

Rethinking the 1960's: UCSD sociologist tells the untold story of the '60s in A Generation Divided: The New Left, The New Right, & The '60s

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RETHINKING THE 1960'S: UCSD SOCIOLOGIST TELLS THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE '60S IN A GENERATION DIVIDED: THE NEW LEFT, THE NEW RIGHT, & THE '60S

Looking back on the 20th century, it is hard to imagine a decade more infused with the symbols of liberal activism than the 1960s, with its long-haired "flower children" protesting war and violence, staging sit-ins for peace and social justice.

Yet, according to University of California, San Diego sociologist Rebecca Klatch, author of the new book "A Generation Divided: The New Left, the New Right, and the 1960s," (1999, UC Press) the untold story of the '60s is about the New Right. For thousands of conservative youth, says Klatch, the '60s was not the decade of JFK but of Barry Goldwater, and the Vietnam War was a stand against communism not a meaningless civil war.

"Many of today's conservative leaders came of age during the 1960s and became politically active during their college years through participation in Young Americans for Freedom (YAF)," said Klatch. "Hundreds of YAF activists from the 1960s are in Washington today, in Congress and other government agencies, heading conservative organizations and think tanks, and serving as political consultants and leaders."

Whereas youth on the left came into ascendancy during the 1960s and 1970s, the right wing of this generation did not come into prominence until the mid-'70s and 1980s and began to take over the seats of institutional power.

"The '60s must be seen within this larger context," argues Klatch, "Not only as fostering protests on the left, but also as nurturing a new generation of leaders on the right. Much of the conservative backlash of the 1970s and 1980s was led by people of the same age as leftist activists."

At first glance, YAF and SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) activists of the right and the left, with their diametrically opposed views of the world, seem to have little in common. However in her book, Klatch uncovers a series of striking parallels between activists on both sides of the political spectrum.

"Activists in both groups were serious and idealistic, deeply committed to their principles, and dedicated to creating social change," said Klatch. "All shared a passion for politics that formed the core of their lives and became central to their identity. Even more remarkable, during the course of the 1960s overlapping interests brought together segments of the left and right as some members of YAF and SDS discovered common bonds of ideology and action."

Klatch's book, which has, remarkably, been praised by both longtime conservative leader and publisher William F. Buckley and California State Senator and SDS founder Tom Hayden, is based on extensive personal interviews with 74 former 1960s activists from YAF and SDS, both male and female as well as archival research. She also attended YAF and SDS reunions and other related political gatherings.

"A Generation Divided" traces the lives of SDS and YAF activists from their political awakenings to their involvement and commitment during the 1960s, through the radicalization many activists faced as their lives changed over the course of the decade.

It is the story of two wings of one generation and their relationships, their tensions, their compatibilities, and their fates.

The book examines how these activists adjusted to life after the 1960s, and found that, contrary to popular perceptions, the leftists of the era did not "sell out" in subsequent years, becoming bankers and businessmen and abandoning their liberal beliefs.

"While most people on the left and the right maintained their beliefs and values as adults," said Klatch, "it was the right-wing activists who moved leftward, not the reverse."

Klatch, an authority on political and social movements, is the author of the award-winning 1987 book, "Women of the New Right." "A Generation Divided" has been praised as the first comprehensive, accurate history of the entire generation of the 1960s. In addition to shedding great insight into the social-cultural dynamics of individual activism, the book has been heralded as a groundbreaking study of women's lives in the midst of the gender revolution.

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