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The Sixties and Me: From Cultural Revolution to Cultural Theory

Los años sesenta y yo: de la revolución cultural a la teoría cultural

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the author offers an approach to his personal and academic development during the 1960s and how they laid the foundations for his contributions in the field of sociology. Pointing out those years as a moment in which a tumultuous social conscience, strongly influenced by the New Left, broke with the static rationalization of modernity, the author analyzes his radicalization in Marxism during his student years at Harvard and his eventual distancing from it. He also explores how the Vietnam war and specific events of the time shaped an entire generation, through pointing to the possible existence of alternative social orders.

Keywords: May 1968; 60s' generation; Sociology in the 1960s; New Left; cultural theory.

RESUMEN

En este artículo el autor ofrece un acercamiento a lo que fue su formación personal y académica durante la década de 1960 y cómo ellas sentaron las bases para sus contribuciones en el ámbito de la sociología. Señalando esos años como un momento en el que una tumultuosa conciencia social, fuertemente influida por la Nueva Izquierda, rompió con la racionalización estática de la modernidad, el autor analiza su radicalización en el marxismo durante su estancia en Harvard y su eventual distanciamiento del mismo. Asimismo, relata cómo la guerra de Vietnam y ciertos eventos específicos de la época moldearon a toda una generación, a través de apuntar hacia la posible existencia de órdenes sociales alternativos.

Palabras clave: mayo del 68; generación de los sesenta; sociología en los sesenta; Nueva Izquierda; teoría de la cultura.

There are currents that run through the affairs of men and women. They wash over us, cleanse us, and push us head over heels into some unknown place. They knock us over, wear us out, and sometimes almost kill us. They leave us gasping in their wake and grateful for being left alive.

The sixties marked another episode in the long history of rebellions against this worldly asceticism that challenge standard understandings of "modernity." Even modernity's greatest champions knew that the rationalization of the world comes at a price. Weber heard the sirens of this-worldly mysticism, eroticism, estheticism, and fundamentalism, but thought they could be resisted. Marx believed that communism would get the problems right, and provide an alternative modern world. Durkheim put his faith in the secular sacred. Simmel looked to art. Parsons saw the other side of the pattern variables, and the strains modernity placed on men, but believed that balance could be preserved by hearth and home. Habermas looked nostalgically at the life world, but thought it could be insulated from instrumental rationality and segregated in the ethical sphere. Modernity's critics, of course, had an easier time. Condemning modernity as abstract morality, Nietzsche yearned for myth and Dionysus. Dismissing modernity as disciplinary rationality, Foucault pursued the private cultivation of the aesthetic self, finding release through ecstatic, transgressive experience.

Awareness of the doubleness of modernity has never been organized into a systematic theory of the emotional and moral contradictions that simultaneously fuel and threaten to destroy it (Alexander, 2013). But the contradictions are there, in the real life of modern societies for all to experience and sometimes even to see.

The cost of rationalization is a tumultuous unconscious. Individuals slip fully into the unconscious during nighttime dreaming, but they are also continuously motivated by unconscious fantasies when they are awake, even if they are able to keep such unconscious "primary process" disciplined by the reality principle in emotionally relatively adaptive ways. There is social unconscious too, and it is informed by the tumultuous unconscious of individuals; it is revealed in the dreams and nightmares that propel popular symbolic life, in movies and television dramas about love and sex, death and violence; in painted and sculpted representations of primordial archetypes, transcendental tranquility, and chaotic passion; in novels about adventure beyond control, intimacy beyond conflict, and remorse without end; in music that is apocalyptic beyond imagination, ecstatic beyond reason, and sublime beyond our most luxuriant dreams.

The dreams of popular culture are the messengers of the social unconscious, revealing the underside of modern order (Danesi, forthcoming). This underside is real. It may not take an institutionalized form, but it provides constant temptation, promising transcendence and threatening damnation beyond good and evil. It fuels social, ideological, and religious movements, utopians hopes for civil and personal repair, for social justice and love, and dystopian dreams of revenge and destruction.

There are times in human history when the social unconscious breaks boldly into the light of day. Such outbreaks mark wars and revolution, but, as well, the great public movements of moral compassion and religious awakening that try to set things right in some fundamental way. Inchoate and diffuse, these moments point to alternative social orders even if they do not clearly define them, much less indicate how they can be achieved. For all their unrealism, these outbreaks provide the fuel that societies need to create and procreate. Rationalization can kill. Social life needs to be fed by the social unconscious if it is to survive.

The sixties marked a great outbreak of the social unconscious. In the last part of the 19th century there had also been enormous waves of anxiety, utopia, and rebellion, in response to the ratcheting up of economic rationalization in the bureaucracy-building age. In some national contexts, these outbreaks helped to humanize capitalism and create social democracy. In others, they unleashed the fanaticisms of fascism, communism, and militarism that threatened to destroy civilization, and came very close. Yet, the turmoil, fears, and cross-class solidarities generated during the Second World War had the effect of creating another surge of social rationalization. The postwar settlement upgraded and enlarged rational control. Should it have been surprising, two decades later, that what Herbert Marcuse called "surplus repression" in the most modernized societies became for many younger people difficult to bear? (Marcuse, 1955).

The sixties were sparked by specific events and not only by such longstanding contradictions in the collective unconscious of modernity. In the United States, the civil rights movement opened up dreams of interracial harmony. The horrendous war in Vietnam polluted America, the vanguard of modern rationalization, and triggered a vast social movement for peace. There was also the emergence of a new kind of music, rock and roll, which fuelled a youth culture and allowed private visions of love and violence to take on new public texture and economic might.

These secular rhythms and historically specific events entered the life cycle of my generation of Americans at a formative stage. Our socialization in the quiet 1950s and early 1960s had nurtured an ambition to fit in and to get ahead. We postwar baby boomers, like our parents, were models of this-worldly asceticism and disciplined self-control. Yet, as the popular culture of that time reveals, we also experienced the anxiety and the romantic yearning that marks the doubleness of modern life.

During the sixties, the social unconscious reached up and grabbed us by our collective throat. It shook us violently, and turned our world upside down.[1] Our parents had deceived us, our teachers were oppressors, our political leaders criminals, our criminals saints. The

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[1] Binary references to distopian and utopian themes of apocalypse and salvation were continuous themes in contemporary efforts to understand the sixties, e.g., Hayes*s* (1969) and Dickstein (1977). On rock and roll as a continuation of the Romantic movement in Western aesthetics, see Campbell (1987; 2006).

old world was dying; a new one was being born. My generation experienced the sixties as a liminal state. Teetering at the edge of the old times, we lived in a communitas that adumbrated the new age, when the fragmented, isolated, and rationalized world of modernity would be left behind.[2]

I was a sixties communard, a noncommissioned foot soldier in this new generational army of social and personal salvation, struggling with "my brothers and my sisters" to bring about the new world that we believed was already in the making. Fresh from the ascetics and romantics of Los Angeles public high school life, I arrived at Harvard College in 1965, just in time to catch the generational tidal wave as it gathered strength. I experienced drugs, sex, and rock and roll in real time, my modernist dreams of grace through achievement for a while seeming almost completely fading away. So did my once powerful sense of the realness of social reality, of the legitimacy of social power, of the reasoned basis for the social and cultural structures of modern American life. The abyss had opened up. Everything holy was profaned; all that was solid was melting into air. I experienced the social construction of reality.

Liminality ruled my sophomore year. Fellow editors at the *Harvard Crimson*, the quasi-professional student newspaper, provided my most rigorous education, and my most coherent writing appeared in its feature pages. The year is frenetic in memory, an often unhappy, sometimes ecstatic blur. When spring came, I threw open my living room windows to blare Beatles and Stones songs into the Lowell House yard.

In my junior year, I began to stick my head above the ether and breathe the intellectual air. With the bemused good will of my social studies tutor, Mark Roberts, I structured an individual tutorial around writings on social utopia. Paul Goodman, Herbert Marcuse, David Riesman, and Kenneth Keniston gave me my first sense of social theory, of how disciplined imagination can stretch abstract intellect to connect with emotional and moral need.

In my senior year, I joined the radical student group Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Disrupting a faculty meeting to protest Harvard's willing to host the Reserved Officers Training Command (ROTC), we received an official disciplinary warning. We threatened a "sleep in" against Harvard's notorious "parietals," the restrictions on female visiting hours, but they were relaxed before we could try it out. We organized a New Left study group, meeting weekly in future socialist historian's Michael Kazin's college rooms. We wondered whether there was a social theory that could tie the fragments of our lives together, fold them into our overwhelming angst, and tell us how radical social change would make it go away. In our intensive study groups, I first encountered such concepts as cultural contradiction and post-industrial society. They seemed to explain our unhappy consciousness and

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[2] For an anthropological theory of communitas and liminality, see Turner (1995).

legitimate our rebellious actions. We felt angry because we were fodder for the new class, being trained to produce commodities that nobody would need.

I experienced the aesthetic pleasure of an intellectual system. The same theory could explain the liberating qualities of the new world and the oppression of the old. This pleasure was so vivid that I became a lifelong theorist. It made me thirsty for even bigger things. I would eventually give up Marxism, and later Parsonianism, but I would remain committed to grand theory, the kind that C. Wright Mills, he of the pragmatic school of American radicalism, claimed to despise (Wright, 1959).

That one could tie normative hope and empirical realism neatly together hooked me for life. Sociological theory became sixties *manqué*. Intellectual ratiocination would provide an antidote to social rationalization. The commitment to intellectual play remained long after the commitment to the possibility of a world organized by social play disappeared (Brown, 1966). Creative social theorizing provided me a pathway from liminality to adulthood, and eventually an income.

The sixties made me into a social theorist. It created the space not only to make the world anew, but to think it anew, and to think about thinking it. Yet, while I shared this experience with many others, not only in the United States but also around the world, what we took from the sixties was never exactly the same. Distinctive experiences in my life course separated me from some of the influential themes of my intellectual generation, even as I remained deeply connected to others. This dialectic of separation and connection led me to cultural and democratic theory, which I continue to pursue today.

The cultural and political radicalism of the sixties focused on emotions and morality, on the structure and restructuring of internal life. Subjectivity was everything, "changing consciousness" and "raising consciousness" the mantras of the day. When I became a Marxist, it was decidedly of the New Left kind.[3] Materialism was our enemy, not only in society but also in social theory. We associated orthodox, economistic Marxism with Soviet communism, and we considered the latter to be an object lesson in social rationalization and domination, not their alternative. Commodity fetishism was the force against which we fought, not the poverty of scarce commodities. Weber's iron cage and bureaucratic rationality were the main dangers, not a particular kind of distributive regime. This was "Western Marxism" with a vengeance, the very embodiment of the theoretical perspective at which Perry Anderson would later take aim (Anderson, 1976), but which he and his colleagues and predecessors in the *New Left Review* had done so much to spawn.

When we spoke about "interest," it was not monetary but motivational. Making revolution meant engaging in intensive dialogue, passionate social drama, and radical reinterpretation.

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[3] For some representative texts of this very particular Marxism, see, e.g., Sklar (1969); *New Left Review* (1977); Poster (1975); Avineri (1969); Cockburn and Blackburn (1969); Marcuse (1964); Wellmer (1971).

We could not rely on objective contradictions, on necessity produced by economic force. Lukács had discovered reification, moving critical thought from Marx to Marcuse. Gramsci had discarded *Capital*, replacing its economic laws with ideological hegemony. Sartre connected Marxism with inner subjectivity. Gorz linked consciousness to a new strategy for labor (Lukács, 1971[1924]; Gramsci, 1971; Sartre, 1963; Gorz, 1967).

New Left Marxism taught that the objective only seemed so. The economic and political were infused with subjectivity. If everything in bourgeois life were ideologically constructed, then everything was up for grabs. If it could be reinterpreted, then it could be redefined. If these new readings were dramatized, they could get penetrate people's inner life. If conscious changed, there would be a new world of sentiment and feeling, and institutional transformation after that.

These foundational beliefs of the sixties generation stayed with me, after the ideology of the sixties disappeared. Translating these beliefs into radical political idioms no longer seemed compelling, but the general sensibility of the sixties retained its feeling and form.

My most ardent academic enthusiasms at Harvard were reserved, not for social theory, but for the humanities, from the ancient Greeks to the Reformation and Renaissance, 19th and 20th centuries theater and novels, art history, and the post-war avant-garde. The one big thing I had learned in public high school was the literary approach called "New Criticism." Interpreting the formal structures and historical contexts of novels, plays, and paintings were what I enjoyed most during my college days.

Yet, my intense antagonism to the Vietnam war motivated me to audit Michael Walzer's lectures on democratic obligation and civil disobedience. Watching this deeply moral thinker use abstraction to grapple with the most pressing problems of my time made a deep impression on me.[4] It introduced me to notions of mutual respect and solidarity that would later inform my theorizing about the civil sphere. I also closely followed H. Stuart Hughes' elegantly crafted lectures on 20th century intellectual history, which began with the discovery of intellectual cosmopolitanism and concluded with the claim that Marcuse embraced a primordialism that threatened to undermine it (Hughes, 1958). While I was not ready yet to entertain such a critique, the Hughes' mind and method fascinated me, implanting a model of theoretically-informed historical text interpretation that later sustained my first, extended undertaking in theoretical sociology.

Gradually, I began to get some sense for social science. My undergraduate honors thesis in Social Studies, with Barrington Moore, focused on the American labor movement in the late 19th century, though I had yet hardly read Marx. My argument was that labor radicalism had been muted at a critical juncture, not by liberal cooptation, but by the subjective impact of anti-labor violence. This rather blunt, rather simplistic thesis was informed by an

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4 These lectures were published as Walzer (1970).

interpretation of inner life. The idea had come to me while reading Samuel Gompers' auto-biography, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor* (1920). It struck me that the centerpiece of that *Bildungsroman* was Gompers' vivid account of his narrow escape from horse-mounted militia during a labor strike in 1877, the "year of violence." If he had not leaped into a sewer and pulled a manhole cover over his head, Gompers believed, he would have been beaten, possibly even killed. This psychological trauma, generated by imminent violence, remained with Gompers for the rest of his life. It seemed to provide a subjective explanation for his commitment to non-political, economic unionism. In my later theorizing about cultural trauma, I formalized this early intellectual gut feeling in a more rigorous way (Alexander, 1982-1983; Alexander *et al.*, 2004; 2012).

During my senior year at Harvard, my political experience became defined by the sharpening tension between revolutionary militancy and democratic reform. When I joined SDS, it was already deeply split between New Left and Progressive Labor Party (PLP) factions. Initiates into the New Left caucus, like me, still read the Port Huron statement, the animating and not very Marxist principle of which was that people had the right to participate in the decisions that affect their lives. This political maximum defined the spirit of 1960s' New Left activists. It was because we were animated by this spirit that we would spend hours talking things through at meetings. Our politics were a passionate commitment to discursive and disruptive engagement with the community outside. Members of PLP, by contrast, viewed themselves as labor militants, members of what they dubbed the "Worker Student Alliance." Rather than following the early Marx, they embraced the abstract economism of the later Marx, advocating not socialist reform but Bolshevik revolution. They were cadre, following policies decided by a central committee in secret meetings. We were disorganized radical democrats. We idolized Marcuse and Sartre; their gods were Lenin, Stalin, and Mao.

During a tense and chaotic meeting that stretched long into an April night in 1969, members of Harvard SDS struggled over whether or not to "occupy" Harvard's central administration building, as a militant effort to stop the machinery of war. The majority voted against initiating such a militant confrontation. A few hours later, however, in the darkness of dawn, PLP militants who had lost the vote stormed Harvard's University Hall. They pulled Deans from their offices, pushing them violently down the stairs. Members of New Left caucus, fearing the revolution would pass us by, soon sucked in our pride and joined the occupation. Administrative missteps, police brutality, and a very restive youth culture transformed this political misadventure into an act of liberation. The rest of the academic year became political carnival. Silk-screened poetry festooned the Harvard yard. We experienced our own Prague spring in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was sixties liminality for the last time.

That summer, after graduation, these impulses of communitas were pushed aside. With other communards, I traveled to Chicago for the convention that split SDS. New Left and

PLP factions postured militancy in a "pre-revolutionary" time. Crude slogans were created, and scripts chanted in competitive counterpoint by militants on both sides. The PLP faction kept time by waving Mao's little red books. Mirroring their sectarian militancy, the "Weathermen" emerged on the New Left side. The "Days of Rage" followed later that summer, militants trashing the streets and clashing with police at Chicago's Democratic convention.

I had returned to Boston after SDS split, becoming a member of what we called the "Roxbury collective." We wanted to provide collateral support to Black Panthers activities in Boston's most impoverished neighborhood, but it soon became painfully clear that, no matter what our political beliefs, highly educated and elite white people were not entirely welcome in this African-American community. Our Roxbury Collective suffered three break-ins, one at gunpoint. Yet my comrades were undeterred, most deciding to postpone post-graduate studies for the sake of the revolution. Some went underground and became Weathermen. For me, however, the spirit of the sixties had taken a dive. I decided not to stay but to go away.

Was it social conformity, good sense, or an increasing hunger for intellectual life that convinced me not to dismiss Berkeley's offer to allow me to study for a Ph.D. in sociology? The program was in some disarray. Even as I attended Neil Smelser's year-long lecture course in sociological theory, which was at once inspiring and intimidating, I felt compelled to create a counter-education in Marxist theory. We young leftists formed a radical study group to explore alternative perspectives and to steel ourselves to raise critical points in Smelser's class. During that year, I also eagerly followed Richard Lichtman's lectures in Marxist philosophy, which presented a Hegelian reading (Lichtman, 1982). I joined the junior wing of James Weinstein's new journal *Socialist Revolution*. Under the tutelage of John Judas and Eli Zaretsky, I studied *Capital* during the sweltering summer of 1970.

The coherence of this more sophisticated phase of my radical education clashed with the growing fragmentation and polarization of radical political life. We formed a sociology collective and did our part during street demonstrations, the rousing performances that unfolded inside tear gas clouds. But holding back from the window breaking and systematic "trashing," we felt increasingly alienated from the hardened members of the revolutionary vanguard. Ground down by its own internal dynamics and hounded by the triumph of backlash politics and Richard Nixon, the new left had come to resemble the old. It became increasingly polluted by Stalinism and sectarianism, by desperate militancy and acts of revolutionary terrorism.

Watching this transformation with horror and fear, I looked for a different way to do radical politics, helping to lead more traditional organizing projects. Our sociology collective traveled to Los Angeles to stand beside workers striking the Goodyear Tire plant. We confronted their conservative trade union leadership and produced a wall poster that provided an alternative intellectual framework for their struggle.

We did not find any converts, and the first doubts about the appropriateness of radical criticism began to form in my mind. There were still some good days ahead. When President Nixon and Henry Kissinger ordered the bombing of Cambodia, in Spring 1970, student groups organized massive demonstrations and a national strike. The University of California at Berkeley was effectively shut down. Fred Block and I organized about a one hundred-person group of sociology undergraduates, doctoral students, and even a few scattered members of the faculty into the "Fremont Project." For three months we canvassed this working class community of General Motors employees, seeking to organize them against the Vietnam war, demonstrating the connection between such imperialist violence and capitalism, whose exploitation we believed such workers would be naturally against. But, if only an hour's drive from Berkeley, Fremont was actually a universe away. The manifest satisfaction of Freemont residents with the American way of life mystified but also deeply impressed me. Was commodification as alienating as the good books had said? Had capitalist culture really brainwashed these workers in a hegemonic way?

I began to think more about culture during my second graduate school year. Even as I continued to sophisticate my Marxist self, particularly with Antonia Gramsci and Louis Althusser, I exposed myself to the seduction of classical "bourgeois" social science. Leo Lowenthal's course on Durkheim raised big questions for me. I drew strained analogies between hegemony and *conscience collective*, but I began to worry about how collective culture could actually be. Was it plausible to link its origins, much less its effects, only to class interests and control? Was culture not more autonomous? Did it not have specifically symbolic processes that exerted their own, specifically cultural effect? Robert Bellah's seminar on Weber sharpened these questions. Weber seemed the daring antidote for Marx. He suggested that the cultural superstructure of capitalism actually had preceded the base, and that deep and abiding concerns about the meaning of life exerted far-reaching effects not only on culture but on social structure as well.

I spent the summer after that second year with Talcott Parsons' *The Structure of Social Action*. I understood that great 1937 work as providing an analytic framework clarifying issues the classical thinkers had raised in a more substantive and historical way. It was the idea of "voluntarism" that still compelled me. New Left Marxism had understood agency, but hedged its bets with notions of ideology, false consciousness, and economic determinism "in the last instance." Parsons showed that you could not go home again. He was the bridge over which I walked from Marxism to sociology.

Such concepts as actor, movement, institution, and role had taken their initial meanings for me in terms of New Left Marxism. What I now understood was that classical and modern sociology could allow for collective subjectivity in quite a different way. My last piece of Marxist work, written during my third year, expressed this transition. It was called "Reproduction or Socialization?" I came down on the sociological, not on the Marxist side. Faruk

Birtek, editor of the *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, decided not to publish this earnest but awkward confrontation of my early Marxism with my emerging sociology.

I experienced the crisis of faith. I could no longer believe in the narrative of revolutionary salvation. The capitalism/socialism binary seemed simplistic. Mao's Cultural Revolution now looked repulsive. Stalinism was something I began to understand generically for the first time. Fabianism and social democracy came to fascinate me. On Election Day in 1968, I had marched down Massachusetts Avenue in Cambridge to "vote with my feet" against formal democracy. On Election Day in 1972, I spent the chilly afternoon and the cold hours of dusk canvassing for the Democratic Party's presidential candidate, George McGovern. I was immensely disappointed at the scale of his defeat.

Which made Nixon's fall during the Watergate crisis of 1972-74 that much more satisfying. Nixon's undoing was also highly instructive in a theoretical way. This evil doing, deeply polarizing conservative, who in 1972 had been re-elected by a record landslide, was forced from power peacefully, by the power of public persuasion. Why? Because he had acted like a political radical. He had stepped outside the rules of civil society, secretly deployed political cadre, and personalized power in an anti-democratic way. Public opinion forced him from office, fearful that the instigator of the infamous "Saturday Night Massacre" would destroy U.S. democracy's sacred core. The discourse of American civil society powerfully expressed itself in a vivid secular ritual, the Senate Watergate Hearings in the summer of 1973. It was not material interest but civil interest "rightly understood," in Tocqueville's sense, that fuelled the massive but peaceful transfer of political power back to Congressional Democrats in 1974, and to the Democratic presidential candidate Jimmy Carter two years later.

It took many more years of reading and thinking to articulate, sociologically and conceptually, what I experienced during the cultural upheavals of the sixties and the politically critical years of what I now think of as the post-sixties democratic transition. That the meaning of social life is its most critical feature, that modernity is not nearly as highly rationalized as it seems, that collective consciousness creates society, that creating civil solidarity is fundamental for a good society, that materialism is a cultural thing. For me, these ideas were the seeds of the sixties. The sixties had to end before the plants that grew from these seeds could bear fruit.

About the author

Jeffrey C. Alexander is the Lillian Chavenson Saden Professor of Sociology and co-director of the Center for Cultural Sociology (CCS) both at Yale University. He works in the areas of theory, culture, and politics. An exponent of the "strong program" in cultural sociology, he has investigated the cultural codes and narratives that inform diverse areas of social life. Some of his most recent books include: *The Crisis of Journalism Reconsidered: Democratic Culture, Professional Codes, Digital Future* (ed. with Elizabeth Butler Breese and María Luengo, 2016); *The Dark Side of Modernity* (2013), and *Trauma: A Social Theory* (2012).

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