



The Sixties

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Sixties Europe

by Timothy Scott Brown, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020, 250 pp., US\$25.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781107552906

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BOOK REVIEWS

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During the late 2010s there was a spate of academic conferences that focused on the legacy of the 1968 student protests. The conferences, which were organized around the fifty-year anniversary of the protests, were held at universities throughout the United States, including Harvard, Georgetown, and Stanford, and in international locations such as London, Paris, Nanterre, Shanghai, and Abu Dhabi. The conferences tended to frame 1968 as a global phenomenon extending well beyond the Western European or North American context that shaped discussions of the revolts for so long.¹ The focus of the conferences often fell on the transnational flow of ideas across borders between the Capitalist West, the Global South, and the “Second World” of the Soviet Bloc. Collectively, the conferences also underscored the abiding fascination with 1968 and its expected and unexpected global impacts.

Even without the fiftieth anniversary, it would have been an apt moment to reassess the 1960s as a decade of political change, increasing radicalization, and increasing youth activism that culminated in the protests of 1968. Governments around the world have been shifting to the right in recent years, while leftwing grassroots organizations like Black Lives Matter and the #MeToo movement have formed not only to counter the threat of resurgent fascism, but to challenge the very structures that underpin systemic racism, normative gender relations, and inequality more broadly. While there are certainly major differences between the Cold War era and today, there are also strong echoes of 1960s discontent and of the 1960s search for a new social order to replace the decaying Cold War pillars of capitalism and state socialism. Then as now, youth were questioning the politics of their elders and striving for something beyond the narrow range of options presented to them.

In the short afterword to his new book, *Sixties Europe*, Timothy Scott Brown makes these connections between the present and the past clear. Brown, a leading historian of the 1960s who participated in some of the conferences cited above, wrote this book for undergraduate students and advanced secondary students – some of those who have been or might in the future be involved with current antiestablishment movements. “Indeed,” Brown comments, “in a moment in which socialism and Marxism are slowly being shed of their Cold War associations, the upheavals of the 1960s are taking on a new meaning and importance” (223). At a point when socialism is again being acknowledged as a legitimate solution to the woes of late capitalism, as opposed to the bogeyman of the late twentieth century, the 1960s search for a different kind of socialist, emancipatory politics has become particularly relevant.

Why focus on Europe in a textbook about the 1960s? Why not look to North America, or to the Global South? Why not write a volume on the “global sixties”? Brown acknowledges that there has been a shift away from an emphasis on Western Europe to the Global South in recent historiography. The Global South, long marginalized in scholarship on the 1960s and the Cold War more broadly, has moved to the center of historical study, with scholars such as Odd Arne Westad demonstrating that the so-called “Third World” was actually crucial to the unfolding of the Cold War and

made it a multipolar conflict rather than a bipolar one.² This shift was reflected in the themes of the 1968 conferences and their concentration on transnationality. Yet without downplaying the centrality of Africa, Asia, and Latin America (in fact, Brown stresses connections between these regions and Europe), Brown still argues for the continuing significance of Europe as the “region in which the Cold War scenario was generated” (2) and a site that therefore felt the brunt of its divisions acutely. He thus calls for recentering Europe without decentering the Global South. He also incorporates analyses of the “three Europes” in his analysis, meaning the Democratic Capitalist West, the Communist East, and the Antidemocratic Capitalist South. The latter two have also attracted more scholarly attention of late, and Brown proposes to draw the three Europes all together in a discussion of the global exchange of ideas.

As a textbook that is part of the Cambridge University Press series “New Approaches to European History,” the book is written expressly for newcomers to the field. The writing is very straightforward and free of jargon, and Brown includes examples sure to compel his audience to make connections to the present day even when it is not explicitly mentioned. For instance, he discusses the use of excessive police violence in confrontations with left-wing protesters in West Germany (115), and students can connect the dots to relate this to the similar use of police force against the left, and especially against Peoples of Color, in the contemporary United States.

Brown also follows recent historiographical trends to place the events of 1968 squarely in the broader context of the long 1960s, observing the protests of 1968 as part of an extended process encompassing the entire decade and beyond. In addition to an emphasis on the exchange of ideas that occurred across a surprisingly permeable iron curtain, Brown highlights how the New Left sought a usable politics other than capitalism or state socialism, the latter of which had been a resounding disappointment. Radicals saw Cold War bipolarity as the main obstacle in the way of social change and the problem that needed to be overcome to implement different emancipatory political practices.

Readers raised in the West, and particularly the United States, might be confused about the 1960s New Left rejection of Soviet socialism/Stalinism, being used to overly simplified definitions of terms like socialism, communism, and capitalism. Brown clarifies and complicates such terms. For instance, he stresses how “socialism” has different meanings across different contexts. The 1960s New Left believed that the state socialist dictatorships of the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc represented a devolution from commitment to original Marxist principles into totalitarianism and looked for other forms of leftwing, radical, socialist politics to replace them. Activists drew on socialist traditions from Europe’s own past as well as from leftwing ideologies emanating from the Global South in order to find workable political alternatives. This included looking back to the anarchist tradition of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), the experience of colonial war in Algeria (1954–1962), and the ongoing efforts of the Nonaligned Movement to carve a third path between communism and capitalism.

The book is not exhaustive and does not cover all aspects of the history of the 1960s in every European country. That is by design, and Brown recommends that readers interested in a more comprehensive comparison look at a survey like Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth’s *1968 in Europe*.³ Brown himself is intent on illuminating “classical problems of revolutionary theory and organization” (8) and homes in on areas where these became most pressing. Accordingly, some nations feature more prominently than others. At the same time, his sweep of the continent is impressive, as he brings in examples from most European nations, in addition to intensive discussion of transnational movements and how the European left was involved with them.

Sixties Europe begins with a short, explanatory introduction that is followed by five chapters and the brief afterword. The introduction lays out the purpose and intentions of the book clearly, with a focus on the multifaceted nature of protest and its grounding in multiple temporal and geographic contexts. The 1960s are presented as a juncture between the global and the local, since widely disseminated radical, postmaterialist ideas circulated on a microlevel, where they were adapted to specific circumstances. Further, Brown sees those ideas as both unique to the decade but also hearkening back to earlier radical moments, such as the Russian Revolution of 1917, to which the New Left consciously turned for inspiration. An emphasis on the intellectual and cultural aspects of the 1960s begins in the introduction and then threads its way through the book too, as Brown insists that the culture and politics of the decade were inseparable.

The chapters themselves cover how the 1960s have been presented in previous historical scholarship, pre-1960s antecedents to the revolt, 1960s culture as reflective of and inseparable from 1960s politics, the development of student political movements across the continent, and the struggle to maintain radical politics after 1968, respectively. The first chapter, "Mapping Sixties Europe," addresses older scholarship alongside more recent literature, chronicling the newest trends in the field. The chapter is not quite historiographic, as it goes beyond a debate about the scholarship to an analysis of the different conceptual frameworks that have been used to understand the decade. Nonetheless, it does address different ways in which scholars have tried to make sense of the confusion of ideas and actions that shaped the 1960s and discusses the categories they have employed to interpret 1960s radicalism, beginning with the now moribund notion of 1968 as a "watershed" that eclipsed what came before and after. From there he moves on to describe newer methods of analysis, including the recent foci on subjects such as oral history and the significance of alliances between students and the working class.

Brown points to the intertwining of politics and culture as another recent preoccupation in the historical literature, arguing that at its best this literature delves into how culture encompassed more than surface phenomena such as dress or music, and gets at how radical, antiauthoritarian ideology spread through society and sought to implement changes that would go well below the surface and lead to a radical restructuring of everyday life. Political/cultural shifts were precipitated by the radical appropriation of revolutionary ideas and methodologies that were drawn from a variety of sources, including from the European past and from transnational examples set in locations such as the US or the Third World.

The second and third chapters explore additional topics that Brown laid out in the introduction, including the New Left's use of the revolutionary past as inspiration for their own activism, addressed above, and the efflorescence of cultural production connected to political radicalism. Chapter three, "Cultural Revolutions," is central to the book, with the question of how culture was imbricated in politics and vice versa seminal to Brown's discussion. Youth culture, which encompassed music, art, fashion, and literature, became emblematic of the leftwing political movement as "radicals sought to expand the new ideas beyond the atelier and the café, connecting them to the burgeoning student protest movements and to the wider field of insurrectionary youth subcultures" (79–80). Art suffused everyday life through political choices such as wearing certain styles or listening to specific music.

The realm of culture was, moreover, thoroughly transnational, with influential figures such as Beat author Allen Ginsberg speaking in both Eastern and Western Europe, and with the writings of prominent leftwing thinkers being translated into multiple European languages. Indeed, despite repression from above in both the Soviet

Bloc and authoritarian capitalist states such as Greece, western musical influence took hold across the entire continent, pushing some less tolerant regimes to try to harness youth culture and direct it into state-sanctioned outlets, such as local bands. As new countercultural movements took hold, however, a widening gap began to grow between those who identified most with counterculture and those who considered themselves “serious” revolutionaries, more interested in Marxist theory and practice than in artistic or musical innovations. This divide would carry over into the post-1968 era, when tensions between the groups became increasingly strained.

The fourth and longest chapter, “1968 in Three Europes,” homes in on the actions of specific political groups in a variety of national contexts, demonstrating that similarities existed across borders, as certain features of student movements were consistent throughout the continent. The impulse to reject Soviet-style Bolshevism and control of revolution by the elites, as well as to find new, emancipatory content in Marxism, echoed almost everywhere. Students directly took charge through the establishment of revolutionary groups, action committees, and councils. They were addressing how to create a social democracy beyond capitalism and state socialism. The students’ nations had different local, historical traditions that informed their revolt, but protest was also freighted with similar ideological drives toward solidarity with the working class and the seizure of grassroots-level political control that did not emanate from establishment political parties or labor unions. Reformist platforms depended on specific local circumstances – France had different priorities than did Czechoslovakia – but in speaking of the Prague Spring, Brown also maintains that “what was important about Prague in 1968 was not the Warsaw Pact invasion but the attempted socialist renewal on either side of it” (150).

In the final chapter, Brown looks at the afterlife of 1968 and the activists’ attempts to come to grips with the failure of their revolution to enact sweeping changes in the wake of the French May and the Prague Spring. He explores the possibilities they saw for continuing the revolution in the future, as well as the cooptation of the symbols of the revolution by mainstream culture, which emptied them of their prior meaning and turned them into marketing tools. One option available to leftists post-1968 was to drop out of society altogether, whether by joining “underground” countercultural and political organizations in the West, or by withdrawing into private life in the East. Another was to work with ostracized populations, including juvenile delinquents, to spread their message as widely as possible and to rescue those they saw as victims of postwar society. Divisions between culturally- and politically-oriented activists – “politicals” and “counterculturalists” (199) – sharpened in this era, too, as those with “serious” political aims disdained those more interested in libertine, sexually-open communal lifestyles. In the meantime, marginalized groups such as women and the LGBTQ+ community began to participate more actively in radical politics and to argue that leftwing men upheld a bourgeois gender hierarchy that made women sexual playthings for “liberated” men rather than elevating them to the status of intellectual equals.

Brown’s *Sixties Europe* is an extremely rich textbook incorporating copious examples of leftwing ideology, praxis, art, and organization. To my knowledge, there is no comparable volume for students, which makes the book appealing to history and political science faculty teaching courses on Modern Europe. There are some minor flaws. For instance, the book could have contained more images of the art and other cultural products that Brown discusses, especially in the third chapter on cultural revolutions. For a monograph intended for a scholarly audience the lack of images in this area would not be problematic, but for undergraduate students, images would help

them make stronger connections with the material they are reading. There is an extensive bibliography, but it may have been nice to have created a more focused “further reading” list to point students to sources on specific topics. At times, the book also becomes somewhat overly involved, laden as it is with an astonishing level of detail that might be difficult for novice students to process. However, this can be ameliorated through the use of some of the primary sources Brown marshals as additional reading. For instance, Czech activist Jan Kavan’s article “Testament of a Prague Radical,” which rejects both Stalinism and Capitalism, may aid in illuminating the richness of the decade and the reality of the possibilities for a third way between Communism and Capitalism (40). Linking such primary sources to Brown’s narrative should assist students in understanding the events of the Cold War and the multiple perspectives that Brown presents. Overall, however, this is a fascinating volume that will serve as a landmark for use in the classroom for a long time to come.

Notes

1. Some of the names of these conferences were “Revisiting 1968 and the Global Sixties, Part I” (NYU-Shanghai, March 13–16, 2016); “Revisiting 1968 and the Global Sixties, Part II” (NYU-Abu Dhabi, September 19–21, 2016); “1968 – The Global and the Local” (Georgetown, March 23–24, 2018); and “Global 1968: Solidarity and Alliance in Global History” (Fondation maison des sciences de l’homme, Collèges des études mondiales, Paris/Nanterre/London, May 2–6, 2018); and “Global 1968 in 2018” (Stanford, May 25 2018).
2. Westad, *Global Cold War*.
3. Klimke and Scharloth, *1968 in Europe*.

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The Young Lords: a radical history, by Johanna Fernández, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2020, 480 pp., US\$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 9781469653440

The Young Lords: A Radical History chronicles the “rise and fall” of the New York Young Lords. Drawing from a wealth of oral history and archival resources – including personal interviews with former members, supporters, and adversaries of the Young Lords and the Black Panthers – Johanna Fernández’ monumental work is by far the most comprehensive study of the group yet to be published. It serves as both a social