might ask what historical value is to be gained from studying a minority of radical young people who in their politics, social attitudes and behaviours stood at odds with the moderate, conservative patterns that commentators noted continuing to define their contemporaries.[1] Social historians emphasise the importance of attending to the everyday experiences and perceptions of 'ordinary' people, whose lives offer the most potential for measuring real change over time. Nowhere is this more the case than with histories of the sixties. The period remains a contested historical landscape, and yet studies of post-1945 society

remain in their infancy. In recent years historians have begun to challenge what Frank Mort has termed 'the progressive' reading of the sixties, which sees the uninterrupted transition from fifties conformity and Victorian 'puritanism' to 'permissive' social and sexual attitudes and behaviours that triumphed in the high sixties.[2] Instead they have stressed the existence of continuity alongside change that comes from reframing the post-war period to allow for a longer-term chronology.[3] They have shown the complicated, sometimes contradictory ways in which old and new social patterns co-existed, and the tension and sheer messiness with which individuals sought to negotiate these.[4] As part of this shift in the historiography, memoirs of radical youth by writers and historians seeking to shape the historical script are criticised for contributing to the false progressive picture.[5] Yet the search for more nuanced narratives should not discount the value that dissenting lives offer the post-war historian. *Young Lives on the Left* seeks to offer new understanding about the complex and contested relationship between young post-war subjects and the shifting social and cultural landscape of mid-century England. Over the course of five chapters this account follows the life stories of approximately twenty men and women from childhood to early adulthood, charting the process of activist self-making over time. Attention is given to how life in the far left and non-aligned left milieux intersected with specific experiences of social class, family relations, gender and changing post-war English society. It explores how radical left cultures shaped everyday experiences of university, political activism, work, family life and political and personal, social and sexual relations.

The book takes a biographical approach and aims to make an informative contribution to the unfolding subjective turn in social history. This acknowledges the value of examining individual lives and subjectivities to illuminate some of the complex ways individuals in the past have used available cultural resources to find meaning in their lives and to form a coherent sense of self.[6] The approach reflects a concern to understand individuals as emotional or affective subjects in dialogue with their material and discursive environments. This book does not always support some historians' faith in the human-directed shape of historical change;[7] the narratives informing this account suggest that, on occasions, men and women were, in fact, at pains to override the cultural power of gendered discourses operating in mainstream society and in radical circles.

Young Lives on the Left explores the historical relationship between the young post-war self and the social, the emotional and the political. It makes no attempt to claim that the stories told here represented

typical growing-up and early adult experiences for most higher-educated young people. However, it does argue that their experiences merit attention, not least because they provide telling insight into the felt complexities of negotiating shifting cultural norms and expectations. On the cusp of adulthood at a breaking moment of New Left liberation politics, these young men and women were key agents in shaping a new language of gendered subjectivity that would leave a powerful mark, initially on the Left, and later more widely, on the increasingly egalitarian heterosexual relationships prevailing at the century's end. They came to political consciousness in a left world on the point of transition, part of the Western European post-war generation that created a new democratic left project.[8] Yet, as activists they continued to maintain important political and emotional attachments to the old labour Left. Politically, socially and emotionally, then, young activists straddled old and new cultural models. Their contested relations with the post-war landscape offer a unique dissenter's perspective of what it meant to mediate between 'discourses and representations on the one hand' and the social and emotional 'trials' of becoming young adults and political beings on the other.[9]

Young sixties activists were a group of citizens uneasy with their modernity. In the late 1960s their New Left politics railed against the atomising, alienating effects of work, culture and social relations in the post-industrial society. Building on the grass-roots, do-it-yourself campaigns inherited from the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), they added their voices to a host of other post-war dissidents challenging the individualising, dehumanising impulses of capitalist consumption in the affluent society. Yet, as social and psychological as well as political subjects, they were inherently modern. Championing the struggle of the subjective, theirs was a politics predicated on an understanding of human selfhood rooted in the project of modernity. From CND at the start of the decade, to the tenants' and race campaigns, and the anti-Vietnam War movement of the late 1960s, through to the new politics of Women's Liberation in the early 1970s, underlying all these struggles was the conviction that the human agent was free, self-made and authentic. This was a politics that called for the realisation not only of the dignity and basic material entitlement of the modern labouring self, but for the post-materialist values of self-expression, self-fulfilment and self-development that emerged as new modes of selfhood from the mid-century onwards. Privileging the lived experience of oppressed people, young activists actively contributed to the expanding range of possibilities for realising this postmodern self. Along with underground community newspapers, do-it-yourself agitprop street politics and radical

street-theatre groups, the consciousness-raising practice of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) operated on the assumption that, as Carolyn Steedman has argued, 'the subaltern *could* speak, that through articulation in spoken or written words, the dispossessed could come to an understanding of their own story'.[10]

This focus on the subjective needs to be understood in the context of the 'valorisation of the self' that occurred in Britain following the war.[11] The young men and women of this book grew up at a time of increasing possibilities for constructing and experiencing the self. Since the late nineteenth century, meanings of selfhood had been reformulated according to new psychological modes of thinking. Mathew Thomson has highlighted the range of psychological perspectives disseminated via popular culture in the inter-war years.[12] More recently, Matt Houlbrook has shown how self-fashioning in this period became intertwined with new modes of consumer culture that harnessed the imagination through dreaming and fictionality.[13] Such developments all supported the interior, individual and developing sense of self that had emerged by the Second World War, what Steedman refers to as 'a quite richly detailed sense of self' within.[14] But it was the post-war period when, many scholars argue, the pursuit of modernity created the truly self-reflexive individual. Thomson has shown how the Second World War spread new thinking about the psychology of everyday life amongst wartime citizens. The emotional intensity of the crisis created the circumstances for psychology to gain popular appeal, whether for answers and explanation or merely distraction.[15] The social instability associated with the challenges of reconstruction created favourable conditions for psychological thinking to remain an influential force after 1945. In the late 1940s and 1950s affluence, commercialism, mass popular culture, education and state welfare institutions presented ever more complex social identities for men and women to realise themselves as social, psychological, gendered and embodied subjects. Just as early twentieth-century modernity had provoked anxieties as well as opportunities, the mid-century confronted governments and citizens with a range of new questions and concerns that promoted an intensive mapping of the social and psychological self. The shifting contours of Britain's imperial mission, uncertainty about her role in post-war Europe, the demise of the nation as a world power, the escalating Cold War and the threat of the Bomb, concern about the effects of American culture on social stability, and the social anxieties generated by the affluent society – such fears not only provoked intense questioning, as Chris Waters has argued, about what it meant to be British, but also generated intensive scrutiny about subjectivity in relation to social citizenship.[16]

Scholars like Nikolas Rose and Mike Savage have argued that managing the personal and interior lives of citizens became a specific focus of government planning after 1945. Whereas for Rose the 'psy-sciences' were central to new concepts of the self-governing and self-regulating self, Savage has emphasised the influence of an expanding professional social science apparatus that also became harnessed to projects of governmentality.[17] The voices of both professions could be heard loudly amongst the range of experts claiming a role in Britain's moral and social reconstruction.[18] In the increasingly competitive media environment of the 1950s, journalists too had their own 'ethical mandate' for social renewal. According to Frank Mort, broadsheet editors promoted discourses of scientific objectivity to manage open discussions of controversial social and sexual questions. In contrast, many tabloid editors saw their papers as active moral and social agents with the task to liberalise national values and attitudes.[19] Building on the late nineteenth-century convention of social investigative reporting, in the post-war period the press continued to be an influential body disseminating psychological and social scientific discourses and informing popular modes of thought about social selfhood in relation to contested issues such as homosexuality, race, the family and social and sexual change associated with affluence, class and youth.[20] Privileging the views of psychological experts, the popular press promoted the ideal of the self-reflective and self-developing independent subject. Quizzes and questionnaires that encouraged the practice of self-reflection were designed to enable self-discovery and to aid self-improvement. Chapters 2 and 3 showcase the important role that newspapers and television played in shaping young individuals' sense of self in the world. Reports of foreign conflicts and visual images of faraway, exotic landscapes generated alternative, imaginative spaces for belonging. For working-class individuals rooted in immobile communities, descriptions of unfamiliar areas of Britain had the same effect. From the confines of their localities, as school children, adolescents and young adults, sixties activists projected private feelings of otherness onto social groups engaged in political and social struggles. Stories of oppressed peoples and marginalised cultures provided alternative social identities that suggested new ways of being.

In their search for more expansive geographic horizons and social opportunities, the men and women of this book reflected desires more widely expressed by post-war higher-educated youth. Yet, unlike most of their contemporaries, this radical cohort also expressed unease with the institution of the post-war family and the models of selfhood it offered. Such sentiments reflected the mid-century shift towards an

increasingly home-centred, individualised society that created more explicit demarcations between public and private life. The New Left personal politics of the early 1970s emerged out of an intimate national site that had become 'a testing ground' for models of selfhood that 'prioritized self fulfilment' and 'privileged authenticity but struggled to verify it'.[21] Discourses of love, marital roles and social and sexual relations surrounding the family gave young activists a language for conceptualising an authentic, reflexive and autonomous self liberated from the constraints of Victorian social practices, attitudes and values. A central argument of this book is that the creation of New Left spaces represented the quest for a construction of self that could accommodate the range of contradictions concerning class, gender, religion, race and sexuality that young activists experienced growing up. Despite the increasing possibilities for social identity, the inadequacy of the models available to these young people propelled their journeys on the Left. They sought a mode of self-understanding that would enable them to make sense of themselves in relation to the instabilities and shifts occurring across Britain and the wider world.

From the mid- to late 1950s this was a world in the midst of social, cultural and political transformation. The booming western economies facilitated rising material affluence that generated new social freedoms and cultural expressions for youth and supported the postmodern project of the independent, entitled self. In Britain young people's assurance of their right to existence was fed by the material nutrients of welfare-state orange juice and free school milk, and by the educational opportunities made possible by the 1944 Butler Education Act that accorded free secondary education to all. Reflecting on her fifties childhood, Steedman considered: 'I think I would be a very different person now if orange juice and milk and dinners at school hadn't told me, in a covert way, that I had a right to exist, was worth something.'[22] Sixties youth was not only encouraged to pursue self-fulfilment as a mode of being, but given the time and material conditions in which to realise this goal. The majority of this radical cohort was amongst the growing, though still small, proportion of mainly middle-class young men and women attending university in the 1960s. The experience provided many with a series of life-defining moments in their journeys towards radical selfhood. Although frustrated by outmoded, authoritarian teaching regimes and *in loco parentis* rules, in the late 1960s universities became hubs for the protest network growing round the VSC. Against the international context of 1968, student life represented a time when many young activists began seriously to experiment with alternative social identities. Many subsequently took advantage of postgraduate

funding opportunities and early 1970s social security to extend the time available for pursuing self-actualisation.

Expanding possibilities for social selfhood occurred in a world that was also visibly expanding. Rapid advances in communication and media technology brought sites of foreign cultures, races, religions, as well as international conflicts, closer to home via radio and television sets in the living rooms and common rooms of young people. Young activists also saw sites of social and cultural difference at first hand through travel to Europe, North America and the newly independent colonial countries. For many of this book's interviewees, early experiences of overseas travel occurred in the context of fathers serving in the armed services or as civil servants in far-flung quarters of the decolonising Empire. Many later travelled as teenagers and students, for leisure, through Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) or via the international protest networks that developed amongst young activists in the late 1960s. Individuals often remembered such experiences as processes of mapping themselves in relation to this wider social, cultural and political landscape. The post-colonial setting provided an important context for conceiving self-autonomy. New concepts of universal human rights, enshrined in the charter and resolutions of the United Nations, were taken up by Afro-Asian nationalist movements, and, by the 1960s, the western world had seen a decisive shift in public opinion and state policies that made it difficult for nations to defend policies that openly endorsed colonial subjugation and racial inequality.[23] Yet, at odds with this discursive climate of equal human rights, images of white violence against civil rights campaigners in the United States and South Africa provided disturbing evidence that attitudes of racial superiority continued to prevail. In Britain too, government policies, everyday instances of discrimination and discourses of race and immigration pointed to the survival of colonial mentalities at a time when black and Asian migrants were framed as racial others outside a socially cohesive nation.[24]

Young sixties activists shaped understandings of self in a nation that was also inherently unsure about its relationship to modernity. Scholars repeatedly highlight the conflicting social dynamics of permissiveness, progressivism and Victorian conservatism that characterised post-war institutions and cultural practices. Running through social and cultural practices, discourses of gender were also in flux. Feminist scholars have shown how conflict between new social and educational opportunities for young sixties women and traditional representations of femininity created internal tension for a cohort of university-educated young wives and mothers that would find expression in the WLM at the end of the decade.[25] More recently, historians have noted the conflict between the

identity of the home-centred family man and the imaginative 'flight from domesticity' discernible in social and cultural images. However, with the exception of feminist histories, few have considered individual responses to changing socio-economic, cultural and political patterns and post-war discourses at the level of the interiority of selfhood. Through careful attention to spoken and visual memories, this book focuses attention on some of the complex ways in which young individuals engaged with the contradictions they confronted while growing up in post-war Britain. It offers suggestions about the role that childhood and early adult feeling, fantasy and thought played in shaping subjectivities. An important theme of the book is the psychic conflict young activists faced in their efforts to negotiate new and existing models of social, political and gendered selfhood. As they struggled to recreate themselves as autonomous, far-left, New Left, feminist and pro-feminist selves, many individuals found it hard to relinquish older ways of being as men, women, parents and social and sexual subjects. This book tells the story of what it meant for a young sixties cohort to create new political cultures and to pursue visions of liberated modes of life and subjectivity.

1968

Young Lives on the Left lies at the intersection of several bodies of post-war historiography. The stories told here belong to the collection of radical voices of 1968 activists – that global generation of young political actors who tell recognisable yet individual stories of journeys to change the world. Theirs are all stories of self-transformation amidst political struggle. Scholarship on 1968 comprises an ever-expanding, now global field. Yet English voices occupy an ambiguous and marginal place within this global collection of life histories. The recent study of *Europe's 1968* is one of the few collections to include stories of English activists since Ronald Fraser's 1988 collaborative oral history study.[26] In her assessment of British student protest during the Vietnam War, Sylvia Ellis offers a possible explanation for the dearth of studies on the British experience of 1968: 'The British student movement during the 1960s was undoubtedly less violent, less radical and more easily controlled than those in continental Europe and the United States of America. There were no barricades, no petrol bombs, no fire hoses, no tear gas, no heavy rioting, no national university strikes or general strikes, no mass destruction of property and no shootings.'[27] When they are understood in these terms, it is all too tempting for internationally framed studies to disparage the actions and rhetoric of British activists as insignificant in comparison to the national power struggles played

out elsewhere across the globe.[28] However, assessing protest movements merely in terms of their impact made upon the national body politic and society overlooks the more subtle questions transnational scholars are increasingly asking about the dynamics at work within the international activist networks.[29] Any attempt to understand the social and technological modes of political and cultural transfer operating across porous national boundaries calls for attention to the individuals who were both recipients and transmitters[30] – to reposition the voices behind the movements and to acknowledge the legitimacy of their experiences.

England stands apart from Europe and North America, where scholars have applied an ever innovative range of historical methods and approaches to understand how cultures of grass-roots activism took shape in individual countries.[31] These scholars have also traced the imprint that memories of activism continue to make on those contemporary societies.[32] The few studies of political and social protest in sixties Britain have shown little attention to the nuanced relationship between political culture and subjectivity. Accounts of England's extra-parliamentary Left have focused almost exclusively on the political narratives at the expense of the social, cultural and emotional.[33] Others have considered the student protest, overlooking the larger, more socially nuanced left network that emerged around the VSC, with its interpersonal connections to the labour movement, Communist Party intellectuals, the first New Left and the counter-culture.[34] Only recently have revisionist histories of post-1945 Britain begun to acknowledge the significance of protest movements, grass-roots civil activism and voices of dissent as sites for scrutinising and challenging the 'consensus' picture that historians inherited from contemporaries, and which for many years dominated post-war histories.[35] Influenced by the cultural and affective turns, studies of post-war political culture have also cast new perspectives on the social, emotional and gender codes and attitudes prevailing in these years.[36] Together with recent social histories of the post-Second World War period, they complicate the 'progressive' narrative that saw the war as a significant watershed in social and cultural life.[37] *Young Lives on the Left* offers to further refine the more nuanced picture that is emerging of British society after 1945. The stories presented here show a complex, multi-layered landscape where old and new social identities of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and nationality co-existed and sometimes competed.

Sources

The book is based on oral history interviews with fifty men and women, conducted at intervals between 2009 and 2012. However, it focuses in

depth on approximately twenty individual stories. Such a small number could never claim to speak for the lives of all young sixties activists. In any case it is perhaps a misnomer to use the word 'typical' in this context. As Rebecca Clifford, Robert Gildea and James Mark have noted, 'there are as many stories of journeys into activism as there are activists themselves'.[38] The book is concerned with exploring the rich individual subjectivities that only a small range of stories make possible. However, as previously explained, it also draws attention to selected cultural patterns and themes which offer new perspectives on the social landscape in which these young radicals came of age. The small selection of interviewees allows for a more in-depth exploration of the complex relationship between cultural patterns, discourses and experience. The life stories were selected not for their representativeness but because the individuals had strong connecting currents to each other; all were closely interwoven with the radical network that grew up around and out of the metropolitan-based VSC. After 1969 they went on to be heavily involved in either of the two main far-left organisations, or in the non-aligned circles that emerged out of this network. As a result, the book has a strong metropolitan bias. However, it does include stories of provincial activity that span the early and later parts of the decade. The reference to northern regions such as Newcastle-on-Tyne, Middlesbrough and Leeds to some extent reflects individuals' movement to these places following the fragmentation of the VSC after 1969; some settled in these areas following their departure from northern universities, while a few grew up and remained active nearby. Stories of provincial activism reflect a regional hinterland of radical protest cultures and left networks that existed in cities and towns across the country in the 1950s, and which expanded in the late sixties with the new liberation movements and the expansion of far-left organisations.[39]

The close interpersonal network at the heart of the VSC influenced how interviewees were selected. The historian and socialist-feminist Sheila Rowbotham provided the initial starting point by suggesting possible interviewees; notwithstanding her prominence in the WLM, her heavy involvement in a range of left projects, campaigns and groups concentrated in the capital throughout the sixties and seventies made her well placed to guide initial contacts. From Sheila's address book the 'snowball' effect took place, leading to other interviewees, who provided further contacts.[40] Interviewees encompassed men and women who, during the late 1960s and 1970s, had either been active members of IS and IMG or been involved in 'non-aligned' libertarian milieux that grew out of the VSC and the early north London Women's Liberation groups. The latter included artistic and theatrical groups,

Agitprop, the Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre (CAST), Red Ladder and grass-roots community groups, including the Camden Movement for People's Power (CMPP), which held close connections with the Tufnell Park Women's Liberation group.

In selecting interviewees, I was mindful of the dangers already apparent in previous studies of 1968; of historians returning repeatedly to narratives of individuals who at the time and since have become publicly associated with movements and campaigns. In the case of Britain, Fraser's 1988 study has, to date, remained the authoritative account upon which historians have drawn upon for first-hand testimonies. However, when placed alongside the few memoirs written by individuals who were publicly at the forefront of campaigns, the result has been to shape a dominant narrative of Britain's '68 activism as an entirely student affair.[41] The sensitivity surrounding historical representation and typicality is a concern not only of historians, but also of former movement participants themselves.[42] The powerful emotional investment that young radicals made in groups, organisations and campaigns left a lasting imprint on their sense of self in the world. Unsurprisingly, many continue to express claims and desires over the official histories. Nowhere has this perhaps been more evident than with the case of the WLM, as witnessed at the fortieth-anniversary conference at Oxford's Ruskin College, held in March 2010, when tension emerged between movement historians and women who feel that their local and regional activities continue to be overlooked.[43]

This book aims to tell less-familiar stories of young radical life that go beyond experiences of student activism alone. It is structured across the life-cycle, from childhood to young adulthood, up to the mid-1970s. Considering the private as well as the public lives of young activists, it shows how the mundanity and everydayness of young adult life cut across the thrills of demonstrating and organising. Attention is given to the cultural texture of activists' homes, to front-room meetings and to paper sales in working-men's clubs and public houses. It is how young individuals mediated themselves through these cultures as political, emotional and gendered beings with which this book is primarily concerned. It considers the psychological spaces that radical cultures provided for young sixties men and women.

Young Lives on the Left includes the voices of men and women who, in contrast to more prominent members of organisations and campaigns, remained active at the grass roots in local and regional far-left branches or 'non-aligned' radical community projects. Although most interviewees did participate in university protests and VSC demonstrations as students in the mid- to late 1960s, a smaller number had been recruited into