Assessing the 1960s

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After all the attention given at the time to the 1960s phenomena, one would now expect some scholarly, inclusive statements about student protest, New Left, and all the rest. Little, to my knowledge has appeared. Crisp histories, confessions of error by some participants, movies depicting loss of earlier visions seem to be the major examples. The three books at hand do not, per se, constitute the systematic, conceptually organized appraisals apropos for discussion in a sociological journal. Mostly historical narrative and biography, they do provide the seminal data for such comprehensive analysis. Written by participants with appropriate credentials for their efforts, these books are both appreciative and critical of the 1960s movements. The presentations, including the specific language utilized, provide provocative clues for comprehending the complex experiences of the era. The accounts are limited to the U.S. situation, however, offering little comparison with similar experiences in other countries, which should be of obvious relevance.

Especially significant are the books’ implicit challenges to common, stereotypical notions—the appealing cyclical interpretations of history and the “generation gap” formulas popular in the 1960s. The latter does receive some

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2Their appraisals present compelling arguments against the themes in the two encompassing expositions at the time, by Feuer (1969) and Mead (1970).
support, reflected in such comments as "younger knew more than older" (Miller:162) and appeals to "people of this generation" (Miller:13). One of the most enlightening observations, however, is about the "generation gap" between the founders of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the leadership and much of the membership later in the decade, who exhibited significant personal rejection of parents. The founders did not, by and large, resent their parents' individual or collective values or political tenets. With all the variations in background—general liberal or some type of radical political beliefs, profoundly religious or casually agnostic—the New Leftism that early emerged accepted, as another participant analyst put it, the "basic liberal concepts that dominate our public political philosophy" (Freeman, 1983:3). If their personal origins were more radical, the "red diaper" babies were nevertheless in accord with their parents' rejection of official Communism after the Khrushchev revelations, and the SDS commitment to the fullest democracy seemed close to what non-Stalinist elders favored. The clashes that later came were associated with the specific political views and styles that emerged as the 1960s rolled on.

These rebels were, as the three writers note, initially fighting the environment of the 1950s in which they were nurtured. It was—or appeared to be—an era of (to use Hayden's language) "stability and peace" (Hayden:3) with an "atmosphere of affluence and affirmation" (Hayden:4). The elders were personally and collectively comfortable, if uneasy for themselves and the world. Their quest for security was pervasive, whether in relation to international affairs or careers. Symbolically, managerial personnel sought the bureaucratic route, for, as recognized in Weber's misgivings and Whyte's complaints about the "Organization Man" (Whyte, 1957), bureaucratic modes seduce participants into the "iron cage" by the promise of comfort. The favorite slogan of social critics at the time, "conformity," bland adherence without profound convictions, implied the accompanying payoff. In the political realm, this meant minimal political activism, due not only to fears of repression but also to the credo that it was out of place in a satisfactorily functioning society, applying the sociologists' conceptual contribution. (Note Coleman's dismay in his "Community Conflict" studies over forceful activism in such disputes as those over water fluoridation [Coleman, 1957].)

This sense of cultural blandness and its accompanying personal alienation, plus the seeming masking of inherent societal problems, is what initially stimulated the New Left philosophy as much as any concrete issues. Accordingly, these three participant observers describe, for themselves, the appeal of any dissident rebelliousness, extending to rock and roll performers and motorcycle gangs. As serious writers had also pinpointed the shallowness of the conformist culture, the urge to assert both authentic personalist and genuine communal values likewise had intellectual encouragement. Furthermore, there was some