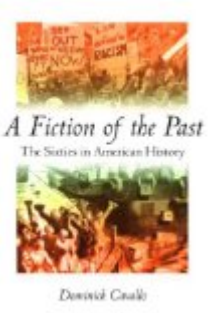
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Dominick Cavallo. *A Fiction of the Past: The Sixties in American History.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. vi + 282 pp. $26.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-312-21930-7.



Reviewed by Doug Rossinow

Published on H-Pol (March, 2000)

Dominick Cavallo argues that the "youthful rebellion" of the American 1960s "has not been sutured to the country's past," that it "dangles in time....generally unhinged from what went before, and painfully alien to what followed" (p. 9). There is considerable merit to this view. Cavallo proposes to connect the youth rebellion of this decade, specifically the white youth radicalism associated with the new left and the hippie counterculture, to broad themes and tendencies in the history of the United States. One refreshing virtue of his book, *A Fiction of the Past*, is the frank specificity of its focus. Cavallo makes no claim that his interpretive framework can encompass the protest activism of African Americans and Latinos. Some may have grown weary of historians' emphasis on Anglo youth in discussions of 1960s radicalism. But that is to wish Cavallo had chosen a different topic, a criticism that tells us little about his work. His basic intention -- and it is a welcome one -- is to erode the provincialism of Sixties historiography by placing his subjects in a longer span of American political and cultural development.

Cavallo analyzes three manifestations of the white youth culture of the 1960s: the new left of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS); the Diggers, a very influential, if quite small group of San Franciscans who, to many, epitomized cultural rebellion for a brief period; and the famous rock musicians of the era, such as Bob Dylan, the Grateful Dead, and Jefferson Airplane. In one long chapter he argues, to my mind not very persuasively, that the rockers were radical because they asserted an artisanal claim to control over the production of their music, against the bureaucratic division of labor that governed the recording business within which they worked. He makes an interesting enough musicological point. But the basis for the radicalism he discerns in this context strikes me as very narrow. He writes that these rock stars expressed "a revulsion against the undemocratic nature of the American way of work" (p. 147), but offers no evidence that this rebellion was a matter of principle that they wished to extend to all Americans. He notes at one point that it is "difficult to define with precision what was 'radical' about" rock music and musicians (p. 149), undercutting the overall thrust of his discussion. In

fact, the links between rock musicians and the world of white radicalism in the 1960s were based upon, first, the ideal of personal liberation that was central to the hippie counterculture, and second, a visceral opposition to the Vietnam War. Participatory democracy had little to do with it. Perhaps an artist like Dylan enacted an Emersonian ideal of self-reliance and a Whitmanian fantasy of self-invention, as Cavallo suggests, that struck a chord with the young rebels of the 1960s. But such ideals were hardly limited to political and cultural radicals, and Cavallo seems to be stretching in trying to link Marty Balin to Carl Oglesby or Emmett Grogan. This essay, although perhaps the most original in his book, seems in the end linked to the earlier and following chapters only tenuously.

On the other hand, to give Cavallo his due, long-standing cultural impulses, broadly evident and deeply rooted in American culture, are exactly the armature that he uses, quite consciously, to link together all the 1960s phenomena he examines. He argues, along lines very traditional within the field of American Studies, that all these phenomena were characteristically "American." The white youth of the 1960s, he writes, "revived older, pre-industrial visions of work, individualism, self-reliance, community and democracy. In effect, they pitted a somewhat mythic....America of open spaces, adventure and unpredictability against the modern managerial, bureaucratic and...staid society that they inherited" (p. 8).[1] Although he includes a tantalizing discussion of the impact of the Western genre in post-World War II television upon the baby-boom generation, in the end Cavallo offers scant explanation for this age cohort's absorption and reiteration of such classic American mythology. He senses a resonance between the social "movements" of the 1960s and the cultural theme of "movement" that he sees at work throughout American history; he supports this broad assertion about the American past with references to Henry David Thoreau and Alexis de Tocqueville.

In search of the roots of the baby-boomers' antibureaucratic outlook, Cavallo raises the subject of childrearing patterns, a logical place to inquire. This was a topic much discussed in early analyses of 1960s radicalism, but rarely explored in the past twenty years. Cavallo has performed a useful service in dusting off the sociological literature on this subject, whose authors range from the early SDS leader Richard Flacks to Bruno Bettelheim, who was not sympathetic to 1960s radicalism. Perhaps the best of such analyses came from George Vickers, who argued that baby-boomers' parents taught their progeny to be "self-directed," autonomous and ethical. Vickers claimed that, contrary to a common view, shared by Cavallo, this character prepared the baby-boomers to succeed within bureaucratic structures, not to fight against the forces of bureaucracy.[2]

Vickers's argument is contrary to the invective that 1960s radicals directed against bureaucracy, and to their embrace of the ideal of small-scale, democratic community. Cavallo, appropriately, emphasizes the ideal of participatory democracy in his discussion of the new left. In his interpretation, the young radicals of the 1960s were true rebels against bureaucracy (whether their rebellion took the form of individualism or communitarianism). He is correct. He seeks to ground that rebelliousness in a sociological analysis that includes the entire baby-boom generation. Yet one must note that that generation always has harbored internal contradictions and a wide array of social tendencies. This particular sociological interpretation of 1960s radicalism, while it always has been promising, is really a questionable explanatory instrument. If the argument works, then why did not *all* baby-boomers become radicals of one kind or another? Childrearing patterns were a contributing factor to 1960s radicalism, but not, in any simple sense, the cause. Cavallo

simply recapitulates the literature in this vein, rather than developing it further. In the end, although he adds nothing new to the scholarly discussion of childrearing patterns as they relate to 1960s radicalism, he still is to be thanked for reviving that discussion.

Cavallo's chapter on the Diggers, focusing on Grogan, is revealing. This group, who took their name from the most extreme faction in the English Revolution of the seventeenth century, have maintained their radical aura for thirty years. The more we learn of them, the less, I suspect, we will think of them. Cavallo argues that they revived "pre-twentieth-century literary myths about the wilderness origins of American identity, freedom and 'manhood'" (p. 103). In fact, despite the positive role that the Diggers sometimes played in promoting their ideal of "freedom" in San Francisco, Grogan's brand of cultural rebellion comes across, in this detailed telling, as reactionary and puerile. Cavallo does not press this evaluation upon the reader, but it is difficult to avoid. Anyone who thinks the Diggers remain a serviceable model for contemporary American radicalism ought to read this account.

A Fiction of the Past concludes with two chapters on SDS that represent Cavallo's most emphatic effort to "suture" the history of 1960s liberalism to the larger body of American history. His account of the new left is basically a friendly one, relying heavily on the analysis offered in *"Democracy Is in the Streets"*, by James Miller.[3] Like Miller, Cavallo stresses the ideas of community, equality, and empowerment expressed memorably in the Port Huron Statement of 1962. Cavallo's new left is very much the SDS of the 1960-1965 period.

Cavallo argues, strikingly, that the young people of SDS during the early 1960s took up the same questions, and the same "quest for community," that animated American thinkers of the Revolutionary and Constitutional eras. In particular he links SDS, with its distrust of centralized power, to the Antifederalists of the 1780s. This is a plausible comparison, and Cavallo is careful to note that he does not think that new left radicals were aware of, or even influenced by, late eighteenth-century thought. He simply sees both these political movements in a single American tradition of antiauthoritarianism and decentralism. Cavallo might have strengthened his case had he noted that historians influenced by or involved with the new left, particularly Staughton Lynd, recognized the same kinship with the Antifederalists that Cavallo notes, and sought to rehabilitate the opponents of the 1787 Constitution as small-d democrats.[4]

Finally, Cavallo judges the new left's project of creating participatory democracy in contemporary America a failure. Although he does not make perfectly clear what would have constituted success for this political movement, he offers several reasons for the "failure." Two of these reasons stand out.

First, he writes, "Given SDS's commitment to decentralized power and localism, the Constitution was *the* problem" (p. 226). Cavallo takes his comparison of eighteenth- and twentieth-century politics too seriously here. It is, of course, tautological to state that the Constitution was a problem for the Antifederalists, but to say the same of the new left is mistaken. To be sure, new left radicals took a view of the national government that was ambivalent at best, especially after the escalation of the Vietnam War. But their decentralism was not such that they chafed at the very existence of federal authority. Miller made clear that SDS did not propose participatory democracy as a plan of government, while Cavallo seems to suggest that they intended it as exactly that. The new left, in its later years, took on a distinct neoanarchist flavor, with many of the movement's members forming small intentional communities in a variety of settings. But new leftists did not think the abolition of a strong national government would have prompted many other Americans to

follow them in this path, nor would it have done so.

The other reason for the new left's limited political appeal, according to Cavallo, was perhaps even more basic. He states, "The course of American social and political development....overtly devalued public life" (p. 244). Operating within this political culture, the new left's "call for a decentralized, community-based democracy of participation had no meaning....Its criticisms of social elites were pointless in a country in which the private use of power, however arbitrarily exercised, is seen as morally legitimate as long as it is 'earned' through the competitive crucible of equality of opportunity" (p. 245).

This jeremiad has its allure. Yet it represents an unbalanced judgment of American political history. For Cavallo seems to argue that a left cannot exist in America, given the unique biases against public responsibility and social equality that he thinks mark our society. This exceptionalist view of American political culture, of course, has a long pedigree among historians, and it has some truth in it; however, Cavallo renders it unsubtly. The long history of left-wing social movements in the United States ought to give us pause before concluding that the political landscape of the American past is as flat as he says it is. Moreover, it is strange that between the covers of a single book, Cavallo argues that white youth in the 1960s were radical because they embraced "preindustrial" values of independence, and that radicalism is doomed in America because of the persistence of rather similar values. The "Wild West" values (my term) that Cavallo sees at work in America might be either radical or conservative, depending on the context. But Cavallo, at different points, identifies such "American" values as essentially radical or intrinsically antiradical. Neither view seems very historically minded, and, certainly, both cannot be true.

Like most exceptionalist analyses of American history, Cavallo's does not emphasize change over time. His aspiration to "suture" 1960s radicalism to the bigger story of American history remains a commendable one. But this metaphor implies linkages to events immediately preceding and succeeding the 1960s in a narrative of U.S. history. Cavallo's book would be more original and convincing if it stitched the 1960s directly to specific developments in twentieth-century history. Instead, despite the author's admirable intentions, in the end *A Fiction of the Past* submerges the radicalism of the 1960s within a static account of American values and attitudes.

Notes

[1]. Although the influence of the American Studies approach is palpable throughout Cavallo's book, he does not acknowledge this.

[2]. George R. Vickers, *The Formation of the New Left: The Early Years* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1975).

[3]. James Miller, *"Democracy Is in the Streets": From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

[4]. Staughton Lynd, *Anti-Federalism in Dutchess County, New York: A Study of Democracy and Class Conflict in the Revolutionary Era* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1962); Alfred F. Young, *The Democratic Republicans of New York: The Origins, 1763-1797* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-pol

Citation: Doug Rossinow. Review of Cavallo, Dominick. *A Fiction of the Past: The Sixties in American History.* H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. March, 2000.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3907