

Uprising! Searching for new subjectivities in the Sixties. Introduction

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Abstract: Thanks to an extraordinary synergy between many heterogeneous factors, the fertile seedlings planted in the Sixties flourished and bore fruit in the 1970s. Slowly, their branches entwined throughout Western society up until the end of that decade and beyond. The elements influencing this metamorphosis are brought to light and discussed in the rich, in-depth articles collected in this monographic issue of *Espacio, Tiempo y Educación*, entitled *The Sixties Reloaded. Exploring social movements, student protests and youth rebellion*—a new exploration of the decade that has generally been relegated to the body of sociological and philosophical research. They were rich and dense years: the goal of the younger generations was to create a new symbolic imaginary, which took shape through music, fashions and alternative lifestyles that stood out in stark contrast to those enjoyed by their parents and grandparents. They went to the streets to protest: they alarmed the politicians in power who tried to convey through the media a very simplified version of the young, so missing the most significant development in the 1960s—the youth taking on a new role, becoming visible in “other” places, beyond the traditional spaces for protest, fighting for pacifism and civil rights, in an attempt to unite the utopian desire to change the world with a recognition of a strong subjectivity.

Keywords: Sixties, student protests; youth; social movements; counterculture.

The 1960s represented a wide-reaching watershed within the Age of Extremes—a rift brimming with symbolic significance whose phenomenological consequences form part of an imaginary (behaviour, language, media and communication) that is still blatantly evident. I believe that, thanks to a variety of factors, the magnetic pull

of the ideas, creativity, lifestyles, music and spirituality –distinguishing features of 1960–1969– heavily influenced the epoch that followed. Thanks to an extraordinary synergy between these factors, the fertile seedlings planted in the Sixties flourished and bore fruit in the 1970s. Slowly, almost karstically, but inexorably, their branches entwined throughout Western society up until the end of that decade and beyond. The factors influencing this metamorphosis are brought to light and discussed in the rich, in-depth articles comprising this monographic issue of *Espacio, Tiempo y Educación*, entitled *The Sixties Reloaded. Exploring social movements, student protests and youth rebellion*—a new exploration of the decade that has generally been relegated to the body of sociological and philosophical research.

In order to understand the «generation gap» phenomenon that developed in the 1960s between two opposing and distinct cultural standpoints in full, we must project ourselves back into a different past. In this time, opposition to the status quo swelled and grew via a strategy of open rebellion against the social models of the 1950s, which were already moving towards unfettered capitalism—baleful and cynical consumerism and the possession of goods as socioeconomic status symbols. Merely being able to meet material needs would no longer represent the myth upon which the burgeoning youth would base their expectations. Hence, disaffection began to develop and coalesce at the start of the Sixties, culminating in open rebellion and the «Great Refusal» (as Marcuse famously described it) to live according to the bourgeois canons. This gave rise to an alternative culture with a loud dissonant voice –a libertarian paradigm whose aim was to demolish the old, obsolete and rigid codes of behaviour and create a *Weltanschauung* that would be better adapted to the *baby-boomer* generation.

However, this clash of cultures had unforeseen ramifications. On the one hand it gave rise to a destructive force, while on the other conventional values (conservatism, respect for authority and the traditional norms upon which communal living was founded) were fervently reinforced. In the passing of a few brief years, the youth movement for change became hypostasised as an undesirable «counterculture». This mixed and took ownership of suggestions from «other» worlds using channels and dimensions that were sometimes very different from what was initially intended, and warrants further investigation. We must ask ourselves what were the opposing visions that came to the fore, and to what extent the direct clash between them was foreshadowed by signs that would have already been clearly apparent to a careful and informed observer.

Across the world, the difficult phase historically distinguished by the Great Depression had profoundly marked the generations that reached adulthood during the Second World War: fears for the future, a paroxysmal attachment to belongings, fear of hunger and deprivation, and a lack of prospects. Material things had contributed to the formation of an ideology based on marked individualism and personal advancement within the community. For this generation, which had experienced hunger, unemployment, daily deprivations and humiliation, the subsequent economic miracle had strengthened a sense of attachment to traditional values (God, homeland and family), together with awareness of success and money as a measure of self-affirmation. However, in the rapidly expanding society –distinguished by well-being for the many and exponential growth in literacy– the younger generations felt divorced

from the selfish values centred around the Western white man. They were imprisoned in a labyrinth of psychological claustrophobia from which there was no escape. This was fertile ground for an explosive synergy between endogenous phenomena such as the inadequacy of the «father» with respect to the needs of his offspring and exogenous historical events and rapid technological advancement. The goal of the younger generations was to create a new symbolic imaginary, which took shape through music, fashions and alternative lifestyles that stood out in stark contrast to those enjoyed by their parents and grandparents. The preceding generations looked upon these collective manifestations with alarm, denigrating them and ultimately seeking to quash them politically and decisively.

What makes it so important to reconstruct the size and reach of the collective imaginary that formed around the wave of protests and worldwide rebellion that the young people of the 1960s sparked from an educational and historiographical perspective? There are obviously many valid reasons. First and foremost, a thorough analysis of the communication mechanisms at play must confute the desacralisation efforts of the news media, which, with growing strength and attention, forged a negative concept of the student youth. They relied on excessive simplification and associated each move they made with the desire for rebellion, creating an anarchic and nihilistic legend that was equally contaminated by the Hollywood films that were so fashionable in the era; *The Wild One* (1953) and *Rebel without a Cause* (1955) were real cult movies and helped turn the worldwide myth that began to spread among the younger generations from the end of the 1950s into a folkloristic phenomenon. They also contributed to divulgation of the common code for flower children, *provos* and Teddy boys, a libertarian phenomenology that was readily identifiable.

However, the public was offered a very simplified version of youth –unkempt, without ideals, rooted in *carpe diem* and surely destined for failure and social marginalisation– and this became the most prominent leitmotiv in the press. In Italy, for example, the media wasted no opportunity to associate episodes of micro-criminality (taking drugs, sexual freedoms, running away and attending hippie get-togethers) with the concrete protests promoting radical changes to the conformist society, which was strongly anchored to the old ideals and frameworks. This was the view touted by the media, who missed the most significant development in the 1960s –the youth taking on a new role, becoming visible in «other» agorà, beyond the traditional spaces for protest (generally represented by the workplace and the mythology of the factory, with its inhuman rhythms). Despite the prevailing consumerism, new vast abysses of material and moral poverty began to come to light. Like an underground river, criticism of neo-capitalism –alienating and devoid of any ethical frame of reference– began to emerge in unusual places, outside the usual forums for political debate. In the vast iconography of the 1960s, such spaces (classrooms, corridors squares and courtyards) became something else –the setting for a huge seismic shift in the status quo. This upheaval was aimed not only at overturning the existing, obsolete pedagogical stereotypes, but also at constructing a new and different sociality in educational environments; schools, universities and cultural centres and associations became active components in a profound metamorphosis –they changed their role and became the theatre and mouthpiece for the protests against the preferred target of the youth movement, namely the authoritarianism that

pervaded the entire society. Constant presence in these spaces and participation in the student movements with conviction and enthusiasm were now experienced differently with respect to the constructive experiences of occupations. In fact, they tended to express, in a radical way, the complexity of the social processes in which young people were involved wholly and globally.

By virtue of the innovative and polymorphic model of understanding life and relationships between individuals put into practice by the younger generations, the stirrings of unrest began to erode the monolithic underpinnings of the bourgeois hold on power. Likewise, that wilful demonization of youth promoted by the mass media, whose seductive sirens contributed to the construction of an image of scandalous perversity driven towards the destruction of the traditional values upon which American society had been built long ago, began to change. Though they had long remained in the limbo of alarmism, dissonant voices on the positive aspects of the wave of protests that swept over the universities and filled the public gathering places were raised, and the media began to make profitable use of a completely opposing point of view.

In the essays that follow, several «red threads» running through the analysis and research into the long Sixties are opportunely outlined. First and foremost, it is essential to emphasize the role of the media. Indeed, through published images and the construction of the new myths and icons, the media played a fundamental role in shaping the minds of a large section of the young people who were, for the first time, getting involved in political discussion and social participation. Secondly, several books played an important role, becoming cornerstones of the vast cultural melting pot of the 1960s, in which a heterogenous, global mix of novels, philosophical treatises and sociological theories were fused together in varying proportions. From a structural point of view, several essays indicate the fundamental importance of the increase in student numbers from the end of the 1950s. The consequent discomfort (crowded lecture rooms, dormitories, halls of residence, canteens, expensive books) relegated the student as a mere passive user of the education system, subordinate to the class of omnipotent university «barons». The construction of a shared imaginary that developed at this time is also explored. This was fuelled by behaviours such as Third-Worldism, Pacifism, Feminism and the demand for civil rights, as an attempt was made to unite the utopian desire to change the world and a recognition of a strong subjectivity, expressed through political action. Last, but by no means least, focussed attention on the great protest movements that suddenly exploded in the *annus mirabilis* 1968, highlighted relevant geographical and political differences between them. These depended on the countries involved, and whether they were mature democracies or totalitarian dictatorships, factors which are discussed.

Without fear of being debunked, we can affirm that the Sixties were years of great illusions and decisive battles. These sowed the seeds destined to bear fruit in the decades to come, and, perhaps completely unknowingly at the time, constructed a new way of being a citizen of the world.