FUTURE OF THE SIXTIES GENERATION AND SOCIAL THEORY

CHARLES LEMERT
Dept. of Sociology, Wesleyan University

Tom Hayden concludes Reunion, his memoir, pondering the future of the generation in which he was so central an actor:

The sixties leave a sense of troubling incompleteness and shortcoming alongside that of proud achievement. But if the time has remained difficult to capture, it is also possible that it is not over. The decade itself was perhaps only the beginning of a time of vast change that is not yet fulfilled. Our generation, after all, has only lived into its middle years.... Why conclude that life’s most powerful moments are already behind us? If the sixties are not over, it is up to the sixties generation to continue trying to heal our wounds, find our truth, and apply our ideals with a new maturity to our nation’s future.

In 1988, twenty years after the most revolutionary year in a tumultuous decade, Hayden’s words are just as pertinent to the present and future of social theory. When the rioting had ceased years ago, many of us looked up and found our intellectual, as well as political, lives changed. Now, we look back and see that the broader intellectual and academic landscapes have also changed — in large part because of the revolutionary ethos of the sixties. Tom Hayden’s question is, therefore, also the question social theory must ask. What is the future for the sixties generation?

The very prominence today of social theory, which barely existed in the American academy in 1968, is one of the landmark accomplishments of the sixties generation. When Alvin Gouldner was writing, fresh with the spirit of the sixties, social theory was little more than a projected third force between academic sociology and Marxism. In this respect, as others, Gouldner continued the tradition of C. Wright Mills. Today neither sociology nor Marxism can be said to be exclusive actors in the field of social theory. Critical knowledge of society is now shaped by
many other compelling sources. One is the cultural left, which Henry Louis Gates defines as “a shifting set of alliances formed by feminist critics, critics of so-called minority discourse, and Marxist and post-structuralist critics generally — the rainbow coalition of contemporary critical theory.” That Gates means by “critical theory” a social theory based in literary studies and not Frankfurt social philosophy is one indication of the changes. There are numerous other changes in social theory, as the essays in this collection well demonstrate. Nonetheless, what remains constant is that social theory, distinct from but related to sociology and Marxism, is an activity in but not of the academic disciplines, willing to use while being critical of ideology, and intent upon producing knowledge that is both true and politically relevant. Social theory, as we encounter it today, is a natural issue of the sixties.

There is much to be said, on different sides, about the importance of the sixties. On the one side, there are those like Hayden, who believe there are still works to be done in the spirit of the sixties generation. Many of the contributors to this special issue hold this view. “Sociology,” says Theda Skocpol in “An Uppity Generation,” “…has survived the raucous advent of a generation of ex-student-protestors. As a result, sociology has much more vivid and interesting things to say about the United States and the world.” Skocpol’s favorable view of her generation’s contributions to sociology is historically conditioned by the politics which made life difficult — for her and others, at the beginning of their academic careers. She, more publicly than most, had to fight for the position at Harvard that partly embodies her success.

Other children of the sixties, however, fought and lost. They are less generous in their view of the sixties generation. Russell Jacoby, in *The Last Intellectuals*, writes both about and as one who lost where Skocpol eventually won. The bitterness in Jacoby’s essay, fed, one assumes, by years of exclusion from a permanent academic position, is palpable. Jacob’s central thesis, however disturbing, is important. Where Skocpol finds the contributions of the uppity generation “vivid and interesting,” Jacoby laments the extent to which former public radicals who entered the university have become, in his opinion, obscure, careerist academicians. “The New Left sprang into life around and against universities; its revulsion seemed visceral. Yet New Left intellectuals became professors who neither looked backward nor sideways; they kept their eyes on professional journals, monographs, and conferences.” Left scholars, he adds, “reluctantly or enthusiastically, [have gained] respectability at the cost of identity. The slogan that was borrowed from the