
AHR Reflections
Canada's "1968" and Historical Sensibilities

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SYMBOLIZING MORE THAN A SINGULAR DATE, 1968 was an international phenomenon. From Paris to New York, from Mexico City to Karachi, students, workers, and peasants mobilized and marched against war and imperialist aggression, for rights, entitlements, and participatory democracy, opposing bureaucratic officialdoms and effete elites.

If '68ers did not always articulate clearly what they were *for*, they certainly knew what they were *against*. "It was right to rebel" echoed across barricades and throughout sit-ins. Just how this dissonance sounded, however, always reverberated with the peculiarities of specific locales.

Canada's 1968 was no different. The Combined Universities Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, founded in 1959, morphed into the "student syndicalism" of 1964's Student Union for Peace Action (SUPA).¹ Montreal, the centerpiece of Québécois radical nationalist grievance, fostered a C. L. R. James-influenced Caribbean struggle against racism. Fed up with discriminatory treatment, West Indian students occupied the Sir George Williams University computer complex in January–February 1969. Mayhem ensued. Campus property burned, millions of dollars going up in smoke. Almost 100 arrests followed, with roughly half of those charged being black.²

Twenty months later, Canada would be rocked by the October Crisis. Two Front de libération du Québec (FLQ) cells kidnapped a British High Commission staffer and the Quebec minister of labor and immigration. Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau invoked the War Measures Act. When it was confirmed that Pierre Laporte, the provincial minister, had been murdered, civil liberties were jettisoned. Canada's reputation as a "Peaceable Kingdom" wilted, "leaving us," in the words of the poet laureate of the Canadian Left, Al Purdy, "where I never wanted to be / in a different country."³

This new political landscape gave rise to much more, including the modern Cana-

¹ Myrna Kostash, *Long Way from Home: The Story of the Sixties Generation in Canada* (Toronto, 1980).

² Marcel Martel, "Riot' at Sir George Williams: Giving Meaning to Student Dissent," in Lara Campbell, Dominique Clément, and Gregory S. Kealey, eds., *Debating Dissent: Canada and the Sixties* (Toronto, 2012), 97–114.

³ Al Purdy, "The Peaceable Kingdom," in Abraham Rotstein, ed., *Power Corrupted: The October Crisis and the Repression of Quebec* (Toronto, 1971), 58–61.



FIGURE 1: Police toss demonstrators to the curb during a student demonstration in front of the U.S. Consulate on University Avenue in Toronto, March 16, 1965. Photograph by Gerry Barker. Toronto Star Photograph Archive, courtesy of Toronto Public Library.

dian women's movement. Maggie Benston's samizdat-like essay, eventually published as "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation," approached domestic labor by fusing Marxism and feminism; it was read around the world between 1967 and 1970. A pioneering declaration of women's liberation, "Sisters, Brothers, Lovers . . . Listen!," was authored by four SUPA women. Its insistence that the personal was at the foundation of all political struggle meshed well with the rise of a gay rights movement that, largely subdued in 1968, would emerge in the 1970s and 1980s, schooled in the language and practices of 1960s liberation struggles.⁴

A Red Power movement, like Quebec's FLQ, gravitated to revolutionary anticolonialist theory, drawing inspiration from militants such as the Black Panthers. Refusal to bow to coerced assimilation and the constraints of an apartheid-like indigenous people's containment was voiced in 1969 with the publication of Harold Cardinal's *The Unjust Society*. This would continue in the 1970s writings of the Métis Marxist and organizer of a cross-Canada caravan of aboriginal protest Howard Adams.

⁴ Margaret Benston, "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation," *Monthly Review* 21, no. 4 (1969): 13–27; Judy Bernstein, Peggy Morton, Linda Seese, and Myrna Wood, "Sisters, Brothers, Lovers . . . Listen!," in *Women Unite! An Anthology of the Canadian Women's Movement* (Toronto, 1972), 31–39; Tim McCaskell, *Queer Progress: From Homophobia to Homonationalism* (Toronto, 2016).

Armed standoffs and blockades pitted indigenous activists against the colonial state, reaching from Kenora (1974) to Oka (1990) to Ipperwash/Stoney Point (1995).⁵

Canada's 1960s saw various social movements and campaigns push governing authority to grant limited but significant concessions, either immediately or subsequently. Extra-parliamentary mobilizations were not alone responsible for shifting the legislative terrain and political discourse of the times. But they did influence change. University life altered irreversibly; the Quebec-Canada relation was redrawn; abortion laws were reformed; welfare provisioning expanded; native land claims, still resisted, began to secure a better hearing in the courts; specific sexual acts were taken out of the criminal code; same-sex marriage was eventually recognized. Norms changed. The 1950s were superseded; the 1960s gave way to the 1970s and beyond.

1968's promise was nevertheless far from complete. In the regulation and repression of class struggle, the much-heralded 1960s announcements of Canadian worker-student alliances and radical support of combative labor (which helped kick off the tumultuous 1960s with a wave of youthful wildcat strikes in 1964–1966) have faded somewhat.⁶ The dismantling of the post-World War II regime of industrial pluralism and the rise of a neoliberalism pushing all mainstream politics to the right (including the New Democratic Party, whose historic claims to be socialist appear increasingly threadbare) have normalized austerity's constraints. Trade union entitlements have been dismantled or are at risk.⁷

How did the changed post-1968 landscape affect the writing of Canadian history? One answer is that everything was different after the 1960s. Another response is that historical sensibilities have not quite sustained the original dissident momentum.

Between the early 1960s and the 1970s, Canadian historical writing shifted gears. In 1965, a *Canadian Historical Review* article suggested that interpreting Canadian history through analysis of class was a non-starter.⁸ A decade later, the study of workers was an avant-garde field, with innovative scholarly articles and monographs in the making. *Labour/Le Travail*, a new journal, would eventually publish the writing of or find places on its editorial masthead for at least eight of the thirteen Canadian Historical Association (CHA) presidents between 1997 and 2018. Study of the "limited identities" of class, ethnicity, and region was embraced enthusiastically by younger historians attuned to the climate of 1968.⁹ Soon this trilogy of identities to be researched expanded to include race, women, gender, and sexual orientation. This was part of a New Left turn toward what Jesse Lemisch in the United States called "the inarticulate." Lemisch's critique of the historical profession's resistance to the radical impulse of 1968 was published by New Hogtown Press, a Toronto enterprise born of the impulses of the 1960s.¹⁰

⁵ Bryan D. Palmer, *Canada's 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era* (Toronto, 2009), chap. 10; Scott Rutherford, "Canada's Other Red Scare: The Anicababe Park Occupation and Indigenous Decolonization," in Dan Berger, ed., *The Hidden 1970s: Histories of Radicalism* (New Brunswick, N.J., 2010), 77–94.

⁶ Palmer, *Canada's 1960s*, chap. 7; Ian Milligan, *Rebel Youth: 1960s Labour Unrest, Young Workers, and New Leftists in English Canada* (Vancouver, B.C., 2014).

⁷ Leo Panitch and Donald Swartz, *The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms: From Wage Controls to Social Contract*, 2nd ed. (Toronto, 1993).

⁸ S. R. Mealing, "The Concept of Social Class and the Interpretation of Canadian History," *Canadian Historical Review* 46, no. 3 (1965): 201–218.

⁹ J. M. S. Careless, "Limited Identities' in Canada," *Canadian Historical Review* 50, no. 1 (1969): 1–10.

¹⁰ Jesse Lemisch, *On Active Service in War and Peace: Politics and Ideology in the American Historical Profession* (Toronto, 1975).

Not all Canadian historians followed suit. Patrician social democrat Kenneth McNaught and a younger, more conservative Michael Bliss were aghast. McNaught deplored the Bible-like status of E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) among "aspiring New Left labour historians," and regarded Herbert G. Gutman and the Students for a Democratic Society alike as "trying to resurrect the anarchic stream in American radicalism." Bliss, whose relationships with radical students at the time were more congenial than he perhaps later remembered, bemoaned the era's "appalling" debris. His epitaph was blunt: "Evil times."¹¹

Good nevertheless came out of the tumult. Labor history may well be flagging, but histories of women, gender, and sexuality are not. History's actual unfolding has produced new boundaries within which the past is interpreted. The study of laboring people, related to 1968's radicalization, became a major field of inquiry in the 1970s and early 1980s precisely because the loose *marxisant* social history of this period grew out of a sense that the working class was a decisive agent of social transformation. In subsequent decades, class seemed defeated. This jaundiced assessment was reinforced by the implosion of "actually existing socialism" and the demise of the Soviet Union. If this was not "the end of history," in Francis Fukuyama's formulation, how history was to be understood was for many altered. Postmodernism, with its critique of all master narratives, its embrace of diversity and difference, and its insistence on power's discursive character, provided an alternative to class analysis and class politics. New critical theory seemed especially congruent with research into subjects such as gender, sexuality, and even race: oppression flowed as much from subjective social constructions as out of objective, structurally determined relations of economic inequality.

The particularity of Canada in this relation of history and historiography could be illuminated with reference to aboriginal history. If there is a dominant field of Canadian historical inquiry in 2018, it is the study of indigenous peoples. Why has this happened, and how does it relate to 1968?

One answer might be that more indigenous people are availing themselves of the opportunities afforded by universities, itself a phenomenon associated with the 1960s expansion of higher education. Important histories and related research have been produced by indigenous scholars such as Kiera L. Ladner, Lee Maracle, Glen Sean Coulthard, Gerald Taiaiake Alfred, Audra Simpson, and the late Arthur Manuel. Publications build on analyses, practices, and struggles of 1960s-influenced Red Power. They resonate with the high-profile aboriginal issues received through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2008–2015), the recent Idle No More uprising, and the ongoing protests/grievances arising from the state's mishandling of an inquiry into missing and murdered aboriginal girls and women.¹²

Indigenous history also looks back productively to the SUPA activists of the mid-1960s and their later counterparts in the Company of Young Canadians, however dif-

¹¹ Kenneth McNaught, *Conscience and History: A Memoir* (Toronto, 1999), 190–192, quotes from 190; McNaught, "E. P. Thompson vs. Harold Logan: Writing about Labour and the Left in the 1970s," *Canadian Historical Review* 62, no. 2 (1981): 141–168; Michael Bliss, *Writing History: A Professor's Life* (Toronto, 2011), 143–147, quotes from 145, 146. For an alternative view more sympathetic to the New Left, see Gregory S. Kealey, "Community, Politics, and History: My Life as a Historian," *Canadian Historical Review* 97, no. 3 (2016): 404–425.

¹² See, for instance, Lee Maracle, *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel* (Toronto, 1990); Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis, 2014); Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham, N.C., 2014).

ferent were their respective relations with the state. These young rebels recognized the injustice that native peoples lived under, and they struggled to address it. If their interactions with indigenous peoples were often ill-conceived, their experiences in working directly with native and Métis populations, both in cities and on reserves, and the criticisms and counsel they received from aboriginal men and women prompted them to see colonialism in new ways.¹³

The historiography of aboriginal peoples in Canada has thus developed, in part, out of the conjuncture of a specific post-1960s history and the consequent changes in interpretive sensibilities. Race and gender are now analytic categories of unrivaled significance. Revelations of the abuses aboriginal people suffered in late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century residential schools, often regarded as working to "kill the Indian in the child," or during the "sixties scoop," when indigenous children were removed from their homes by government agencies, ostensibly for their protection, kept issues of racism and colonialism alive in both the historical and political consciousness of Canadians long after 1968's radicalizing moment had passed.¹⁴ The public recognition of these "national crimes" was undoubtedly related to political reckonings that surfaced prominently in the 1960s, when Canada's First Nations were initially recognized as having a unique "Citizens Plus" status.¹⁵

Diverse historiographies now elevate parts of Canada's past that somehow seem larger than a chimerical whole. This is what alienated Canadian historians such as Bliss, McNaught, and Jack Granatstein, committed as they were to a national historiography that might highlight accomplishment and advance as expressed in a singular progressive state.¹⁶ Metaphorically, 1968 did nothing if not interrogate/destabilize this national, collective, accomplishment. It pivoted *against* the flattening, homogenizing reduction of history to a study of power's achievements. This was social history's *oppositional* moment, and it rode the dissent and disturbance that defined 1968.

Meanwhile, 1968's policy-inducing impact, although it could not be entirely suppressed, was certainly sidetracked. Canadian history of the last fifty years is in part a record of governing authority adapting to the demands of the 1960s only to ultimately curtail their full realization, restructuring in the name of restraint. This ideological march to the right has been obfuscated with the rituals and rhetoric of a politics of recognition. Nowhere is this more evident than in the now-quintessential Canadian state façade fronting concern for the injustice that native peoples have endured. Hundreds of royal commissions and government reports/inquiries have addressed issues of First Nations and Métis men, women, and children since the 1960s. The central accomplishment of this performative political intervention is some small measure of improvement in the lives of indigenous people against the larger backdrop of the

¹³ Murray Dobbin, *The One-and-a-Half Men: The Story of Jim Brady and Malcolm Norris, Métis Patriots of the Twentieth Century* (Vancouver, B.C., 1981), 224–235; Joan Sangster, "Confronting Colonialism: The History of Indigenous-Settler Alliances in Canada," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 28 (forthcoming 2018).

¹⁴ John S. Milloy, *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879 to 1986* (Winnipeg, 1999).

¹⁵ Alan C. Cairns, *Citizens Plus: Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian State* (Vancouver, B.C., 2001).

¹⁶ Michael Bliss, "Has Canada Failed? National Dreams That Have Not Come True," *Literary Review of Canada* 14, no. 2 (2006): 3–5; Bliss, "Privatizing the Mind: The Sundering of Canadian History, the Sundering of Canada," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 26, no. 4 (1991–1992): 5–17; J. L. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto, 1999).

state's cultivation of legitimation, measured out in the appearance of substantive relations of reciprocity.

Something akin to this may well be unfolding in how history is currently being written. Much of the hot, often inflamed but always exhilarating air of 1968 has gone out of the historiographic balloon. Debate among historians in Canada is almost non-existent.¹⁷ New fields, such as environmental history, have consolidated productively, but not necessarily in ways that give rise to much controversy. Contentment with diversity's dimensions, which are admittedly rich and varied, threatens to return us to the homogeneities of a past seemingly buried, one in which the virtues of Canada's unique mythology are again extolled, our history summoned up to confirm the best in seemingly commonly recognized traditions of reasoned tolerance and reconciliation. The historiography of the early to mid-1960s was, in part, characterized by its self-satisfactions, however antiquated. Destabilizing this was one of 1968's small accomplishments. But contemporary Canadian historiography seems in danger of relapsing into its own kind of progressive consensual complacency. This threatens to mask difference in the realm of ideas and strategic understandings of how we achieve political change by extolling difference as arguably the preeminent analytic category, a move always destined to be derailed by arguments that specific stronger differences *must* take priority over seemingly weaker ones.

There is thus an undeniable tension at the core of modern, post-1968 Canadian history *and* the historiography that has paralleled this development. Canada has evolved out of 1960s influences, and this rebellious decade spawned irreversible change. The writing of history was also reconfigured. Yet amid an undeniable reworking of important dimensions of everyday life, and however much Canadian historiography pays lip service to the values and commitments that once spoke in the loud, rancorous cries of a rebellious decade, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. 1968 is still with us at the same time that it now seems long ago.

¹⁷ Note the comments on "debatophobia" in Joan Sangster, *Through Feminist Eyes: Essays on Canadian Women's History* (Athabasca, Alta., 2011), 30–35.

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