

## The Long Sixties: America, 1955-1973

**Review Number:** 2113

**Publish date:** Thursday, 25 May, 2017

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**ISBN:** 9780470673621

**Date of Publication:** 2016

**Price:** £65.00

**Pages:** 216pp.

**Publisher:** Wiley-Blackwell

**Publisher url:** <http://eu.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0470673621.html>

**Place of Publication:** Hoboken, NJ

**Reviewer:** Louisa Hotson

Here is a textbook that lives up to the best ideals of the genre. *The Long Sixties* promises us ‘a brief narrative history of the 1960s – a quick trip, as it were, through a momentous decade’ [p. vi]. In less than 200 pages Strain takes us from a surprisingly turbulent 1950s through the American experience of the Cold War and developing social and political movements, before screeching to a halt with Vietnam and Watergate in the 1970s. It is not easy to synthesize such a large amount of activity in a relatively short space, but Strain has made a commendable effort. Highly readable, it is packed with punchy expressions and a healthy smattering of engaging and well-chosen historical vignettes – ideally equipped, in other words, for any undergraduate reading list.

More importantly, this is a textbook with a mission: to help us to understand the true story behind the ‘sixties’, a period about which much has been written, but which evokes a polarising reaction within the nation at large and commands, as yet, no single historical narrative in the academy. For this purpose, Strain differentiates between the idea of the ‘sixties’ as engrained in popular culture, and the actual events captured in fractured form in the existing historiography. In describing the latter, he argues that the moment of decisive change actually unfolded during a longer, loosely bracketed period of almost 18 years. The argument is compelling, and Strain has produced an admirable attempt at showing how the period between 1955 and 1973 were years of tensions and inconsistencies that were all part of a widespread effort to remake and revive American society in the distinct circumstances of the middle of the 20th century. No single narrative predominates, we read not only of liberals alongside conservatives, or those under and over 30 – but also of the violent demonstrators amidst ‘peaceful’ civil rights protests, of progressive values in some areas standing alongside entrenched and persistent discrimination and misogyny, raging activism with booming consumerism, environmentalism with new technology. In presenting these events and themes together, we learn to think of the 1960s, and of our own time, as a ‘collage’ of ideas, movements and issues all adding up to a distinctly new chapter in American life.

The task that Strain has attempted is an important one. As historians of the 20th century United States are all too aware, the decade of the 1960s has inspired a number of historical investigations. However, as Michael Heale perceptively noted in 2005, little in the way of consensus has emerged among historians of this period. (1) In the equivalent amount of time following the New Deal, a broad range of literary scholars, historians

and journalists had come to some sort of widely accepted understanding of its significance.<sup>(2)</sup> Such common accord has been missing when it comes to the 1960s. Instead, scholarship has been voluminous, but it has also been fractured with scholars tending to take certain themes, perspectives or actors: whether this be the fate of liberalism, the roots of the New Right, New Left or focused studies on Vietnam, the Cold War, Civil Rights or the distinct period of political change at the end of the decade.

In structure, if not analysis, the book is rather conventional, divided into 12 familiar epochs. The first chapter focuses on the 1950s, but challenges the classic image of tranquillity and prosperity with the contrasting threat of a dawning Atomic Age and growing political uncertainty. The second and third chapters bring us into the decade of the 1960s, as Strain recounts the transition from John F. Kennedy to Lyndon B. Johnson and the developing Cold War. It is in the fourth chapter that the curtain really begins to go up on what becomes a heady acceleration of changing values, expectations and opportunities as Strain presents us with the dawn of the Civil Rights movement in 1955 (albeit, as he admits, 'rather biddably' (p. vii)).

It is in writing about the struggle for civil rights that Strain is at his best. Beginning with a reimagined Rosa Parks, less genteel and more militant than is typically portrayed, we learn not simply of the march on Washington and various sit-ins, but also the striking violence of the decade. This clearly builds on Strain's previous work on the Civil Rights movement and he integrates an exciting new historiography that pays attention to the true intensity and pugnacity of the era. This account should come as a breath of fresh air to students using Greene's recent book on the 1960s which sees the message of non-violent movement eroded by black radicals.<sup>(3)</sup> Instead, under Strain's guidance, we learn of the staggered nature of progress early on, the '[o]ne step forward, two-steps-back headway of the movement – with every achievement now paid in blood – had become agonizing'. The language is crisp and untrammelled – we learn of the bravery of those involved and the 'kneejerk reaction of bigots'; of high-pressure fire-hoses and police dogs directed at children. We also get figures that are useful empirical statistics for scholars and for students will serve to further enhance the rich picture that Strain presents – 930 protest in 115 cities in 11 southern states, with more than 20,000 arrests, at least 35 bombings, and 10 deaths directly related to racial protests (p. 60).

The fifth chapter focuses on another key element of the decade: the student movement. The message is made with the same nuance that Strain brings to other parts of the book, as he states that 'often indistinguishable, the counterculture and the Movement reshaped American youth, even as most did not actively join in' (p. 75). Due in part to the length of the book, Strain leaves slightly underdeveloped the argument that only a minority of students were directly involved in the famous effort. Instead he understandably but somewhat disappointingly focuses most of his attention on the active participation of a minority of students. Brevity is also the challenge with chapter six on Vietnam and chapter ten, entitled 'Minority empowerment: from margin to mainstream' which focuses on black power movements at the end of the decade. In both chapters we receive a broad overview of the salient facts, but in certain respects a longer and more detailed description would be valuable and welcome.

Nevertheless, the later chapters work together well in presenting the overall impression that these were impatient decades. By downplaying the well-worn popular conception of 'hippies' and 'conservatives' in chapter five, Strain replaces these fractured groupings with a broader category of expectancy; 'What ultimately unified this generation, then, was not fashion, or drug use, or free love, or even a desire for peace. It was an attitude of impatient expectation that aggressively reshaped American life along strikingly different lines' (p. 76). The concept of expectation also works well in subsequent chapters focusing on other movements; civil rights, feminism and the New Left. In each case Strain offers us a way to understand and conceptualise the overlapping yet distinct nature of these various groupings. Chapter seven is another strength of the book, offering a separate section of 'Sex, gender, and the new feminism'. The historiography has moved away from treating the movement as an offshoot from the other movements, and it is refreshing to see this reflected in a textbook. Strain deals with the material deftly. He distinguishes between the 'reawakening' sexual revolution and second wave feminism, all related but discrete with differing emphases and levels of politicization.

The final two chapters are valuable contributions to the preceding material. In chapter eleven Strain offers a persuasive argument that the 1970s were ‘remarkably similar’ (p. 162) to the decade before. We see a brief but convincing summary of the continuation in foreign and domestic politics that are a useful reminder of the many ways in which the decade lived on past the end of 1969. But Strain also describes how new forces worked to cover up the tracks of the preceding decade, and the ‘sixties’ emerged for the first time as an idea, evocative of rapid and transformative changes in American society and politics, and a sort of coming of age of the United States. As he stresses, these were changes that emerged over a broad timeframe but became associated with one decade in particular. The final chapter focuses on legacies. Strain’s intention here is to show us how deep changes have persisted, and how they have also played a part in the collective memory of the nation.

In reading Strain’s book we come away with a vivid image of an important period in American history. We might wonder whether he could phrase his intention differently in the introduction when he writes that he hopes to ‘beneficially complicate our understanding of the decade’ (p. vi). Implying the creation of confusion, the word ‘complicate’ hides the fact that what Strain really offers to the reader is quite the opposite. *The Long Sixties* certainly exposes numerous tensions that laced this a period of turbulent change, but Strain presents them in such a way that we come away with a new level of clarity and understanding of the overarching factors that work to integrate a distinct historical epoch in which the American state and its people squared up to a number of new and challenging circumstances and began to forge a new set of political, social and cultural expectations and structures, which still persist today.

The idea of the 1960s as a period of almost 20 years, from 1955 to 1973, is certainly an ambitious one, which leaves one open to the criticism that it flattens a busy era and artificially extends the true moment of change beyond its proper bounds. But it works in this context, and it works because despite the brevity of his book, Strain has carefully collated a number of different facets of the decade and presented them in an organised and coherent manner. The central distinction which he has conjured between the ‘sixties’ as an image in our political and cultural imagination and a formal period of American history is an interesting one, and he thoughtfully holds it up for inspection. Most importantly, in reading this book we might reawaken the quest held up by Heale in 2005, but never truly accomplished in the interim: to understand the extent to which the 1960s contained a ‘search for order’ to replace the New Deal state. This was a search that could not be neatly encompassed in a short or precise timeframe, but it was nevertheless a significant and meaningful phenomenon in modern American history. In this respect, this little book is an important reminder of the rewards which may be gained by historians when they emerge from the weeds of historical research to reflect on the big, overarching themes that stitch together distinct periods of history.

## Notes

1. Micheal Heale, ‘The sixties as history: a review of the political historiography’, *Reviews in American History*, 33, 1 (March 2005), 133–52.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Ibid.*, 133.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. John Robert Greene, *America in the Sixties* (Syracuse, NY, 2010).[Back to \(3\)](#)

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