

Class, Activism and History: Two New Books on the Sixties

PALMER, Bryan D. – *Canada's 1960s. The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009. Pp. 605.

PALAEOLOGU, M. Athena (ed.) – *The Sixties in Canada. A Turbulent and Creative Decade*. Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2009. Pp. 362.

THERE IS a certain pattern to the way in which distinct historical eras emerge. Initially journalists, politicians and sociologists start assessing events in the recent past. Then, as the political scientists and sociologists lose interest, historians begin to move in. Historians prefer a certain distance in time before they wade in to the discussion, at least with any serious commentary. This is formed by the nature of the research they have been trained to use, their respect for time as a key element in change and their desire to look at the significance from a certain distance. Before long they begin to create a new era – distinct from the present but instrumental in our understanding of how we got to where we are.

Two recent books, Palmer's *Canada's 1960s* and Palaeologu's *The Sixties in Canada*, signal the continuing evolution of that fabled decade as a subject of serious historical analysis. At the same time, the evolution is still clearly underway. Palmer is a baby boomer, as are many of the contributors to Palaeologu's edited volume. Moreover, many were activists in the decade and bring to their analysis not only the usual historical baggage but also nostalgia for an age when all things seemed possible. So nostalgia and the mythification of an already fabled decade are an inherent part of both works.

A definite left-wing perspective is another element clearly present in both works. Palmer explicitly celebrates this and uses it as a weapon to wield against the new graduate student religion of post-modernism. His approach is "more modernist than post-modernist, more historicist than textualist, and more attuned to Marxist sensibilities than it is to the reification of discursive destabilization characteristic of current theoretically fashionable premises . . ." (p. 8). As an edited collection, the ideological perspective of Palaeologu's work is more eclectic but it too views the decade from the Left and, in the case of several contributors, the perspective of a personal experience with activism.

To point out the explicit presence of nostalgia, myth and ideology is not to imply anything necessarily pejorative about either work. Mythification

takes an event, era or person and packages it as a whole, searching for patterns within the qualifications and exceptions that are inevitably present. Nostalgia is also inevitable when people who lived through an event look back on it—especially if the event or era was formative in their own lives. The real question is the degree to which the historians turn nostalgia into insight and mythification into perspective. For the prospective reader, as well as the reviewer, the question is what do these books bring to our understanding of the sixties?

The answer, I am pleased to say, is a great deal. Palmer's book, in particular, though open to criticism on various fronts, is a complex, interesting and important work. Some of the essays in Palaeologu's collection are more varied and present new research that shed light on the decade.

Both works are united by the belief that the sixties were a transformative decade—one in which the Left played an important role. For Palmer this transformation revolves around the redefinition of Canada itself: "What follows builds on the view that the 1960s wrote *finis* to the safety of being Canadian. As the decade's developments unfolded they did so in ways that ended forever the possibility of championing *one Canada*, with its Britishness a settled agreement (p. 21)." To Palmer the sixties were a necessary prelude to the modern, multi-cultural society that exists today. The decade had its flaws, he recognizes, but in challenging old views of Britishness, or gender, or race and class, Canada was changed forever. Dimitri Roussopoulos, in his introduction to *The Sixties in Canada*, is more narrowly focused, but also sees a fundamental change as having taken place. Participatory democracy, he concludes, was the "enduring legacy" of the sixties.

There are several ironies in both these conclusions. Roussopoulos sets his faith in participatory democracy against the autocratic tendencies of the Harper government. Yet that government was born in a prairie rebellion against the political elites and often employed a strong populist rhetoric advocating the participation of the average person. Participatory democracy can cut both ways and does not always lead in the same direction.

Palmer's analysis also contains a certain irony. The unrepentant Marxist is too good an historian to avoid the awkward fact that class was probably less of an influence in the 1960s than nationalism. Indeed, he essentially accepts the fundamental premise of George Grant who argued in 1965 that the death of conservatism left Canada vulnerable to the American empire. Both the Left and the Right in Canada focused on the problem of Canadian identity during the sixties. Neither had the answer and in the end "the vehicle of Canadian national identity imploded" (p. 429). Along the way, as Palmer and writers like Smart in Palaeologu argue, the intersection of generational sensibilities and nationalism were often more important than traditional notions of class.

Against this complex context, both works turn to specific issues and themes to make their fundamental point. Palmer's structure is particularly important in shaping the way in which his book works. He uses ten distinct episodes in the history of the sixties to make the argument about the redefinition of Canada itself. Of course, many of these focus on those matters associated with sixties protest or radicalism: the counterculture, labour unrest and native rights. To Palmer's credit, though, he takes a wider lens and looks at everything from the Munsinger sex scandal to boxer George Chuvalo's 1966 match with Muhammad Ali in an effort to illustrate his underlying thesis about identity, modernism and change.

The decision to take snapshots of particular incidents or trends of the decades has pluses and minuses. The most obvious minus is that there is no single narrative linking the events of the decade but a collection of episodes that ultimately leaves much unsaid or unconnected. On the positive side, several chapters give a quite engaging and perceptive analysis of the way in which the decade played out. The sad story of Gerta Munsinger and the fresh take on Marshall McLuhan stand out as examples. Other chapters that look at the more radical aspects of the decade do so with a fresh perspective. For example, the wildcat strikes are examined as a quite different manifestation of the spirit of the age and as an aspect of youthful rebellion as much as working class resistance.

Indeed, as that chapter and others demonstrate, though Palmer sees the spirit of the sixties as something to be celebrated, he is far from unrealistic in his assessment of what was happening. He never allows nostalgia to gloss over reality. There were, he demonstrates, elements of naivety, contradiction and just plain silliness in much of the rebellion. Also, though he is a Marxist and even terms himself a Trotskyite, Palmer recognizes the dangerous and self-destructive turn that occurred by the end of the decade.

From a Marxist perspective, he recognizes, there were a great many contradictions in the radical movements of the period. Many voices sought to be heard and the result was a lively but often ineffective and ideologically incoherent approach to change. Thus Student Union for Peace Action failed in its naïve idealism in the mid-sixties only to see the new Left radicalism of the next few years fragment on small differences in ideology or around issues of personality and approach. Old Left and new Left could not make common cause. Nationalism (or anti-Americanism) further complicated matters toward the end of the decade: "The Pandora's box of nationalism, once opened, proved a difficult politics to keep within Marxist bounds, Left nationalists soon embraced a plethora of essentialist positions" (p. 292).

While Palmer adds much detail and thoughtful analysis to our understanding of the sixties the question is how much his work, or the contributions in *Palaeologu* ultimately change our view of the decade. My answer here will seem contradictory. On the one side, the essential

nature of the decade is not challenged. This was indeed a time of transformation in which fundamental challenges emerged from youth as new leftists, as advocates of the counter-culture and students. Some of the expectations were unrealistic and doomed to failure but the overall impact was nonetheless significant. The kind of Canada that emerged from the decade was very different than it was when it all began.

It is in the interpretation of the nature of the 'new' Canada that both works, benefiting from time and some perceptive analysis add something to our understanding of the significance of the decade. Yes, there was the breakdown of old assumptions about race and conformity, gender and generation. More importantly, though, was that these sensibilities were only a part of the transformation of the older order. As Palaeologu concludes, "the scope of the sixties is much wider than is generally thought" (p. xiv). Palmer sees it as altering, on a basic level, the way in which Canadians thought about their society. Both liberalism with its previous assumptions about individual rights and conservatism, with its red Tory tradition, were left adrift. With organic Toryism dying a death on the rocks of non-Anglo immigration and the abandonment of red Toryism by the Conservatives, individualism and collective identity were left to contend for dominance. The former is expressed, crudely, in the modern day conservative party while the latter is expressed in untidy forms within the charter (along with individual rights), in human rights commissions and in multiculturalism.

That leads to two final comments. If this argument is accepted, the radical reshaping of our political landscape over the last twenty years is not the result of particular leaders and events but of something fundamentally systemic about the changes wrought by the sixties, the final chapter of which is still being written. Second, as Palmer seems to imply at points, none of this owes much to Marxism which has become as anachronistic as British Toryism as a guide to Canada's future.

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