



# *A Fiction of the Past*

The Sixties in American History



*Dominick Cavallo*



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## THE SIXTIES IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Dominick Cavallo

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*For JoAnn Drumbheller Smith  
and  
Fred Weinstein*

A FICTION OF THE PAST

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First published 1999 by

PALGRAVE™

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010 and

Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Companies and representatives throughout the world.

PALGRAVE is the new global publishing imprint of St. Martin's Press LLC Scholarly and Reference Division and Palgrave Publishers Ltd (formerly Macmillan Press Ltd).

Excerpts on page 171 from "Talking with Garcia," by David Glans and Jackson Blair from *Garcia* by the editors of *Rolling Stone* and page 173 from "Dead Zone," by Michael Lydon from *Garcia* by the editors of *Rolling Stone* copyright © 1995 Rolling Stone Press. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

ISBN 0-312-21930-X hardback

ISBN 0-312-23501-1 paperback

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cavallo, Dominick, 1946-

A fiction of the past : the sixties in American history / Dominick Cavallo.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-312-21930-X hardback—0-312-23501-1 paperback

1. United States—History—1961-1969. 2. United States—Social conditions—1960-1980. 3. Radicalism—United states—History—20th century. 4. Youth—United States—Political activity—History—20th century. 5. Subculture—United States—History—20th century. 5. Subculture—United States—History—20th century. 6. Youth—United States—Social Life and customs. I. Title.

E841.C33 1999

973.923—dc21

98-46179

CIP

Design by Acme Art, Inc.

First paperback edition: January 2001

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe an enormous debt to those who helped me write this book. A number of colleagues at Adelphi University read and commented upon the work at various stages of its evolution. Fellow historians Lester Baltimore, Robert Devlin, Martin Haas and Carl Rheins were insightful and, thankfully, relentless in their criticisms. I owe them a great deal. I was fortunate as well to receive guidance from other members of the Adelphi community who read parts of the manuscript: Jeffrey Kane, Vincent Passaro, Nicholas Petron, Alan Sadovnik and George Stricker. The staff of the university's Swirbul Library were extraordinarily creative and resourceful in locating documents. I am especially grateful to Dean Eugene Neely, Gertrude Neubauer and Victor Oliva. And, as always, Carol Sabino was helpful in a variety of ways.

Other scholars and friends read the manuscript—I am especially indebted to Mel Albin, David Burner and Dennis Fagan; others engaged in ongoing discussions during which they helped me clarify my ideas about the sixties—thanks to Anita Cohen, Denise Schank, Cathy Tuohy and Martin Van Lith. Michael Flamini, Alan Bradshaw, and Jennifer Simington of Palgrave were extremely helpful, effective and understanding; and a special thanks to William Berry for his adroit, focused and tenacious copy-editing.

This book is dedicated to two people without whom it would not have been written. Fred Weinstein was there from the beginning. He spent countless hours patiently reading numerous drafts of each chapter. More than that, his incisive *mind (and wit)* kept me on my toes. But even more than that, his unique ability to juggle and blend the roles of teacher and friend, critic and advisor, sparring partner and trainer, enabled me to push on when I was tempted to drop the project (the burden for not dropping it rests, of course, solely on my shoulders). Everyone who has dealt with, been touched and taught by Fred during his distinguished scholarly career knows what I'm talking about.

JoAnn Smith was there from the beginning as well. For hours, which slipped into days, then months and finally years, JoAnn listened to my ideas about the sixties and plans for "the book." She owns the book as much or more than I. Though a baby boomer, she is not a child of the sixties; and perhaps that fact, along with her formidable intelligence, made me listen when she voiced skepticism about ideas which struck her as off the mark. We spent hours talking about the fifties and the Diggers, and hours more listening to the music. And dancing to it. The book is over, but we're still dancing.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .....	vi
------------------------	----

1. Problems in Making Sense of the Sixties .....	1
--	---

## PART ONE:

### SOURCES OF FERMENT IN THE FORTIES AND FIFTIES

2. The Cult of Security .....	17
-------------------------------	----

3. Middle-Class Child Rearing and the Renaissance of American Individualism .....	43
--	----

4. New Bottles, Old Wine: An Archeology of Rebellion .....	63
--	----

## PART TWO:

### THE SIXTIES IN AMERICAN HISTORY I: THE COUNTERCULTURE AND ROCK AND ROLL

5. "It's Free because It's Yours": The Diggers and the San Francisco Scene, 1964–1968 .....	97
--	----

6. Rock and Work: Another Side of Sixties Music .....	145
---	-----

## PART THREE:

### THE SIXTIES IN AMERICAN HISTORY II: STUDENTS FOR A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

7. The Politics of Liberty and Community: Students for a Democratic Society, 1960–1965 .....	189
---	-----

8. The Political Ferment of the Late Eighteenth Century and SDS's Failed Quest for Community .....	215
---	-----

Afterword: A Fiction of the Past .....	251
--	-----

Notes .....	257
-------------	-----

Index .....	279
-------------	-----

## ONE

# Problems in Making Sense of the Sixties

*[O]ur national life has been a running argument about, and with,  
the sixties.*

George F. Will, Forward, *Reassessing the Sixties*

THE INCLINATION OF AMERICANS TO EXPECT AND ACCEPT CHANGE is perhaps their most commonly shared national trait. But no one old enough to vote or understand the issues debated by John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon during the presidential campaign of 1960 could have dreamed how profoundly and unalterably their society would change over the next ten years. Or how deeply distressing those changes would be to so many of them. The assumptions that shaped some of their most valued, fragile or problematic relationships—those between women and men, children and parents, students and teachers, citizens and political leaders, black people and white—unraveled to one degree or another during the decade.

But few events during that whirlwind of movements, conflicts and upheavals known as “the sixties” took Americans more by surprise or enraged them as much as the insurrection of those who were young, white and college-educated. Perhaps no other movement was more maligned during the sixties. Certainly none has been more misunderstood since. In this book I explore various expressions of white radicalism during the decade with an eye toward answering two basic questions about them.

First, why did they happen? How was the initial stirring of discontent among a relatively small number of college students at the start of the decade related to their upbringing? Or, to ask the same question somewhat differently, how did the furiously chaotic sixties spring from the comparatively placid late forties and fifties? And why did millions of young people become alienated from mainstream American values by the end of the decade?

At the time, convincing answers to these questions eluded most Americans, including thoughtful radicals. In 1965 Paul Potter, the president of the radical campus group Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), gave a speech to an audience of college administrators at the University of California at Berkeley. One of the most intelligent and politically astute radicals of the decade, Potter told his audience that the young white students who organized the New Left in the early sixties were the “sons and daughters of the American dream.” Most were raised in “comfortable” middle-class suburbs in the forties and fifties, within what he called a “permissive” family culture. Many enrolled in the country’s elite colleges and universities. Hence the mystery. “Somehow,” said Potter, “and for reasons that are not entirely clear to me, this group of young people, who had everything their society could give them, found that gift hollow and rejected it.”

More than three decades after Potter’s speech, the reasons for their discontent remain “not entirely clear.” This is so despite the estimable attempts to account for it by those who have studied those volatile years.

The second question concerns the historical significance of the radical youth culture. What can it tell us about the American experience, before and since the sixties? What were the historical precedents of the political ideas advanced by SDS, the largest radical student group in American history? Where does the hippie counterculture—that strange, paradoxical melange of communal bonding and “do your own thing” individualism—fit into the broad sweep of American culture and history? These historical questions and issues have not been systematically pursued by scholars. And to do so is to embark on a very different enterprise from simply describing the rebellions, or searching for their immediate origins in the post World War II years leading up to 1960.

For instance, both the Civil Rights revolution of the early sixties and the women’s movement that gathered momentum toward the end of the decade had deep historical roots as well as tangible immediate causes. They were not only responses to blatant contemporary injustices, but had precedents in earlier reform and liberation movements. At least on the surface, that cannot be said of the cultural and political radicalism that took shape in the first half of the sixties. These movements were created by groups of relatively privileged white college students whose leaders—though by no means, of course, all their adherents—were almost invariably men. And their substantive criticisms of American society, which

garnered little serious attention in the sixties (beyond their opposition to the Vietnam War) and are all but forgotten today, exist in historical limbo. Rather than being an integral part of the American saga, they remain the stuff of myth, warm nostalgia or cold disdain, depending on one's point of view. I will suggest that the most important ideas and values of the radical youth culture were firmly grounded in specific American historical traditions. Most of them originated long before the forties, fifties and sixties. Indeed, before the twentieth century.

In answering the two questions, especially the second, the book often moves back and forth in American time. And my approach is thematic rather than chronological. This is an unusual way of exploring the decade's history. It requires, therefore, an introductory chapter that describes both the problems of accounting for the rise of the radical youth culture and how I propose to connect it to the American past.

### THE ORIGINS OF DISCONTENT

During and since the sixties, historians and social critics have tried to account for the origins of the radical youth culture. Much of their work is astute and insightful, and can be divided into three major themes (they are not mutually exclusive). One of them interprets the disaffection and domestic violence generated by the war in Vietnam as the major force behind the decade's radical movements. In his perceptive history of the era's numerous movements, Terry Anderson called the Vietnam War "the engine of the sixties." Without the war, "the decade would have remained a liberal reform era, not a radical decade, not 'the sixties.'"<sup>2</sup>

There is, of course, a good deal of truth to this. The war in Vietnam inspired hundreds of thousands of perhaps otherwise apolitical young people to join antiwar organizations or to sporadically participate in increasingly bold and violent protests against the war. As the war dragged on in stalemate year after year, despite the optimistic predictions of military and civilian officials, it caused many Americans of all ages to question the wisdom, even the integrity, of their leaders. And it prompted a legion of young people either to "drop out" of society altogether and join the counterculture or display their alienation from mainstream America by selectively adopting elements of the hippie lifestyle. Perhaps as many as 3 million of the 45 million young people who turned 18 between 1960 and 1972 became involved with the counterculture to one degree or another, at one point or another. Tens of thousands of others joined, or identified with, radical political organizations like SDS.<sup>3</sup>

But the American combat presence in Vietnam, greatly expanded by President Lyndon Johnson in the spring of 1965, did not inspire young people



to create early New Left groups like Students for a Democratic Society or the Student Peace Union. SDS was organized in 1960, the SPU in 1959. Of course, the obsessive anti-communism that defined the country's Cold War foreign policy and made the Vietnam tragedy possible, if not inevitable, contributed mightily to the development of the New Left to begin with. Nevertheless, the New Left was there before the war. And though it attracted only a few thousand adherents in the early sixties, it became a conduit for political opposition once the war erupted.

The hippie counterculture was already stirring in the San Francisco Bay Area when Johnson raised the stakes in Vietnam. For the rest of the decade the counterculture, with its rock music, long hair, hallucinogenic drugs, experiments in communal living and colorful costumes, served as the main vehicle of protest for young people who sought refuge from a society they saw as equal parts violent and boring. The foundations of the New Left and counterculture were laid in the first half of the decade. The young people who created these movements were poised to rebel from the beginning, before the war made protests against the "establishment" popular. They have to be accounted for.

But so do the hundreds of thousands who joined them after 1965. The war may have been the crucial factor in their decision, but that doesn't account for their disposition to oppose it. There was nothing inevitable about the antiwar movement. Just 15 years before Vietnam, the United States became involved in another stalemated and futile Asian land war, in Korea. The two conflicts erupted under different domestic circumstances, including rules governing the draft, but similarities between the two are significant. The Korean war was just as undeclared by Congress as Vietnam. And it was just as driven by American fears (and fantasies) of a monolithic international communist conspiracy directed by the Russians and Chinese and bent upon world conquest. Korea claimed over 36,000 American lives, about 20,000 fewer than were lost in Vietnam. But it did so much more quickly, in about one-third the time. Yet Korea did not generate significant domestic opposition, from young or old. By contrast, during the sixties hundreds of thousands of all ages, especially the young, were willing to protest a war and challenge the authorities who made it. The war in Vietnam did not create either the alienation felt by many young people or their penchant to question authority, although it greatly increased both.

A second way of accounting for the rebellion of the young in the sixties focuses on how they were raised in the forties and fifties. While the emphasis differs from one historian to another, all of them agree that most alienated young people came from middle-class families, especially before the late sixties. Their parents usually had at least some college education and were professionals or business executives. Or if not themselves middle-class, they wanted their children

to become college-educated professionals and raised them accordingly. Either way, the overwhelming majority of the disaffected young were middle-class by birth or aspiration. Historians target various aspects of middle-class family life as holding the key to explaining the discontent of its children.

Some trace the rebelliousness of young people in the sixties to the affluence and consumerism of the fifties. According to this theory, the quest for self fulfillment and the outright hedonism of the sixties youth culture were legacies of the affluent forties and fifties. During those years middle-class families indulged their children by catering to their whims. Some believe affluent parents raised children permissively. They socialized them in the ways and means of a post World War II orgy of promiscuous consumption. For the children of affluence, things came too early and too easily in that time of plenty.

During the fifties, corporations saw a potential windfall in the huge new market created by the baby boom. Department store shelves brimmed with everything from toys based on Walt Disney film and television characters to 45 rpm records whose vinyl grooves spun out a new music called rock-and-roll. Parents who remembered their own deprivations during the Great Depression of the 1930s eagerly showered their children with a cascade of consumer goods. As a result, according to Stanley Rothman and S. Robert Lichter, the "requirements of work and self-discipline" were gradually undermined. By the time the children of middle-class prosperity came of college age in the sixties, they lacked the capacity for delayed gratification that characterized previous generations. What they wanted, in a word, was "fun."<sup>4</sup>

A variation of this theme holds that affluent parents encouraged their children to believe that a good education inevitably led to prosperous careers, and both would make their future reasonably stable and secure. The affluence of their parents allowed children to feel secure enough about the future to indulge themselves in the present. Historian Godfrey Hodgson said the problem with hippies was that they were raised in a "no problem society—not of the United States but of the relatively privileged part of American society from which they came. They were bored because there was no problem about money, no problem about sex, no problem about college, and no great problem if you dropped out."<sup>5</sup>

A final spinoff on the theme of the middle-class family seizes on its democratic, child-centered qualities. Professional middle-class parents earnestly cultivated their children's moral and intellectual faculties. They encouraged them to think for themselves. The sociologist Richard Flacks, a leading member of SDS, went so far as to suggest that the child-centered ways of the middle-class family unwittingly subverted the "bourgeois" values of the wider society. These families encouraged children to express themselves and embrace "humanism."

Consequently, they became “hostile to the self-denying, status-oriented individualism of bourgeois culture.”<sup>6</sup>

There is at least an element of truth in all of these views. The problem is that none of them can explain why “the sixties” happened only in the sixties. The egalitarian, child-centered, status-obsessed, consumer-oriented and frequently liberal-minded professional middle class family has existed since at least the late nineteenth century, though there were then fewer such families than in the years following World War II. This version of the middle-class family continues to thrive in the 1990s, in even greater numbers than in the forties, fifties and sixties. Yet neither before nor since the sixties have significant numbers, or comparable percentages, of its children dropped out of society or become its critics. Much less have they challenged the hegemony of “bourgeois culture.” More important, other than in the sixties American college students have never *created* major cultural and political movements to protest the status quo. Quite the contrary. And if there was a link between an American cult of consumption and the sixties counterculture, it is not as obvious as some might think. “It wasn’t hard to drop out,” said one hippie. “I had a lot of things to get rid of—a car, a hi-fi, a million useless things.” These sentiments were common among serious members of the counterculture.<sup>7</sup>

A third view about the origins of the radical youth culture is especially important. The psychologist Kenneth Keniston was probably the first to advance it, in the late sixties.<sup>8</sup> Keniston said the young activists he interviewed usually fulfilled rather than rebelled against the political and moral values of their middle-class parents. According to Keniston, most of the white students who joined New Left groups, civil-rights organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or participated in antiwar protests were acting on values they had learned at home. They had been instilled with empathy for the oppressed and the poor by liberal or, more rarely, radical parents. Also, the democratic, relatively egalitarian atmosphere in professional middle-class households encouraged children to think critically and question figures of authority. Young people raised to think for themselves became disillusioned and alienated when they discovered the chasm between the America depicted by politicians, clergy or teachers in the forties and fifties and the one they encountered around 1960. The United States was not the paladin of democracy, equality, freedom and universal affluence they had learned about in their textbooks.

Without question, the young people who joined civil-rights and peace organizations in the early years of the sixties were motivated by moral outrage over the gulf that separated American ideals from American realities. Their activism was ignited when they discovered that the United States was riddled with racism and poverty. They were disturbed as well by the pervasive, irrational

anti-communism that dominated American politics, stifled dissent at home and inspired a nuclear arms race that threatened human survival. I want to make it clear that I believe these issues played a major role in fostering their initial rumblings of alienation from American society.

Yet by themselves they cannot account for the origins of the New Left or the counterculture. Racism neither suddenly burst onto the American scene in 1960 nor disappeared after 1970. Why didn't comparable percentages of morally concerned, middle-class white college students join African American organizations in their struggle against institutionalized racism in the prosperous 1950s? Or during the boom times of the 1920s? For that matter, why are they holding back in the affluent 1990s? Issues dividing the races are different today than they were in 1960 but nonetheless remain explosive. The same is true of poverty and the inequitable distribution of income. Even during its most spectacular boom periods in this century, the United States economy has been marked by gross disparities in wealth and large numbers of poor people.<sup>9</sup> And as for the existence of government officials who ignore the country's democratic traditions and procedures in designing their foreign and domestic policies, what made the America of 1960 particularly unique in this regard?

The willingness of significant numbers of college-educated young whites to rebel in the sixties requires an explanation that includes but goes beyond the existence of these issues and inequities as they existed in 1960. And as we shall see in chapter 4, some of the white college students involved in the Civil Rights movement in the early sixties were quite conscious at the time of being motivated by urges that went beyond (but certainly didn't detract from) their sincere moral outrage over racial injustice.

In the three chapters that make up part I, "Sources of Ferment in the Forties and Fifties," I describe how the culture, economy and boundless expectations of the affluent, comparatively placid postwar years fed into the upheavals led by the young in the sixties. Like others who have tackled this issue, my focus is on how radicals were raised. But my interpretation of this process is very different.

A good deal of chapter 3 describes the child-rearing patterns in middle-class families of the forties and fifties. These children were obsessively doted upon by their parents, but they were also taught self-discipline. Their intellectual and moral faculties were energetically cultivated, though seldom with the goal of making them rebels. They were led to believe their lives would be self-fulfilling, adventurous and challenging, but only if they were competitive, hard working, self-reliant and willing to take risks.

These attributes were not nurtured in a vacuum. Middle-class parents encouraged their children to be intensely competitive and individualistic so they might take advantage of the extraordinary economic and personal opportunities

created by the postwar economic boom. The unprecedented prosperity of those years was unexpected, coming as it did on the heels of the Great Depression and the dislocations of the war years. Its magnitude and longevity created the most widespread boom mentality in the country's history, a modern reprise of pre-twentieth-century American dreams of limitless frontiers of possibility. By contrast with most previous and subsequent eras of prosperity, the cornucopia of the postwar boom was relatively egalitarian; it swelled the incomes of millions of working class families and led them to believe that they or their children would attain middle class status (despite the fact that twenty percent of the population stagnated in poverty). It was as though the New World of incalculable economic frontiers and boundless personal horizons had been discovered all over again. Major technological innovations, expanded educational opportunities and developments in popular culture reinforced these sensibilities. They suffused the world of the young, at home, in school and through the media. In other words, various social and cultural trends reinforced the traditional American values of individualism, self-reliance and autonomy imbibed within the family. Along with their parents, the children came to believe anything was possible in America.

In 1960 President John F. Kennedy used the term "New Frontier" to describe the youthful daring of his administration. This historically evocative phrase is appropriate as well for defining the culture of limitless expectations that reigned within the postwar middle-class family and the wider society.

Many sixties radicals sprang from that culture, though most of their parents did not raise them to become disillusioned with their country, much less grow into radicals. But the traits instilled at home did arouse expectations about leading autonomous, adventurous lives in an egalitarian society. These sensibilities were out of step with the social and political conformity of the fifties. More important, they were sanctioned by powerful myths and values woven into American culture from the beginning. The mixture of the two proved combustible in the sixties.

I will argue that the New Left and counterculture were more than rebellions against a repressive, boring Cold War culture. In addition they revived older, mostly pre-industrial visions of work, individualism, self-reliance, community and democracy. In effect, they pitted a somewhat mythic (though real enough) America of open spaces, adventure and unpredictability against the modern managerial, bureaucratic and (from their point of view) staid society that they inherited as they reached college age in the middle of the twentieth century. The fear and furor created by the emergence of the sixties youth culture reflected an underlying struggle between two powerful, historically grounded yet contradictory versions of American life.

Part I links the child-rearing practices of the middle class in the forties and fifties to the values and behavior of young radicals in the sixties. A good deal of

evidence is mobilized to support this view. But short of the impossible task of compiling biographies of every political and cultural radical mentioned in the book, the evidence is inferential, as it must be when drawing connections between childhood experiences and adult behavior. Not every sixties radical was raised by college-educated or affluent middle-class parents (or by working-class parents intent upon achieving professional status for their children). And by no means did everyone raised in such families become alienated from mainstream American values. The story told here is necessarily incomplete and inevitably immune to "scientific" validation. Hopefully it provides a reasonably convincing narrative of how and why this unprecedented insurrection among young Americans occurred.

### THE SIXTIES IN AMERICAN HISTORY

The remainder of the book is an attempt to connect three important and very different expressions of the radical youth culture to the American past. The hippie movement, which started in San Francisco, is discussed in chapter 5, and the attitudes toward work of those who created the music of rebellion, sixties rock-and-roll, is the subject of chapter 6. Chapters 7 and 8 describe Students for a Democratic Society and the ambiguities and ideals of the American political tradition it reasserted.

The goal of these chapters is to weave the radical youth culture into the American experience. Unlike other major instances of turbulent internal conflict, such as the American Revolution and the Civil War, the sixties of youthful rebellion has not been sutured to the country's past. Rather than being explained by and made an integral part of that history, this crucial aspect of the decade dangles in time. It is generally unhinged from what went before, and painfully alien to what followed. It remains, therefore, inevitably misunderstood and misinterpreted.

This is evident in contemporary views of the radical youth culture. In the mass media the revolt of young people in the sixties is often portrayed as a bad memory happily fading as the decade recedes in time. For instance, some blame the tumult and violence of the decade on the "spoiled" children of middle-class affluence. In the words of a *Time* magazine columnist writing in 1996, they were "overprivileged, pretentious, self-righteous, self-important."<sup>10</sup> And although the only apparent links between the heinous acts of a serial bomber (known as the Unabomber) apprehended in the nineties and sixties radicalism are the facts that the Unabomber taught at Berkeley in 1967 and composed a "manifesto" studded with caricatures of sixties radicalism, a recent headline in the *New York Times*

nonetheless reads, "Campus Turmoil of 60's Reveals Themes Echoed in Unabom Manifesto." And one in *Newsday* proclaims, "The Unabomber Is a Typical '60s Lout."<sup>11</sup>

Still others see the legacies of the youth culture as a host of social "pathologies": an ongoing drug problem, moral relativism, political correctness, multiculturalism, sexual promiscuity, high divorce rates, identity politics, mistrust of authority figures and disengagement from the electoral process. Allan Bloom's 1987 book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, placed a good deal of the blame for these conditions on the counterculture and New Left.<sup>12</sup> More directly, and minus Bloom's erudition, Republican congressman and majority leader of the House of Representatives Dick Armey asserted in 1995 that "all the [contemporary] problems began in the Sixties." Indeed, the upheavals of the sixties continue to inform the political animosities of the 1990s. During the 1992 presidential campaign Bill Clinton's patriotism was questioned because of his antiwar stance during the sixties, and in 1994 House Speaker Newt Gingrich referred to him as a "counterculture McGovernik."<sup>13</sup> Of course, running against "the sixties" in political campaigns is as old as the decade itself. Ronald Reagan's successful campaign for governor of California in 1966 was enhanced by his incessant warnings to voters that the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley in 1964 and the hippies of San Francisco were harbingers of anarchy and moral degeneration.

Focusing on the bizarre and irrational nature of the sixties youth culture (it possessed both qualities) allows critics (and most other Americans) to ignore its legitimate and still-relevant criticisms of American society. Some who were young, radical or otherwise "hip" during the sixties may recall it fondly. But they tend to engage in wistful nostalgia about lost opportunities to change the direction of the country. Or they invoke the decade as if it was a dream.<sup>14</sup>

Young people enrolled in the proliferating college courses on the sixties, like the one I teach, often seem envious of that generation's lust for freedom, commitment to causes and casual willingness to challenge authority. But contemporary students have difficulty fathoming the depth of that "older" generation's alienation from American institutions. Most do not entertain the possibility that the rebellions of the sixties may have been mobilized by issues that were inextricably tied to but went beyond the antiwar, Civil Rights or women's movements. Nor can they imagine how deeply etched in the American grain were even the most radical visions of the New Left and counterculture.

Drawing connections between events in the sixties and those of the distant past is a hazardous enterprise fraught with snares, both obvious and subtle. Some caveats are in order. I am not suggesting that ideas and circumstances that existed

before the twentieth century were directly tied, in some causal continuum, to the movements discussed in this book. Or that terms like democracy, autonomy and individualism necessarily mean the same things in different historical periods. Nor do I argue that hippies, New Leftists and rock musicians looked to earlier movements in American history for inspiration. On the contrary, like most of their fellow citizens they viewed the past as an obstacle to transcend rather than as integral part of the present. They were typically American in believing a new and perfect world could be created from scratch and that they were the ones to do it.

At the same time, however, I would suggest that a people's myths of origination—its stories about where they came from, what they became and how both frame a projected future—are passed from one generation to another. As are ambiguities and conflicts about the meaning of the values and ideals contained in those narratives. They are adapted to the unique circumstances confronted by each generation and transmitted in various formats through an assortment of media.

For instance, when the sixties generation was growing up, the media were saturated with stories about the American Old West. Young people were inundated with novels, comic books, movies and especially television programs about the Wild West. They were surrounded by powerful, often historically inaccurate tales of the adventure, danger and individualism associated with the "conquest" of the West, and of its centrality to their country's identity. Young people diligently raised by parents to be individualistic in the extreme and trained to be poised for adventure and risk taking might well identify with these images. Or they might intuit how sharply these values contrasted with the emphasis on personal security and conformity during the fifties. Or both. Put another way, there was nothing inevitable about the prevalence within the counterculture of cowboy garb, unruly long hair on males, Indian lore and other images linked to the frontier and Old West. But it was far too pervasive to have been mere coincidence either. The question is, what did it mean?

The same is true of the democratic values espoused by SDS. It was not so much that they were socialized as children to value democracy and equality. So is every generation of young Americans, although those growing up during the most heated years of the Cold War might have heard more about their country's democratic heritage and why it was worth defending. What distinguished the experiences of young people in the forties and fifties were the implacable intensity and limitless optimism with which their parents and others urged them to become autonomous, take command of their lives and exploit new frontiers of post-war economic and personal opportunity. Because of this, they may have viewed the American idealization of democracy as the political coin that



legitimated their need for autonomy and independence. They valued democracy not only as an end in itself, but also as a means of achieving control over their lives. Under certain circumstances, such as the apathy or violence with which most white adults responded to the early Civil Rights movement, they might also come to see that what passed for democracy and equality in their country were mere shadows of the real things.

Finally, the reasons for building the book around SDS, the counterculture and rock music should be explained. Especially since I largely ignore other movements that arguably were far more significant and undeniably had a greater impact on the country in the long run. For instance, the Civil Rights and women's movements are the decade's primary legacies. Unlike the counterculture and New Left, they still exert a powerful influence on society. They continue to challenge attitudes and institutional arrangements that historically consigned African Americans and women to second-class citizenship. Or worse. Also, involvement in the Civil Rights and women's movements was deeply entwined with the disaffection of young, middle-class whites, especially those in New Left organizations like SDS.<sup>15</sup> And isolating as I do the history of political and cultural radicals from the Civil Rights and women's movements, as well as from the anti-Vietnam War crusade, incurs the risk of artificially extracting them from the wider context of the decade's liberation and protest movements.

Despite this, I have decided to take the risk. A major goal of this book is to link the youth culture to the American past. Unlike the counterculture and New Left, the historical roots of the Civil Rights and women's movements have been thoroughly excavated by scholars. The sources of their discontent and their relation to previous reform movements now form an integral part of the American story. The history of both groups has been incorporated into high school and college textbook accounts of the American experience.

Also, in contrast to student radicals and hippies, an aura of political and cultural legitimacy surrounds the Civil Rights and women's movements. There were radical feminists and black activists who challenged the economic and social premises of American society. But the primary goal of most of their advocates was to achieve American equality: before the law and of educational and economic opportunity. Neither group has achieved full equality of opportunity, but the phrase "equality of opportunity" invests both movements with a legitimacy never enjoyed by the New Left or counterculture. The term embodies an ideal that goes to the heart of what the country means to most of its citizens. Equality of opportunity, along with more or less unfettered competition between individuals for wealth and status, defines what freedom means to most Americans. The vast majority of civil-rights and women's advocates reasserted ideals