Book Review: The Spirit of the Sixties

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The Spirit of the Sixties: The Making of Postwar Radicalism by James J. Farrell. New York and London: Routledge, 1997. hardcover $70.00. paperback $19.95.

The Sixties, that magical decade now so long ago, continues to stir interest in my students today. When I show them a film like *The War at Home* that covers anti-war activity at the University of Wisconsin, many profess shock at the brutality inflicted on student protesters by the police. Others volunteer that if these things were going on now, they too would be in the streets. Many want more information. But where to begin? After all, which 60s are we talking about? In his preface, Farrell recognizes this dilemma when he writes, "Although I am exhausted, this book is by no means exhaustive. I have not tried to write about all of the Sixties; I have only unraveled the thread of personalist politics."

By unraveling the thread of personalist politics, Farrell reconstructs it into the unifying theme of his book. He defines personalism as "a combination of Catholic social thought, communitarian anarchism, radical pacifism, and humanistic psychology...too unorganized to be a philosophy or an ideology...more a creed than a catechism, more a perspective than a particular position." Farrell's approach is deeply historical by which I mean that he provides not only an interpretation of the history of the decade but traces back the roots of the decade itself. Contrary to some writers who see the 60s as a radical break with the past, Farrell is smart enough to understand that decades draw on earlier countercurrents when can later emerge as dominant themes. Farrell examines these countercurrents in detail, especially the Catholic Worker Movement, the Beat Poets, the early Civil Rights Movement, and groups that focused on war and the insanity of nuclear weapons.

Countercurrent adherents shared the view that something was deeply wrong. In different mixes, from different histories and perspectives, and with different emphases, each saw society as alienating, conformist, materialistic, insensitive to the dignity of the person, and deeply hypocritical. Ironically, the very self-righteousness of society's spokesmen (and they were nearly all men) rebounded back in the form of resistance. Heavy handed anti-communism and blustery proclamations of America as the greatest and freest country led some people to ask questions. Why in such a great nation can't millions of Black people vote? Why are they denied the use of restrooms on interstate highways? Why must they sit in the back of the bus? Why does substandard housing exist? Why are there undernourished children? Why are so many jobs dead-end, unfulfilling, and socially useless? Why is so much spent on weapons of mass destruction and for what do our leaders seem so willing to sacrifice the lives of millions in nuclear holocaust? And later, isn't destroying Vietnam to save it insane?

Farrell begins his chapter on the Catholic Workers with the line, "The Sixties arguably began...on the 15th of June, 1955." It was the day of Operation Alert, an official national civil defense drill. Dorothy Day and 27 others from the Catholic Workers, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and the War Resisters League stayed above ground

and were arrested in protest against nuclear weapons and the official sham that such weapons were survivable. Farrell provides a detailed history of the Catholic Workers and their founders Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin. He explains that their pacifism, anarchism, and commitment to the downtrodden were one of the important models and inspirations for the 60s. As Farrell puts it, "Catholic Workers identified the issues of the sixties before the Sixties began, and they offered models of protest long before the protest decade."

Farrell's chapter on the Beats also begins in 1955 with Allen Ginsburg reading *Howl* in San Francisco. The Beats wanted to reclaim poetry killed by war, academics, neglect, lack of love, and disinterest. In the process they contributed to the reclaiming of America's soul. Farrell identifies Kenneth Rexroth as a key older figure who influenced Ginsburg, Snyder, Ferlinghetti, and Kerouac. The poetic currents fused with the comedy of Sahl and Bruce, the satires of *Mad* and *The Realist*, and the singing of Dylan, Baez, and others to create an alternative way of seeing based on literature, social criticism, personalist compassion, and cultural politics.

The Catholic Workers and the Beats shared a vision in integrating spirituality and politics. This was a vision also practiced by Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement. Both made world headlines with the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 (a good year, it seems). Farrell traces the development of King's personalist philosophy, first at the Crozer Theological Seminary and later in his graduate studies in Boston. Farrell highlights the key role played by Bayard Rustin in introducing King to A.J. Muste and Dave Dellinger and other pacifists, and in developing King's commitment to non-violent direct action. King's early opposition to nuclear weapons and, later, to the Vietnam War were powerful expressions of that commitment. Farrell argues that nonviolent direct action as practiced by King and his supporters was a major expression of the personalist philosophy of social change that animated the Civil Rights Movement for at least a decade.

Farrell's last chapter on the 50s roots of the 60s is on *Liberation* magazine which published its first issue in 1956 and quickly became a forum for the expression of personalist dissent. Farrell traces the personalist politics of three of the founders and editors of *Liberation* — Muste, Dellinger, and Paul Goodman, and he develops the connections between *Liberation*, the Committee for Nonviolent Action, and Women's Strike for Peace.

Much of this came together in the 60s through SDS, the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, and the campus rebellions. Farrell writes that "When students enrolled for lessons on principled dissent and social activism, they turned, not to the Old Left of the postwar period, but to the civil rights movement, the Beat movement, and the ban-the-bomb movement." Personalist politics was not the only model and inspiration for the student movement, but it was a major one, and Farrell ably traces the history of personalist politics on the nation's campuses.

The influence of personalism persisted strong into the mid-60s but broke down in the late 60s because of pressures and defeats which personalist approaches could

not contain. The bitterness following the defeat of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at the 1964 Democratic Party convention was one factor. Liberal support for the Vietnam War was another. The slow pace of change and the disillusionment of some with personalist politics as inefficient, unworkable, and doomed to failure were others. The ghetto revolts spoke powerfully of the frustrations of minority poor people while the King assassination highlighted the determination of the conservative resistance. These developments are explored by Farrell in his chapter "The Vietnamization of Personalism."

In his last chapter "Countercultural Personalism" Farrell considers the counterculture and the politics of dropping out — a kind of self-directed and self-indulgent personalism often — though not always — without the incisive political critique and personal engagement in issues characteristic of earlier variants. Farrell traces the influence of Maslow and the humanist psychologists and goes on to examine the drug culture, the politics of irrationality, the role of rock, Haight-Ashbury, the Diggers, communal farms, and Yuppies. He writes with open eyes, giving credit where credit is due, while criticizing the naivete, the ease of cooptation, and the sexism which came to permeate much of the drop-out scene.

In his epilogue Farrell considers whether or not we can find current expressions of 60s personalist politics. He says we can in aspects of feminism, the environmental movement, the anti-nuclear movement, and local protest movements. Here the search for dignity, challenges to corporate and governmental power, and the struggle for a better, saner, safer, and more just world continues.

Farrell covers a lot of ground and covers it well though important parts of the 60s story are left out. There is scarcely a mention of Malcolm X, the Weathermen, and the Black Panther Party. But this is not a major criticism because we have to keep mind that Farrell set a definite, limited task for himself and that was examine the roots of personalist politics and to trace their influence on the social movements of the 60s. Farrell has done his homework and written a lively, well-crafted and informative book on that topic. It has my recommendation.

Ordinarily, this would be the end of the review, but I would like to go on a bit more. Last year I had one of my students read Farrell's book and write a report. This student, we'll call her Sue, is white and about 35. She has three young children and is married to a technician employed by a utility company. Once, when she was a child, Sue asked her mother why Uncle Lloyd had painted a peace sign on his bedroom wall and received the answer, "Because he's a goddamn freak." For Sue, looking back from the present, her mother's reaction "symbolized the paradox that existed between the movements and the people they intended to move." Sue continues in her paper:

Here was this single mother with three children. No court could make my father pay child support, and no government agency would pay for child care so she could work.

Sometimes she worked "off the books" doing odd jobs, mostly cleaning of some sort. We (the kids) would fall asleep in office buildings to the sound of her vacuuming and be woken long after midnight. I have a particularly vivid memory of one night watching

her press the collars of men's shirts. She had a disgusted look on her face and I asked her what was wrong. "These filthy pigs," she said, and she help up a shirt to show me a heavily stained collar. She looked like she would vomit from the thought that she held in her hand a strange man's shirt, a dirty man as far as she could tell. Only now as an adult can I truly comprehend how she felt that night, how symbolic that collar was to her. Anyway, a song came on the radio. It was Sonny and Cher's "I Got You, Babe." As music filled the tiny room, streams of tears slid down her cheeks. I didn't say anything. I just sat and watched a lifetime of regret wash over her face while she pressed the collars of those shirts.

Looking back on that night, and about how she felt about Uncle Lloyd, I find it both ironic and reasonable that she had no faith in the politics of that time. If anyone knew the pain of marginalized people, it was my mother. My father, the ultimate capitalist, walked away with her dreams and all his money. He cheated on his taxes so that he showed very little income, and he hired the best attorney money could buy to defeat her in court. But then again, let down by so many, so often, how could she believe in anything? How much room is there for self-actualization and personhood when there's no food on the table, or no hot water in the shower?

So after reading *Spirit*, I am still left with the same questions that are often in my mind. How do you empower people? How do you empower those in poverty? Oppressed by racism? How do we disempower the ruling class?

These are serious questions that go beyond mere technique. They raise issues of class and culture because the crusaders for justice are seldom from the same class groups as those whose lives they seek to better. The practitioners of personalist politics were bold enough to pose the questions and to seek the answers. Some, like the Catholic Workers, SNCC, and SCLC, in my view, provided better answers than others. The movements themselves are now gone but the questions remain. While Farrell never says so directly, part of his message, I believe, is that we should now pose the questions once again, provide answers appropriate to our circumstances, and act on them.

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