

Young Lives on the Left: Sixties Activism and the Liberation of the Self

Celia Hughes

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Post–World War II British youth coming of age during the 1960s and '70s had to navigate their journeys to adulthood through a society rocked by massive change. Celia Hughes's *Young Lives on the Left*, based on interviews with people from varied backgrounds who were radical leftist activists during those years, paints a compelling and sympathetic picture of young people who believed that they must, and could, change the world.

They were also seeking their place in a society divided between those who embraced change and traditionalists who clung to a way of life threatened by the collapse of the British Empire. Although post-Empire British radicalism escaped much of the violence seen in the United States and continental Europe, conflict was inevitable. A “search for belonging” became part of the narrative for these activists, and revolutionary socialism, with its call to remedy the contradictions and inequities of the larger world, coupled with its aura of belonging to a radical minority, was attractive to many.

Meeting in living rooms and pubs, young activists shared their ideas and feelings about the changing attitudes toward class, education, sexuality, and the role of the individual in society. Gender roles and relations were in flux, and Hughes's book is credited with being the first to explore how the women's liberation movement, with its challenge to thousands of years of male domination, affected the Left.

While the book is a grim reminder that some of the same battles are still being fought today, it's not about “the loss of a sense of the possible”; a good number of Hughes's interviewees are still politically active. Their struggles and accomplishments provide today's activists an opportunity to learn from the achievements and the mistakes of their predecessors.

KRISTINE MORRIS (July/August 2018)

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