

**Gerard DeGroot, *The Sixties Unplugged: A Kaleidoscopic History of a Disorderly Decade* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2008). 528 pages + Bibliography and Index. ISBN # 978-0674034631. Hardcover \$15.00**

*Chris Elcock, University of Saskatchewan*

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A popular notion about the 1960s states that “if you remember the Sixties, you weren't really there.” This of course implies that the select few who claim to be the true guardians of Sixties knowledge were too absorbed in radical politics or counter-cultural activities to have paid attention to other ongoing events. By the same token, it reveals the extent to which the Sixties have been understood as a special decade in American history. Indeed, the mere evocation of the decade invariably triggers a myriad of names, events or movements in the popular mind: JFK, Vietnam, Martin Luther King, second-wave feminism and hippies are some of the themes that inevitably surface in any discussion on the decade. Many Sixties nostalgics have remembered the decade as a time of hope, progress and optimism, tragically crushed by the cynical reality of American politics. There is also another strain of Americans who have a very different opinion of the Sixties and remember them for different reasons: those were times when youth were rejecting authority in an apparent generational conflict, flouting conventions and insulting the American Dream. Yet, beyond - rather than in between - both sets of memories, there are several narratives that have been forgotten on both sides and, when revealed, give the decade a new dimension, far removed from the typical reminiscence.

In *The Sixties Unplugged*, the St. Andrews professor of history Gerard DeGroot - author of a highly-acclaimed study on the atom bomb - offers yet another study of a decade that has been a source of so much debate and contention amongst historians and lay readers, and suggests that the Sixties are indeed a special decade because they have been remembered for the wrong reasons. Recollections of the Sixties have often been used by left and right alike; many liberals have attempted to remember the decade as an era of unprecedented optimism and praised its numerous achievements. Conservative writers, however, have lamented the decade's moral permissiveness. De Groot nicely sums up the situation: “idea has

been turned into ideology, with the effect that the Sixties has come to be defined not by time but by faith” (p. 1). Whether the Sixties were indeed a special decade is thus somewhat irrelevant. What matters is that the history of the Sixties is still distorted and inaccurate, because the typical memories and accounts have weighed too much in the orthodox Sixties scholarship.

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One of the answers to the problem, DeGroot argues, is to simply stop looking at the Sixties as a decade, by remembering that decades are always artificially-constructed linear units that make the historian's work seem orderly and rational. As a result, historians, in their quest to have the Sixties neatly-framed, have overlooked too many historical facts that did not seem to serve their overarching narratives. Indeed, “the Sixties” has almost become a monolithic era with specific themes and events that are systematically associated with the decade. According to DeGroot, the events that took place in the Sixties - arguably more so than any other decade - did not have any coherent logic, which means that writing a coherent overarching narrative is not appropriate, because it runs the risk of omitting events or distorting facts to fuel the central thesis.

One of DeGroot's main contentions is that the vision of hope and progress commonly associated with the Sixties is a symptom of optimistic delusion. If we look away from that monolith and consider other oft-omitted facts, an altogether different and gloomier picture emerges: “cast aside the rose-tinted spectacles and we see mindless mayhem, shallow commercialism, and unbridled cruelty” (p. 2). Americans remember Kennedy's assassination as one of the quintessential events of the Sixties, but will struggle to remember the year when Ronald Reagan began his rise to prominence as governor of California - an event that was ultimately far more important on the domestic and global scene. They will point to heroes, like Martin Luther King, but will hardly associate the decade with Chairman Mao. They will remember Students for Democratic Society, supposedly led by cohorts of youth, but have forgotten Young Americans for Freedom and their efficient conservative proselytizing on American campuses.

These are the problems DeGroot seeks to correct by offering a series of short narratives, rather than a main storyline. The structure of the book is thus rather unusual. The chronology goes from the late

1950s to the early 1970s through 15 chapters, each divided into sub-sections. It does not take long to realize that these essays are only connected by the decade in which they are set. That is not to say that DeGroot does not make any links, but the purpose of having these fragmented histories is to serve the greater aim of de-constructing the Sixties monolith. Hence the reader jumps from one section to another, from politics, to society, to culture, often without transition. Chapter 2, for example, begins with a discussion on the invention of the transistor, followed by another on the Beat Generation and another on the impact of the birth control pill. This approach will probably be criticized for producing a fragmented account of the decade, but that is precisely DeGroot's aim – to move away from continuity and homogeneity.

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DeGroot's objects of study are surprisingly varied. Some chapters of the decade are a welcome change from the main body of Sixties literature and many add an international dimension to a narrative that has often been confined to the United States. Discussions on the Apartheid regime, the rise and brutal fall of Patrice Lumumba in Congo (Léopoldville), the coup and multi-year transition of power in Indonesia and the conflict in the Middle East are presented to focus away from domestic events, but also to offer, when relevant, insights on American foreign policy. As well as the social events (Civil Rights, anti-war movement) typically studied in Sixties literature, DeGroot does well to add popular culture to the picture (rock and roll or subversive press). His accounts tend to offer multiple angles of approach, studying facts through the lenses of race, class and gender, without forgetting the importance of the ruling economic and political bodies, as well some micro-history to balance everything.

Eager to break away from the traditional accounts of the Sixties, DeGroot has an engaged and provocative style that attacks several myths of the decade. While he gives JFK what credit he deserves for handling the Cuban missile crisis, he ultimately portrays him as the consumer product of its time and a warmonger with little or no idealism. The Woodstock Festival, so often hailed as the greatest achievement of the hippie counter-culture, is also criticized for its poor organization and mercantile dimension. The Civil Rights movement is also critically assessed; De Groot shows that there were

tensions between the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and condemning the SNCC for using children in their demonstrations.

DeGroot's approach is undoubtedly novel and refreshing because he learned about the decade by reading about, and not by taking part in the various movements. There are, however, some flaws in his book. First, DeGroot spends very little time discussing the achievements of the decade, for which he feels there is already enough existing material. Although he clearly points it out in his introduction, his account ultimately suffers from a lack of balance, and he often finds himself lapsing into cynicism. The SDS activists, the reader learns, were "dull" and were blinded by "the naïveté of self-important young people" (p. 94). DeGroot feels that their involvement in protest was simply narcissistic satisfaction, neglecting to look at the movement as part of a longer tradition of American progressivism. Similarly, his analysis of Timothy Leary's psychedelic movement as an embarrassing tantrum of deluded narcissists is not particularly novel and he disappointingly fails to connect it with American religious reformism and the broader spiritual awakening of the decade.<sup>1</sup> This cynicism can also be understood as part of a longer tradition in post-1960s literature – Christopher Lash's *Culture of Narcissism* immediately springs to mind – that is quite content to reveal the contradictions in various protest movements, but does not offer a penetrative analysis of American dissent and dissidence.

Second, for all his sardonic attacks, DeGroot's chapter on the Vatican's ban on birth-control is surprisingly neutral and non-provocative. The ban, which caused outrage in the Western world, could have been ample ammunition against an institution condemning the right to rule one's body, and one wonders whether DeGroot, for all his iconoclastic approach to the Sixties, might not be applying double-standards to avoid any controversial statements that might prove disrespectful to religious readers.

Finally, his account lacks a historiographical discussion that would have put his approach in perspective. Although this is intended to keep the narrative engaging and accessible to a broad readership, it

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Robert S. Ellwood, *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening: American Religion Moving from Modern to Postmodern* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

might have been prudent to remove some of the anecdotes and critically engage with scholarly literature. The graphic descriptions of Maoist-era infanticide will surely convince the reader that the Cultural Revolution deserves to be not only part of the standard narrative of the Sixties, but of the twentieth century as well. Yet, the more gruesome details could have been avoided in a book that ambitiously attempts to synthesize a decade in just over 500 pages of written text.

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Although this book has its flaws and sometimes flirts dangerously with oversimplification, DeGroot can be praised for his highly-readable account that offers a radically new approach to a controversial and contested period. Academics may find little new in his material, but that is almost beside the point. DeGroot convincingly dismantles the monolithic Sixties meta-narrative; what is left is a cluster of several independent narratives that give the decade an entirely new appearance, and ultimately give the decade a long-needed breath of fresh air.