

Looking back on the 'Age of Aquarius': The 1960s revisited

THE SIXTIES: CULTURAL REVOLUTION IN BRITAIN, FRANCE, ITALY AND THE UNITED STATES, c. 1958 - c. 1974
 By Arthur Marwick
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REVIEWED BY
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Conflict and confusion about what to make of the 1960s and how that decade should bear on choices for the future too often results in simplified portrayals of the era as either benighted or enlightened. Scholarship on the subject usually extols those years or laments their chaos, frustrated promise or failed hopes. Only a few observers, like E.J. Dionne in his "Why Americans Hate Politics," have shown how contemporary politics is still so

enmeshed in battle lines forged in the 1960s that most politicians cannot seem to grasp the complexities many ordinary Americans see in the hottest political issues.

Arthur Marwick's rambling 900-page tome, "The Sixties," enters headlong into the contemporary discussion in the West about the significance of the decade, which he stretches to include the last two years of the 1950s and the first four years of the 1970s. The book provides an ambitious synthesis of major movements not only in the U.S. but also in Britain, France, and Italy.

Whether we lament or celebrate the "long" decade he describes in such profuse detail, Mr. Marwick argues that it is undeniable that the period ushered in nothing short of a "cultural revolution." Yet, the ultimate message of his excursions into almost every imaginable realm of life is one that rings all too familiar: The 1960s was a time of collective

eye-opening, a new "radical honesty" (as a recent book put it), innovation and true liberation.

Perhaps Mr. Marwick's most emphatic point is that Marxism was and is not adequate for understanding the changes of the time. In repeated attacks against Herbert Marcuse and other intellectuals of the period (as well as later Marxist historians of the 1960s), the author belittles the idea that the "revolution" of the 1960s had anything to do with overthrowing bourgeois values

and structures.

Countering the Left's truism that middle-class forces for complacency co-opted any genuine radicalism (an idea that derived in part from Marcuse's notion of a kind of counterrevolutionary "repressive tolerance" on the part of members of the "establishment"), Mr. Marwick argues instead that middle-class representatives of established institutions were actually quite receptive to change. This receptivity — or "measured judgment" as

he calls it — explains the spread of liberationist, anti-authoritarian attitudes (among others) forged among various "subcultures" throughout mainstream society. It is this very acceptance of once marginal views by the majority that amounts to Mr. Marwick's "cultural revolution."

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