



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1983 Volume IV: America in the Sixties: Culture and Counter-Culture

Introduction

Teaching very recent American history is an experience possessed of its own peculiar rewards and frustrations. This is because, for better or worse, we care about the recent past much more than distant events. The study of recent American history is bound up inextricably with our own individual biographies, and, as a consequence, it takes on a special emotional charge which can both energize inquiry and present difficult barriers to clear thinking. These special problems and possibilities are heightened even further when one attempts to teach the history of the 1960s, a period of especially bitter conflict and lasting impact. In my own teaching, I have found that students rarely sleep when the subject is the sixties; indeed, the challenge is to avoid simply recreating in the classroom the very confrontations that took place in the streets of the sixties.

Many teachers never have the opportunity to meet this challenge. Survey courses in American history never seem to quite make it to the recent past, and those who teach in related fields seldom have the chance to integrate the history of the sixties into their curriculum. It was my good fortune to work with a group of teachers determined to overcome these obstacles. These curriculum units are the fruit of their effort to seize the rewards of teaching about “America in the Sixties.”

In our seminar we focused on the key “countercultural” movements in the sixties: the black struggle for civil rights and ethnic identity, student radicalism, opposition to the War in Vietnam, the drug culture of the hippies, and feminism. Our discussions were spirited affairs, and I would be remiss if I said we were able to avoid altogether the temptation to reconstruct in our small circle the very polemics we were studying. Nonetheless, I think these units testify to our unrelenting effort to subject our political and moral hopes and fears to the discipline of rational discourse.

In their curriculum units some teachers have centered their attention directly on the topics of our seminar discussions, while others have explored related issues. Karen Wolff’s unit provides an overview of many of the questions and problems we examined and makes use of the sort of documents we ourselves found most affecting. Joan Rapczynski and Florence Zywockinsky join Henry Rhodes in addressing the historical and moral issues raised by the War in Vietnam. Judy DiGrazia and Belinda Carberry offer courses on two of the most important and powerful forms of cultural expression of the sixties, rock and roll music and the “new journalism.” Finally, Willie Elder and Sheila Troppe pose some of the critical questions raised by the revolution in electronic technology that has transformed American life since World War II, changing the way we look at the world and the way the world (or at least the FBI) looks at us.

What these units share, despite their disparate topics, is an underlying passion, variously expressed, to alert young people in as an imaginative way as possible to the issues raised by the political and cultural conflicts of the sixties, conflicts that have been deflected or buried but not resolved. They share as well a concern that

without the critical intelligence and historical sensibility that quality education imparts these conflicts will long remain unresolved. These units are, in short, compelling evidence that the history of the sixties belongs in the curriculum of our schools.

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