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No Direction and No Home: The Sixties Unplugged

To offer a survey of one of the most controversial periods in the last century is an unenviable task. Yet Gerard J. DeGroot provides a fresh look at the history of a turbulent decade even though, as Jefferson Airplane’s Paul Kanter says, “If you can remember anything about the sixties, then you weren’t really there.” DeGroot, a professor of twentieth-century British and American history, has touched on specific elements of 1960s history and culture in his previous works (*Dark Side of the Moon: The Magnificent Madness of the American Lunar Quest* [2006], *The Bomb: A Life* [2005], and *A Noble Cause? America and the Vietnam War* [2000]), but none of that research was as comprehensive as *The Sixties Unplugged.* In *Sixties Unplugged,* he expands his research to comment on the United Kingdom, Europe, Asia, and Africa. He wants readers to reconsider their nostalgic visions of the 1960s as an era of complete idealism. If illicit drugs affected people’s memories, perhaps, he argues, time has as well.

DeGroot argues that the events of the 1960s had little if no interconnectedness. Indeed, in his introduction, he points out that the modern narrative of the 1960s resulted from subsequent studies of the decade. He furthers his argument saying that “the act of writing a book can, unfortunately provide the illusion of order; random ... events are linked together in a narrative, whose structure implies a continuum that never actually existed” (p. 3). In an attempt to showcase so-called forgotten history, he comments that historians have left out too many minor, yet important, events in the history of the 1960s—an issue he hopes to remedy. DeGroot fully embraces the concept of a disconnected decade by dividing his work into fifteen thematic chapters, each replete with exemplars of his specific theme. Perception versus reality is the underlying theme throughout the chapters, as he attempts to debunk many of the myths and misconceptions surrounding the 1960s.

While every chapter in the book does not cover events in the United States—chapter 3, for instance addresses the apartheid in South Africa—a single chapter (chapter 8) will suffice as a representative of DeGroot’s work as a whole. Chapter 8, entitled “Sex, Drugs and Rock ‘n’ Roll,” deals with such topics as Timothy Leary and his experimentation with LSD; the motivation behind and results of the sexual revolution; and the myths surrounding the Woodstock festival, including the belief that it was an entirely free event. Concerning LSD, DeGroot explains that many who participated in Leary’s drug revolution—including Leary—believed that taking LSD was a means by which to experience a deep spiritual event. Moreover, many within Leary’s drug movement believed that taking acid was a way to free oneself from the oppression of modern society and to rebel against the so-called Establishment. DeGroot argues, however, that while the intent of the drug culture may have been to open people’s minds, the very nature of LSD prevented any kind of meaningful action to take place. As an example, he notes that “many who took LSD thought that the mere act of doing so made them bona fide mem-
bers of Leary’s revolution. They did not understand that changing the world involved something more fundamental than simply turning on.... In the end, the drug rebellion was defeated by its own excess and by the contradictions inherent in the act of turning on” (p. 214).

Similar to the drug movement, the sexual revolution was touted by those involved as a way to reject the social norms of the Establishment. Those involved in the sexual revolution believed that having sex with multiple partners or without a romantic commitment was the most personal means of protesting against an oppressive and unprogressive society. Indeed, DeGroot notes that women especially applied political and personal significance to the sexual movement, believing that it liberated them from the social conventions of traditional female sexuality. He differs from other historians by showing that while many in the women’s liberation movement believed that free sex was a way to liberate women, society, and men specifically, did not feel the same. Indeed, movies of the period, such as Room at the Top and Alfie, celebrated male sexual exploits and depicted women who opposed their sexual lifestyle as prudish or frigid. Finally, DeGroot breaks with traditional histories of the women’s liberation movement by arguing that many women convinced themselves that to prove their commitment to free sex liberation, the thing to do was to have sex with multiple partners.

Finally, DeGroot addresses one of the most iconic events of the 1960s: the Woodstock music festival. Woodstock, according to those who attended, was the ultimate statement of the hippie generation. It consisted of over five hundred thousand young people gathering in one place to enjoy music, drop acid, and change American culture. According to DeGroot, Woodstock was not nearly as idealistic as many envisioned. The event, overall, was not planned as a hippie mega-event, but as a money-making concert with additional money coming from sales of a film and album. Moreover, many bands were motivated by money, as the promoters had nearly $3.5 million from ticket sales with which to book big name acts. Another myth of Woodstock, according to DeGroot, was that everyone in attendance was allowed to smoke pot and drop acid. While it was true that concertgoers were allowed to indulge, it was not because the organizers believed in some kind of utopian vision of society. Drug use was permitted as a measure of insurance against a riot should an attempt be made to ban it. The final myth that DeGroot discusses was that the festival was eventually made a free event as a larger political statement against the American capitalist system. In reality, it was made a free event—and then only on day two—as another way to control a potentially unruly and large crowd. Many people remember Woodstock, like other events of the 1960s, as being more pure and sanguine than they really were.

DeGroot’s thesis is that the decade was not as idealistic as has been portrayed in the subsequent forty years of cultural recollection and historical study. For example, he wants readers to know that the song “Ballad of the Green Beret” sold more copies than “Give Peace a Chance.” His thesis is not, however, entirely new. Authors as early as the 1970s began questioning the validity of many of the myths of the 1960s. Indeed, in his 1971 monograph Coming Apart, author William O’Neil painted a picture of a decade that had many promising moments which were never capitalized on. As an example, he wrote that the Woodstock festival was indeed a peaceful meeting of nearly five hundred thousand young people, but he also noted that “there wasn’t enough food or water. The roads were blocked with abandoned autos, and no one could get in or out [of the concert site] for hours at a time.”[1] Similar to DeGroot, more recent authors, such as Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, have noted the less than idealistic nature of Leary’s drug movement. They pointed out that while many of those who took LSD claimed to have a religious experience, they also suffered from depression. Moreover, many of their acid-induced “insights” were nothing more than long-winded ramblings about a drink of water or the setting sun.[2]

Despite his lack of new or groundbreaking research, DeGroot worked with a variety of sources from traditional monographs, manuscript collections, and documentary and pop culture sources. Indeed, the topic of his work lends itself quite well to the use of pop culture documentaries, such as the 2005 Martin Scorsese film about Bob Dylan, No Direction Home, and the 2002 DVD release of the Beatles film A Hard Day’s Night. While his use of sources is unique, his method of citation is confusing. His endnotes list books only by their author and page number. If one needs to reference the full title, DeGroot lists sources in full in the works cited portion of his book; however, that section is awkwardly arranged. He divides his works cited into four categories: manuscript collections, books and articles, newspapers and magazines, and videos and DVDs. While someone familiar with the historiography of the 1960s would have no problem distinguishing between primary and secondary sources, a student new to the field would have benefited from a works cited section that separates primary and secondary liter-
nature.

In addition to his confusing organization of sources, DeGroot is also somewhat sloppy in his citation method. While his use of Internet-based sources (such as speeches and journal articles) is a refreshing leap into the twenty-first century, his citation method is flawed. In his notes section, DeGroot does not list the hyperlink Web site in which he obtained his information. He lists the title and author of the Web site (when available) followed simply by “Internet.” One would have hoped that he would have listed at least the main page of the Web site he used as a source. It could be argued—as DeGroot does—that Internet Web sites are edited and reedited, and as a result cannot be definitively cited. While this may be the case, it does not mean that one should only vaguely reference a Web-based source. Moreover, the author’s incomplete citation method begs the questions of what type of Web site he used, what are the possible biases of the Web site’s author, and how can you find the specific quotation or passage of text?

Despite his somewhat confusing citation style, DeGroot’s monograph will be useful to the new student of 1960s cultural history. He does not provide any research that is particularly groundbreaking; however, he does provide a study of the 1960s that acknowledges the major cultural events of the decade. Moreover, DeGroot argues that the events of the 1960s were not as fantastic and revolutionary as the subsequent histories of the era have portrayed them. As his chapters are almost entirely self-contained, DeGroot’s work will serve as an excellent reader for any graduate or undergraduate class on the 1960s.

Notes


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