

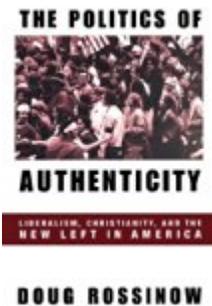
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Doug Rossinow. *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity and the New Left in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. x + 498 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-11056-3.

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The

I've been waiting for Doug Rossinow's *The Politics of Authenticity* ever since I first read his article on Christianity and the New Left in *American Quarterly* a few years ago. It was worth the wait.

These days, Americans know the 1960s mainly through its spectacles—the Kennedy inauguration, the Birmingham fire hoses, the March on Washington, the assassinations, the Vietnam War and anti-war protests, the Summer of Love, race riots, police riots, Woodstock, and the moon landing. We know, in short, the “TV. Sixties,” those events dramatic and tele-genic enough to make the news. As a consequence, we know too little about the quieter and less confrontational aspects of the decade. We know more about what people did in front of cameras than what they thought and did off-camera. We know more about noisy protests than about quieter conversations and prayer vigils that characterized campus life in the Sixties. As a consequence, since most of us don't live our lives in front of T.V. cameras, the Sixties seem to have little contemporary relevance.

The Politics of Authenticity is a powerful corrective. Rossinow presents a case study of Sixties activism from the University of Texas, beginning in the peculiar post-war politics of that great state, and concluding in the national politics of the 1970s. Working with published and archival material, and with contemporary interviews with a wide variety of Sixties activists, Rossinow crafts a complex and intelligent interpretation of the decade. Like Kenneth Heineman's *Campus Wars*, this book pro-

vides more detail about leftism outside the limelight. Like any good case study, it addresses both the particularities of the case and the implications of the case for the broader story. Rossinow, in fact, does this particularly well. When Texas radicals brought their populism to the national offices of SDS in the mid-Sixties, for example, they infused the New Left with a “prairie power” subtly different (more anarchistic, anti-authoritarian, and counter-cultural) than the metropolitan radicalism of the early SDS. At times, Rossinow provides more detailed information about Texas and individual activists than I think I need to know; indeed, the book would be better if it were seventy-five pages shorter. But even so, this is a rich and provocative study of the most important traditions of the New Left.

Rossinow contends, as his title suggests, that Sixties politics revolved around questions of authenticity. Alienated by their upbringing and by the hypocrisies of American culture, activists thought they could recover a sense of personal wholeness by healing the wounds of society. Although discussions of authenticity can sometimes make it sound solipsistic, Rossinow is good at showing how a passion for authenticity led to compassion for—and solidarity with—others. In the words of Casey Cason, the hope was that activists could become “less inhuman humans through commitment and action” (p. 104). At its best, authenticity would breed social justice, and *vice versa*. Whole people could create institutions in which it would be easier to be good, and those institutions would nurture people less alienated and more engaged than

most Americans of the Age of Anxiety.

As I do in my book *The Spirit of the Sixties* (Routledge, 1997), Rossinow emphasizes the importance of religion and spirituality to the New Left. Activists like Casey Cason (Hayden) came to the movement, and attracted countless others, because they framed their activism as a matter of faithfulness to long-established ethical traditions. Rossinow traces this moral dimension of Sixties activism to Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement's emphasis on "the beloved community." But he also identifies a "Christian existentialism" that flourished in campus centers like the University of Texas' Christian Faith-and-Life Community. There, long before the communes of the late Sixties, young people formed intentional communities that connected them to longstanding communities of faith and justice. Students discussed writers like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Paul Tillich and Albert Camus, and took their work to heart. When John F. Kennedy titled his June 1963 speech on civil rights "A Moral Imperative," even he understood that the civil rights movement went beyond civil rights to moral right.

Unlike many histories of the New Left, which emphasize its exceptionalism and separatism, this one emphasizes the Left's continuing conversations with other traditions of American reform-Christian evangelicalism, the Social Gospel, the lyrical Left, mainstream feminism—even liberalism. For example, Rossinow stresses the importance of the populist liberalism of the Lone Star State to the social construction of the Texas New Left. Early leftists were encouraged by liberals like Ronnie Dugger, and later leftists found that they could form some constructive coalitions with liberals. While Rossinow acknowledges the general hostility of the Left to liberalism, he also shows that leftists could be creatively eclectic and inconsistent in forming coalitions.

The Politics of Authenticity integrates both women and feminists into its analysis. Rossinow notes, as others have, that an important strain of the New Left was a response to male fears of emasculation in the modern world, much like Theodore Roosevelt's Progressivism. Too, the argumentative style of the New Left privileged the loud and the garrulous, who were usually men. Even so, early in the decade, places like the University YMCA-YWCA offered "free spaces" for women to shape the politics of the beloved community. Later, the sexism of the New Left created a feminist backlash that led a lot of leftists (women and men) to emphasize the politics of housework and other cultural issues that subsequently influenced the counter-culture. Rossinow also contends that

"only the death of SDS opened the possibility, for the first time in this era of activism, of a feminist left" (p. 312).

Like other Sixties analysts, Rossinow shows how, as Kurt Vonnegut said, "America radicalizes Americans." Indeed, non-leftists shaped the late Sixties Left by their intransigence and their attacks. University repression, Black Power, and the Vietnam War also drew leftists away from the optimistic assumptions of the early years. Still, this backlash also led to the richness of "new working class" analysis, which Rossinow explains extraordinarily well. The idea that "alienation isn't restricted to the poor" (p. 194) allowed leftists a wider range for radicalism, interrogating most of the institutions of American society. When the Vietnam War ended, and the national Left disintegrated, this wide-ranging cultural activism was what was left.

By the end of the decade, the emphasis on authenticity, coupled with the intransigence of the political "System" and the factionalism of the Left, led activists to an emphasis on cultural change through counter-cultural living. Instead of overthrowing American government, they would undermine American society by creating a new society in the shell of the old. Like the New Left, the counter-culture emphasized authenticity. Indeed, Rossinow suggests that "starting in 1966, counter-cultural activity became "the new left's most important strategy for fomenting social change in America" (p. 251). Like the lyrical Left of the early twentieth century, this prefigurative politics had its own (usually small, usually local) successes, but it also succeeded in bringing cultural issues into mainstream American politics, most often in the Democratic Party. And as Rossinow points out, it complemented the cultural modernism of the American middle classes. In either case, cultural radicalism became cultural meliorism, and reinforced the liberal individualism of the mainstream culture.

This book is valuable, not just for its own original and nuanced interpretation of Sixties politics, but for its historiographical insights. Rossinow knows virtually all of the literature on Sixties politics, and, both in the text and in the footnotes, he sets his interpretation in conversation with other Sixties analysts. The result is not just a first-rate monograph that complexifies the Sixties, but a guided tour of important scholarly thinking about that decisive decade.

Rossinow's book shows both the importance and attractions of authenticity, and the problems with a politics in which the "personal is political" and *vice versa*. It's amazing how old-fashioned authenticity sounds now. I

don't think that anyone is likely to characterize the politics of the Nineties as a "politics of authenticity." But authenticity might be preferable to the polling and "spin control" that propel the lies and evasions of contemporary politics.

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