

# (Re-)Writing the History of the New Left: A Critical Appraisal of New Left Historiography

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The radical movements of the 1960s capture and haunt the American mind. Academic interest in the New Left began at its public demise in the early 1970s, and attention soared in the 1980s when a new generation of historians brought to the study of the radical student movement the historical perspective that only the passing of time could provide. Their studies legitimized the New Left as a topic for serious analysis and elevated the writing of New Left history to unprecedented levels of persuasive academic inquiry. But this essay argues that their approach was at best inadequate and at worst misleading. However, three revisionist works by Tom Bates, *Rads: The 1970 Bombing of the Army Math Research Center at the University of Wisconsin and Its Aftermath*,<sup>1</sup> Barbara Tischler (ed.), *Sights on the Sixties*,<sup>2</sup> and Kenneth Heineman, *Campus Wars: The Peace Movement at American State Universities in the Vietnam Era*,<sup>3</sup> inspire hopes that New Left historiography is undergoing fundamental change in the 1990s.

Studies of the New Left from the 1980s may be viewed along a continuum stretching from George Katsiaficas' affirmative *The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968*,<sup>4</sup> which evokes the sensibilities of the radical left, to Peter Collier and David Horowitz' polemic *Destructive Generation: Second Thoughts About the '60s*,<sup>5</sup> which laments its legacies and repudiates its creeds. In between those opposites the range of analysis and opinion is narrow in stark contrast to the divisions in popular assessments of the New Left. New Left historiography is dominated by a rigid canon at whose core stand three works of

1 New York: HarperCollins, 1992.

2 New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992.

3 New York: New York University Press, 1993.

4 Boston: South End Press, 1987.

5 New York: Summit Books, 1989.

the 1980s. In *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* historian Maurice Isserman uncovers the continuities between the New Left and the Old Left and argues that the New Left was not new.<sup>6</sup> In *"Democracy is in the Streets": From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* philosopher and music critic James Miller offers an institutional history of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and an ambitious analysis of *participatory democracy* which defined the New Left of the early 1960s.<sup>7</sup> The work that many critics have hailed as the definitive study of the New Left is *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* sociologist and media critic Todd Gitlin. In his vivid survey written with the passion so characteristic of New Left historians, Gitlin blends personal memoir with academic analysis and covers a wide range of events, organizations and moods.<sup>8</sup>

There was broad consensus among historians of the 1980s on what phenomena of the New Left deserved analysis, and in particular what did not. Most historians marginalize local movements and neglect the New Left of the late 1960s. Hence, they do not do full justice to the diversity of the New Left. Of course, the "supporty columns" in Ann Arbor, Chicago, and Madison are not being neglected, but otherwise, nearly all concentrate on national organizations as manifested on the coasts in major cities and at elite universities. W.J. Rorabaugh has written a detailed study of one radical hotbed, *Berkeley at War: The 1960s*, but little has been written on local movements outside the limelight of the national media.<sup>9</sup> Predictably, historians have also been biased in their temporal focus. They depict New Left history as the evo-

6 New York: Basic Books, 1987.

7 New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987

8 New York: Bantam Books, 1987. Among the most significant other works published in the 1980s are Wini Breines, *Community and Organization in the New Left: 1962-68, The Great Refusal* (New York: Praeger, 1982), John Bunzel (ed.), *Political Passages: Journeys of Change Through Two Decades, 1968-1988* (New York: Free Press, 1988), Alice Echols, *Daring To Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-75* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), Tom Hayden, *Reunion: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1988), Cyril Levitt, *Children of Privilege: Student Revolt in the Sixties, A Study of Student Movements in Canada, the United States, and West Germany* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), Abe Peck, *Uncovering the Sixties: The Life and Times of the Underground Press* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), Stanley Rothman and S. Robert Lichter, *Roots of Radicalism: Jews, Christians, and the New Left* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), and Sohney Sayres et al., *The Sixties Without Apology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

9 New York: Oxford University Press, 1989

lution from hopeful idealism through dissatisfaction with liberalism to infatuation with vanguardism and revolutionism. In his monumental *SDS* Kirkpatrick Sale demonstrated the usefulness of that approach, but most historians have suffered from a one-dimensional good-bad typology which applauds the early years and repudiates the later years.<sup>10</sup> That typology makes them focus on the early period and neglect the later New Left. Hence, except for a number of anniversary books about 1968, including David Farber's *Chicago '68* about the demonstrations at the tumultuous 1968 Democratic Convention, little has been written on the period 1968-70.<sup>11</sup> Isserman and Miller virtually refrain from addressing the New Left as it manifested itself after 1968. Gitlin has important sections on the struggle over People's Park in Berkeley in 1969 and the fragmentation of the organized student movement in 1968-69, but his analysis of the later decade does not have the depth and momentum of his analysis of the early decade when he himself played an important role as president of SDS in 1963-64.

The ironies of the marginalization of local movements and neglect of the end of the decade are obvious and have been pointed out by a number of the most radical historians. In a review essay in the *American Historical Review* Isserman lamented the consensus of New Left historiography and its reluctance to address local phenomena, and in a more recent essay in *Socialist Review* Alice Echols calls for a "Remapping of the Sixties."<sup>12</sup> It was radicals in cities such as New York and San Francisco and at elite universities such as Columbia and Berkeley that attracted most attention then and now, but it was the spread of the New Left to communities with no real radical tradition that documents its enormous appeal and impact. It is no less ironic that so little effort has been made to analyze the period 1968-70 when in fact the New Left peaked and disintegrated. One may suspect that the reluctance among historians in the 1980s to analyze the New Left of the end of the 1960s stems from a combination of political favoritism and nostalgia. Most of them identify openly with the New Left of the period 1960-65 when many of them were active participants, and it is about this period when

10 New York: Random House, 1973.

11 Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988.

12 Maurice Isserman, "The Not-So-Dark and Bloody Ground," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 94, No.4, Oct 1989, pp. 990-1010; Alice Echols, "W Gotta Get Our of This Place: Notes Towards a Remapping of the Sixties," *Socialist Review*, Vol 22, April-June 1993, pp. 9-33.

their personal political aspirations coincided with the spirit of the movement that they write most knowingly and elaborately. They often remain overwhelmingly sympathetic to the ethos of participatory democracy and portray the early New Left in a favorable light. In the eyes of the radical left, Revolutionary spirits were not released until the events of 1968, which deflowered the new Left and deprived it of its ideological innocence, but to most historians today, post-1968 radicals were fallen angels operating under a cloud of impending doom. To Isserman, Miller, and Gitlin the violence, absolutism, and revolutionism of the late New Left are painful memories, which seem to prove many opponents' worst accusations. Hence, one may suspect, many radical historians have neglected the later period in order better to legitimize the New Left.

The recent works by Bates, Tischler, and Heineman are important additions to New Left history and contest the consensus analysis of previous works. Bates' concern is the University of Wisconsin, hardly a non-elite campus, and among the three he is most safely within the borders of mainstream historiography. All, however, reverse the topical and temporal focus of previous works and analyze local movements of the end of the decade that have for too long gone unnoticed by historians. They air different political sympathies, and they do not constitute a historiographical school of shared thought and analysis. Nonetheless, they share important premises.

Bates, a journalist and trained historian, has written a passionate evocation of the events and emotions that led to the bombing in August 1970 of the Army Math Research Center at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. The radical community in Madison has before been analyzed by Paul Buhle in *History and the New Left: Madison, Wisconsin, 1950-70*, but Bates addresses a single event with national repercussions and investigates its relations to central features of the New Left and its cultural-political context.<sup>13</sup> The group of radicals that carried out the bombing, known as the New Year's Gang considered the Army Math Research Center a legitimate target as it was responsible for military research, but the bombing killed an innocent physicist who, ironically, was sympathetic to the peace movement. Thus, it became a sobering moment to many radicals who realized the futility of armed struggle in the "mother country". *Rads* is a dramatic narrative which traces the

13 Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990.

actions of the bombers, university officials, and local and federal police. Bates centers his story around Karl Armstrong, the leader of the New Year's Gang. He explains his actions and successfully demonstrates how Armstrong's perverted logic stemmed from political outrage and a sense of mission. Towards the end of his narrative he turns to psychohistory. He suggests that Armstrong's actions were also motivated by childhood traumas but never explains this interesting hypothesis in great detail. It is then that Bates' study is at its weakest. Nonetheless, Bates has written a readable and successful account of an important event in the New Left which has long been neglected.

In her collection of essays Tischler of Columbia University brings together scholars from a wide range of disciplines and demonstrates that the study of the New Left is best conducted inter-disciplinarily. Among the contributors are Barbara Ehrenreich, Mark Stern, and Morris Dickstein. Several contributors analyze campus protest, and some write about the counterculture. Others focus on the peace movement and introduce the reader to topics such as Women's Strike for Peace. The essays are of varying quality, but most are well-argued, and all but few are innovative. Among the most interesting is Tischler's own introduction, "'It Was Twenty Years Ago' or Why We Need More 1960s Scholarship." Tischler laments the nostalgia and hostility that dominate popular images of the decade from which she draws her own political lessons. She criticizes the works of the 1980s that have set the tone of New Left scholarship and calls for "an exploration of the meaning of local events, lesser-known movements, and historical actors who played lesser parts" (6). She understands the inadequacies of previous scholarship, but at times her collection betrays her own ambition to venture into new, unexplored territories. It analyzes marginal phenomena but also includes an essay on media celebrity Abbie Hoffman whose life has been thoroughly researched by others. It is difficult to understand the inclusion of that essay, but otherwise, however, *Sights on the Sixties* is a remarkable collection that lives up to its aims.

Among the most convincing and pioneering studies of the New Left in many years is the study by Heineman, a young assistant professor at Ohio University, of the peace movement at state universities. The concern of *Campus Wars* is student, faculty, and administration attitudes. Throughout Heineman focuses heavily on the involvement of state universities in military research, which he finds a decisive factor in foment-

ing student protest. Heineman uses for case studies four campuses with no radical tradition that are all located in fairly conservative communities: Kent State, Penn State, Michigan State, and State University of New York-Buffalo. It is to his great merit that he relates student protest not only to the national scene but also to local factors. His greatest achievement is to prove that state universities provide the paradigm for understanding the student and peace movements. He feels that too much attention has been paid to elite universities, and he sets out to correct the myth that anti-war dissent was a belated development at less prestigious universities. Instead, he argues that many state universities took the lead in the peace movement which in fact blossomed in the American heartland. However, he believes that cultural security and economic privilege made some radicals at elite universities champion violent protest. In an important aside he demonstrates that those students in fact succeeded in militarizing some students at state universities whose radical movements then disintegrated. Unlike most other New Left historians, Heineman is too young to have experienced the New Left, but he commands an admirable view of the student and peace movements, and his scholarship is of an intellectual integrity that is only too rare among New Left historians.

Material about local events and movements is as accessible as material about national movements and events, and it is not lack of material that has kept historians from addressing the local movements of the New Left and in particular those of the end of the decade. Historians have preferred to write survey studies concentrating on the national picture. Historians sympathetic to the New Left may have been reluctant to single out one area for analysis as that would suggest that the New Left and its issues were local rather than national or international. However, it is on the local level that one sees most clearly the successes of the New Left. At the end of the decade most national organizations suffered from intense factionalism and nihilism, but at the local level, a radical community spirit persisted in reaction to reactionary order. Bates documents one of the most tragic chapters in the history of the New Left, Heineman is by no means affirmative, and only the contributors to Tischler's collection celebrate the New Left which has obviously shaped their intellectual sensibilities. All, however, agree with the spirit of the New Left and many of its creeds. By analyzing local movements at the end of the decade they attempt to rewrite New Left history and challenge the

consensus view of a canon of works by historians such as Gitlin, Isserman, and Miller. However, any canon is difficult to deformate, and the consensus analysis of the New Left still prevails. Bates, Tischler, and Heineman have received little recognition and they have been sparsely reviewed. Historians continue to focus on media celebrities. Not only was a collection of Hoffman's writings, *The Best of Abbie Hoffman*,<sup>14</sup> published soon after his death, but Marty Jezer also wrote the biography *Abbie Hoffman: American Rebel*,<sup>15</sup> and another biography of Hoffman is under preparation by Jonah Raskin, *For the Hell of It: The Life and Times of Abbie Hoffman*.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, the steady stream of survey studies of the New Left and the 1960s in general continues. David Farber recently published *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s*,<sup>17</sup> and Isserman, who is also preparing a biography of Michael Harrington, has been sidetracked from a study of the demise of the New Left by a survey study of the 1960s that he is now writing with Michael Kazin.

Nonetheless, the balance will be redressed. Refocusing on the end of the decade will fill many of the gaps in New Left history and shifting from national to local concerns seems an inevitable process which would confirm a basic tenet of the New Left as well as new directions in historical scholarship. The new social history of the 1970s provided new understanding of historical processes from the vantage point of those outside the mainstream. Similarly, the history of American Communism has examined particular cultures within the Communist Party. The works by Bates, Tischler, and Heineman indicate that New Left historiography is undergoing similar changes. The New Left insisted that power should come from the bottom up. If taken to heart by historians, *Rads*, *Sights on the Sixties*, and *Campus Wars* may have profound historiographical ramifications and serve as models for future studies of the New Left that acknowledge that the true significance of the New Left rests at the end of the 1960s and outside the elite and metropolitan cultures and communities that until recently were the sole focus of New Left historians.

14 *New York: Four Walls Eight Windows*, 1989

15 *New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press*, 1992

16 *San Diego: Harbrace, forthcoming*

17 *New York: Hill & Co.*, 1994