

# TEACHING THE SIXTIES: POLITICS, PEDAGOGY AND THE MEANING OF A DECADE<sup>1</sup>

**Lorenzo Costaguta**  
University of Birmingham

*The Sixties: a collage of fragments scooped together as if a whole decade took place in an instant.*

Todd Gitlin (1987, 3)

The Department of History where I work offers to its second-year students a selection of fifteen optional modules per term. With around two hundred and fifty students per year, this means that normally each module enrolls fifteen to twenty of them. The usual arithmetic fell apart when, two years ago, the department decided to start a module on the Sixties in the United States. The first year it was on offer, eighty-two students (a third of the whole second-year History cohort) indicated the module as their first choice, fifty as their second choice.<sup>2</sup> You may think that the success of the module was caused by the popularity of the person that was going to teach it, but that was not the case. For one very simple reason: when the module was offered, the person who was meant to design and run it had not been appointed yet.

When I took up my current job, one of the first tasks I was asked to complete was to design and convene the brand-new module “The Sixties: ‘Years of Hope, Days of Fear.’” In the pages that follow, I offer some considerations based on my experience designing, delivering, and revising one of the most popular history modules offered by my department. The incredible popularity of the United States and the Sixties in British academia is a relatively minor indicator of the enduring success that this topic continues to have both among scholars of U.S. history and literature, in school education and the general public. Compounded in its success are surely the fascination for cultural myths and icons like the Beatles, John Fitzgerald and Robert Kennedy, or Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and the enormous significance of the political events and changes that started in those ten years, from the Vietnam War to sexual liberation to the struggles for racial equality. At the same time—and perhaps more importantly for scholars of the period—the success is motivated by the persistent difficulty to furnish comprehensive and undisputed descriptions of the decade,

---

<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to thank the co-editors of the issue Marta Gara and Virginia Pignagnoli for their support in the planning and editing of the article; Tom Bishop for comments on earlier drafts; and the students of my 2017 and 2018 Sixties classes at the University of Birmingham, whose constructive and insightful participation gave me the primary material to write this article.

<sup>2</sup> These numbers were collected by a colleague working on module allocation for the academic year 2017/18. Second-year option modules consist of three contact hours per week and seven hours of independent study.

from its sudden and unexpected inception to its multiple and contradictory legacies to the roles of its numerous and cumbersome protagonists.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of this essay is to investigate some of the pedagogical possibilities that a decade so rich with meanings and with a literature so sophisticated and varied can offer. I aim to reflect on some of the challenges that I have encountered in transmitting specific concepts and ideas to students, perhaps exploring what these difficulties could mean in the contemporary political scenario and in the context of contemporary American Studies. At the same time, I will explore ways in which simplistic narratives can be challenged and how the teaching of the decade can be innovated through the use of recent literature. This advice I offer will focus on three main points. The first is what to make of the (alleged) prior knowledge of the course topic brought to the class by the students themselves. Next, I will turn to the tension between two crucial concepts that run parallel in the historical exploration of the Sixties: the “cultural” and the “political.” Teaching the Sixties means finding the right equilibrium between debating the cultural production of the decade and exploring its dense political history, made of popular grassroots movement and broader paradigmatic shifts on a national level. At the same time, it means instructing students on the multiple meanings that the idea of “political” incorporates. Finally, I will conclude with two considerations on how to change and innovate teaching the Sixties, especially when discussed in the potentially “claustrophobic” context of a U.S. history module. I will suggest that countering the “declension” narrative—the idea that the Sixties were a “failure”—is crucial to shifting the conversation on the period. At the same time, framing the U.S. Sixties in the context of the “global Sixties” is a crucial way to expose students to multi-linear and problematized explanations on the origins, development, and legacies of the decade.<sup>4</sup>

#### BUILDING KNOWLEDGE FROM PREVIOUS KNOWLEDGE

Each year, I start my module with an icebreaker exercise. First, I ask students to raise their hands if they know the name of a President who took office during the Sixties. Then I ask about a singer who became famous during the decade; artistic trends that started in the period; political leaders who died between 1960 and 1970. In each of these cases, most hands go up with no hesitation. Sometimes, I ask students to mention famous events happening in the decade: music festivals, demonstrations, protests, etc. Answers abound. They all want to say something, and the most knowledgeable students would strive to include in the list some event beyond the most notorious ones like the Selma march, the Summer of Love, or Woodstock. When the room is relaxed and on board, I turn to another question: now, who can answer the same questions for the Fifties, or the Thirties, or the Twenties in

---

<sup>3</sup> Despite the incredibly high quality of the literature produced so far, syntheses of the decade, primary source readers and essay collections continue to be published at a significant rate. A selection of volumes published include Farber (1994); Bloom (2001); Isserman and Kazin (2003); Lytle (2006); Green (2010); Ward (2010).

<sup>4</sup> This article joins a rich and growing literature on how to teach the Sixties in the U.S. See especially Bailey and Farber (2006); Lekus (2006); Levy (2004); Liebermann (2019).

the United States? Panic ensues. Some hands go up for the presidents. On singers, artistic trends, and politicians assassinated, I normally receive perplexed looks. I can try to draw a list of notable events, but it will never be close in length to the list compiled for the Sixties. This exercise helps me getting across the point that the Sixties are an exceptional decade. I want students to immediately realize that the Sixties is a period like no other. Regardless of individual backgrounds, I want them to reflect on the fact that each of them already has a structured idea of what the decade was about, be it its cultural production or its political and social impact.

The first time I taught the module, I thought my objective was to “destroy” these ideas and replace them with better informed ones. I was aware that, for many of them, the source of these ideas were GCSE or A-level classes on the Civil Rights Movement or the Cold War, contexts in which often unproblematized and rigid narratives of the events were taught.<sup>5</sup> Across the years, I came to realize that my approach was all wrong. A pillar of the social constructivist approach to teaching is to “providing students with opportunities of ‘constructing’ their own knowledge and skills through practical experience in real-life or modeled activities” (Tarnopolsky 2012).<sup>6</sup> In the context of my module, applying this method meant allowing students to construct their own understanding of the Sixties *relying* on what they already knew. In practice, this meant using their knowledge and building on it, facilitating from afar the “problematization” of the module content.

After realizing my mistake, I started using early classes to test the level of knowledge in the room, creating a friendly environment in which students felt confident to share their expertise on the subjects discussed. This approach was especially useful for topics students were already familiar with. The Cold War is a topic that students have often detailed knowledge of. They are experts on the steps that led to the establishment of a bipolar geopolitical order in the immediate aftermath of World War Two, and they are quite versed in debating main problems of periodization and causality (when did the Cold War start? What made it different from previous confrontations? What was the role of nuclear weaponry?). Students’ knowledge background is an excellent starting point to debate historiography on the origins and causes of the Cold War and to build a more critical understanding of the cultural and social impact of the Cold War on the domestic front in the Fifties. Starting from Cold War ideologies, students can more easily understand the dynamics of militarization of the domestic front and the oppressive nature of anti-communist propaganda. In turn, these sessions provide an excellent starting point to facilitate discussions on the start of the protests in the Sixties, from the late-Fifties anti-nuclear armaments rallies of SANE to the broader campus demonstrations of the New Left in the early Sixties.

---

<sup>5</sup> GCSE stands for General Certificate of Secondary Education. It is the certificate that English, Welsh and Northern Irish pupils receive at the end of their secondary education. The GCSE is followed by the A-Levels, a two-year course in which students pick three subjects to study in more depth. The A-Levels precede the admission to an undergraduate course. Evidence shows that the Civil Rights movement and the Cold War are two of the most studied topics in A-Level history classes across the country (Child, Darlington and Gill 2014).

<sup>6</sup> For a comparison between the different learning approaches, see Caffarella, Merriam and Baumgarten (2006).

This method—relying on students’ previous knowledge and building on it—had the added advantage of reducing my use of “lecture-style” explanations, where students just sit and listen with no active engagement.<sup>7</sup> Each student would have a different response to the problems they were presented with, based on their level of knowledge, their level of understanding of the readings, their analytical and critical skills. Whatever the conclusions students reach, I could appreciate that this method had the positive effect of leaving students gratified by the fact that their knowledge was valued and used in a meaningful way, and for those who had no prior knowledge, by the fact that they did not feel left behind, but actually looked after and brought up-to-speed with the rest of the class. In this way, prior knowledge on the Sixties stopped being “a problem” and became a resource that allowed me to have an ampler set of tools to work on specific aspects of the module. Issues like the lack of participation in class, the involvement in the conversation of silent students, or the handling of overly talkative students were made easier by this method aimed at structuring and compartmentalizing the use of previously-held students’ knowledge on the topic.

#### DESIGNING THE SYLLABUS: STUDENTS’ EXPECTATIONS AND CONFLICTING NARRATIVES

Far more complex was finding the right balance between cultural, social, and political aspects in the designing and delivering of the module. While deciding the reading list and seminar program of my module, myriads of questions came to my mind. JFK’s New Frontier must surely be discussed, but how much emphasis should I put on JFK’s neglect of civil rights? Should I cut discussions on JFK’s domestic policies altogether and dedicate some proper time to Bob Moses’s voter registration efforts instead, rather than quickly covering SNCC in the larger context of the Civil Rights movement? Everyone knows that “The Times They Are A-Changin’” is one of the hymns of the decade, but how many know that by 1965 Bob Dylan had quit writing political songs for good? Does that even matter at all? Should I deal with Second Wave Feminism before or after discussing the advent of the New Right with Richard Nixon’s 1968 victory?<sup>8</sup>

To a certain extent, the main problem with deciding which direction the module should take was one of expectations. One of the main reasons why the Sixties are so popular is their cultural impact. The endless string of singers whose career started in the Sixties is only matched by the enormous changes in fashion and social habits brought by the decade. Pop music, rock and roll, sexual emancipation, and drug use were catalyzers of a radical shift that allegedly made people forget the conservatism of the Fifties and changed Western societies for good. Chats with students made me realize that their expectation was of a

---

<sup>7</sup> The shortcomings of passive teaching methods like lectures, that do not include any sort of students’ active involvement, have been well documented since the 1970s (Dale 1969; Dale 1972; Lee and Reeves 2007).

<sup>8</sup> These questions were provoked by reading some books in preparation for the module, a selection that included Bryant 2006; Hogan 2007; Wilentz 2010.

module that focused almost exclusively on these aspects—a cultural history of the “shiny” decade that laid the foundations of our modern pop culture.

To try and put some order in the abundance of options I had and to give a response to students’ expectations, I decided to classify the material I had along four different sub-narratives, running in parallel with one another. The first one tapped straight into students’ wants. Indeed, the multitude of famous artistic icons coming out of the decade (musicians in the first place, but also poets, actors, and film directors), together with innovations in fashion and the lasting impact of a freer social attitude towards sex and recreational drugs, they all made me look for ways to emphasize the cultural and social impact of the decade.<sup>9</sup> Second, the seismic changes provoked by protest organizations like the Civil Rights movement, student movements, feminist movements, Black Power and other ethnic-minority groups, gay rights organizations, and anti-war protests invited reflections on the Sixties as the starting point of the “culture wars” still shaping our modern political debate, from identity politics to pacifism to reproductive rights.<sup>10</sup> A third line of arguments involved national politics and its changes in relation to foreign and domestic dynamics. Traditional narratives indicate the end of the Sixties as the moment in which the New Deal coalition that organized U.S. politics since the Thirties fell apart, provoking a structural realignment that put conservatives in charge of U.S. national politics. Through Richard Nixon’s and, more importantly, Ronald Reagan’s presidencies, this conservative consensus produced the neoliberal socio-cultural infrastructure that still dominates American and Western politics today.<sup>11</sup> The fourth and last narrative placed the Sixties in the context of the Cold War and debates on America’s role across the world. Without a proper consideration of the impact of the Cold War both abroad and at home, no aspect of the decade can fully be appreciated.

Eventually, I decided to structure the module so that it would reflect the attempt to give a balanced and consistent relevance to the four aspects mentioned, and to fruitfully explain the connections between them. In practical terms, sessions dedicated to one of the four narratives (a broad and sweeping introductory session on the Cold War context; sessions on Civil Rights or the women’s rights movements; a seminar on political music in San Francisco during the second half of the decade) alternated with sessions on specific events or moments that helped students understand the interconnectedness and intricacy of the multiple threads developing throughout the decade.

---

<sup>9</sup> There is a sprawling bibliography of non-academic and academic books on 1960s culture. In the preparation of the module, two useful points of reference have been Dickstein (1977) and Monteith and Halliwell (2008).

<sup>10</sup> This is a line of argument that has recently been explored by Kazin (2018). For a sustained treatment of the role of the Sixties in the history of the culture wars, see Hartman (2015).

<sup>11</sup> Although the general lines of this interpretation remain unchallenged, scholars have furnished detailed interpretations that have allowed to better understand the features of this crucial passage of U.S. history. On the one hand, scholars have investigated the history of conservatism in the Sixties to understand the origins of the present neoliberal moment (McGirr 2001; Perlstein 2001; Mason 2004; McGirr 2011). On the other hand, they have unearthed evidence to show the long origins of the crisis of New Deal liberalism. For this aspect, the reference point, although quite difficult to use for teaching purposes, is Sugrue (1996).

An example of the latter is an activity on the 1968 Democratic National Convention protests.<sup>12</sup> During one of the most momentous weeks of the decade, thousands of protestors from all over the country paraded through the streets of Chicago while the Democratic Party was deciding its Presidential candidate. The marches, unauthorized by the city mayor, attracted the violent reaction of the Chicago police. The events of Chicago broadcasted live to the houses of millions of Americans, in a moment that historians have identified as a key shift in the path towards the triumph of Richard Nixon's message of "law and order."

A session on the Chicago protests gives me a perfect opportunity to show students how the four threads I identified above intertwined inextricably. Black and white demonstrators gathered in Illinois in a last-ditch attempt to stop the nomination of "warmonger" Hubert Humphrey and set the Cold War on a new course in Vietnam. In the streets, counterculture and New Left strategies shaped the course of the protest. While Allen Ginsberg tried to calm the crowd through group meditation sessions, counterculture-inspired yippie leaders marched carrying Presidential candidate "Pigassus the Immortal," a 145-pound domestic pig, running with the slogan "They nominate a president and he eats the people. We nominate a president and the people eat him." Meanwhile, a delegation of the Black Panther Party flew from the Bay Area to Chicago, in one of the first occasions in which white and black anti-war activists tried to find a political convergence. While the police responded to protestors with ruthless violence, at the International Amphitheatre delegates of the DNC chose to ignore people on the street and went ahead with Humphrey's nomination. This outcome confirmed the irreparable fracture between the Democratic Party and the anti-war movement, in a dramatic shift that set the course of the 1968 elections and eventually brought to a close a long period of hegemony of New Deal liberalism (Farber 1988).

Pulling apart the details of the Chicago demonstrations is a fascinating task. It requires familiarity with the trajectories of several movements (the New Left, the anti-war movement, the hippie movement, black power, the Democratic Party itself), as well as knowing the biographical sketches of many of its leaders (Tom Hayden, Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, Allen Ginsberg, Hubert Humphrey, and Eugene McCarthy), while of course being able to place the events within the big picture of the Vietnam War and the Cold War. It potentially allows the class to grapple with some crucial issues of historical thinking (to what extent can a specific event change the course of history? What is the relationship between social and political/institutional history? Is a media representation of an event more important than the event itself?), while at the same time indulging in counterfactuals and alternative scenarios that test the soundness of students' analytical skills. These types of sessions allow the teacher to test students' knowledge of a set of broader

---

<sup>12</sup> I am indebted with my colleague Tom Bishop for pointing me towards the teaching potential of the 1968 Democratic National Convention.

historical problems pertaining U.S. history and its development across the twentieth century. If this background knowledge is missing, it is inevitably impossible to carry on part of the conversation.

The balance between single-narrative and multi-narrative sessions proved quite successful, and I have continued to use it across the years, each time adopting small tweaks and changes to the sessions that did not go as planned to get to the learning outcomes I had set in advance. At the same time, a healthy amount of trial and error and suggestions received from university-arranged module feedback and informal conversations with students allowed me to identify specific issues that kept me pondering about more radical changes in the module program and larger issues of perception of the decade and its role in explaining the present intellectual context—problems on which I have continued and continue to work on today.

#### THE MEANING OF THE “POLITICAL,” THEN AND NOW

Perhaps the most interesting and poignant issue to discuss is relative to the features of the concept of “political” as understood by students. Let me introduce the issue with an anecdote. During a session on the Free Speech Movement, I asked the class to try to put themselves in the shoes of the Berkeley students that decided to scale up the protest on free speech in 1964. My aim was to discuss the dynamics leading to the politicization of the American youth in the Sixties: how come that a generation of well educated, middle-to-high class young individuals, with a promising future ahead of them, generated such a powerful and disruptive amount of protest energy? What was the source of their discontent? Searching for a question that could kick off the conversation, I asked something along the lines of: if you should think of a source of profound and deep dissatisfaction of your generation—something that scares you or causes you concerns—what would come to mind? The idea I originally had was to start from whatever answer I would get and progressively lead the conversation towards some of the issues at the basis of the protests of the New Left and the FSM: capitalist massification, the pressure towards conformism caused by Cold War ideologies, the anxieties generated by the nuclear threat, etc.

To my dismay, the only issue my students could find some agreement on was street crime and personal safety in the areas surrounding the campus. The lack of imagination or apparent unawareness about more pressing global concerns struck me. Sure, when the session took place we were in the middle of a knife crime wave of national proportions, a trend that hit Birmingham’s student-inhabited areas for the first time in years, so this must have been felt as an urgent and widespread issue to them (Walker 2018; BBC News 2018). But in that same moment, the U.K. was knee-deep in the Brexit crisis, at the apex of a supposed

“reawakening” of youth’s activism in Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party, and right after the beginning of the “Fridays for Future” strike initiatives. None of these points were raised in the classroom.<sup>13</sup>

This episode was in line with a broader trend I have been noticing in my students’ intellectual and personal backgrounds. Across the board, I could appreciate that students had more familiarity with certain understandings of the concept of “political,” while they struggled enormously to get others. “The personal is political” is a slogan that does not require any explanation in class. Students immediately get its meaning and its historical and contemporary implications. In fact, what is hard to explain to them is how the profoundly political implications of personal lives were apparently not fully clear before the Sixties.<sup>14</sup> This is to the credit of second wave feminism and its many post-Sixties reincarnations, from black feminist collectives in the 1970s down to the recent #metoo wave of protests. The familiarity students have with the political implications of the personal sphere is a further confirmation of the profound impact that political ideologies born in the Sixties have on our present society.

Conversely, in my experience I have noticed that a large number of students have a harder time understanding the background, tortuous developments, and significance of more “traditional” versions of the “political,” in most cases when connected to historical and long-standing political ideologies, from Marxism to liberalism to conservatism. Being a scholar of the left in the United States, I have often been taken aback by students’ difficulty to place the passage from the “Old” Left to the New Left in the U.S. into any meaningful historical context, one including the long trajectory of left-wing ideologies (socialism, communism, and American liberalism); the role and impact of trade unions in the country’s history; and the significance (or the lack thereof) of the organized left. Not that I was expecting students to have any detailed knowledge of any of these aspects of U.S. history. But I thought I could rely on a generic understanding of the issues left-wing and right-wing political parties have been fighting about from the late-nineteenth century onwards: social and economic rights, political representation, personal freedoms and so on. Quite the contrary. In more occasions than I would like to admit, I found myself explaining to students what the difference between the “left” and the “right” was. The overlapping and unclear concepts of socialism and communism regularly made students’ heads spin, and it is not hard to imagine the exasperation deriving from attempts to explore some broad differences between the various schools of Marxist thought that emerged in the twentieth century.

---

<sup>13</sup> This episode happened in November 2018, well before the “Fridays for Future” initiative gained wide global attention. I look forward to repeating this seminar in the early 2020 to see if the responses will change.

<sup>14</sup> Of course, they were. Especially women’s rights activists early understood how the distinction between “public” and “private” spheres was a means to maintain patriarchal social structures and limit women’s influence in the society. 1960s Second Wave Feminism produced the first political breakthrough of the concept, which came to be historicized through the slogan “The Personal is Political,” the title of a famous article by Carol Hanisch (a title that she does not take credit for) (Hanisch 2009; Rosen 2006).



Don't get me wrong. That students are not passionate about the byzantine distinctions between the myriads of left-wing groups animating the Sixties' student movements is perfectly comprehensible. At the same time, quite rapidly I identified in this area a set of problems I should somehow try to solve, and therefore I embarked upon an attempt to turn a problem into a potential occasion. Eventually, I found out that teaching a module on the Sixties offers the opportunity to fill gaps in students' knowledge while at the same time start extremely fruitful conversations on the meaning of the "political," conversations that have influence not only on students' capacity for historical thinking but also on their positionality in our current socio-economic context.

For a start, I soon came to realize that the lack of background knowledge and familiarity with left-wing critiques of capitalism was a problem that made the task of understanding the origins and development of political protests in the Sixties virtually impossible. Far too often, the anti-capitalist critique expressed by protest groups in the Sixties sounded to my students as too abstract, overambitious, and narcissistic. Realism and practicability surely were not the main concerns of 1960s New Left groups, but at the same time dismissing the Yippie Manifesto, the Weathermen Underground's Communique#1, or documents from the Columbia Strike Coordinating Committee because they did not read as modern party manifestos was a clear sign of the fact that students struggled to go beyond the surface of the critique mounted by young left-wing activists in the Sixties (Bloom and Breines 2012, 50-60, 333-336, 385-391).

Fortunately, there is no lack of historical context that a good amount of preliminary readings and sweeping lectures cannot fix. In the context of the debate between the Old and the New Left, acquiring a better knowledge of the political goals and functioning of the Socialist Party of America, the Communist Party of the USA and the AFL-CIO became a less dry and daunting task. This background allowed us to better place into historical perspective the political and historical innovations that documents like Charles Wright Mills's "Letter to the New Left" brought to the theorization and practice of the American Left, and the impact that the New Left had on political movements of the decade (Bloom and Breines 2010, 61-65).

At the same time, and perhaps more importantly, debating the New Left and its limits allowed us to start a broader conversation on capitalism, individualism, and consumerism that would have been hard to imagine otherwise. The anecdote on campus safety and personal concerns that I mentioned earlier was an indication of students' under-developed capacity of critical thinking in relation to their own social, economic, and political positioning in the current socio-economic and political context. I responded to this circumstance with sources that went straight to the point. Mario Savio famously declared that "there is a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part," and "you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels . . . upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it

stop!” (Cohen et al. 2014). Savio’s speech is the purest expression of the capacity of a generation of young American students to self-assess their own role in their society and contest its functioning, in direct opposition to a governing body that wanted to carry on along the same lines of the past.

Putting students in the condition to understand Savio’s speech and deploy an equally acute and vivid capacity of critical thinking is one of the most challenging but also rewarding opportunities that teaching a module on the Sixties has to offer. Mario Savio’s poignant critique towards the homogenization and the conformism brought by capitalist production is an opportunity for students to reflect on their own personal and political lives. At its best, the New Left introduced amongst other things an existentialist dimension in the left-wing critique of American capitalism that survived the socio-economic conditions of the Sixties and still applies to our present circumstances. Students can reflect on their own roles as workers, consumers, and intellectuals in a society whose structures are often presented as untouchable and unmodifiable. The request for a fulfilling life, so clearly articulated by Tom Hayden in the *Port Huron Statement*, was one of the main aspirations driving the American youth in the Sixties. It is a goal that does not stop ringing true now.

At the same time, learning about the Sixties’ protest movements is an occasion to more critically understand the injustices upon which our society is built. The composition of the student population of the University of Birmingham (quite accurately reflected in my classes) is hardly a faithful projection of the British society at large. As a Russell Group university with a prestigious reputation, UoB attracts students from a predominantly middle class background, with a systematic underrepresentation of students from BAME and working class backgrounds (University of Birmingham 2019). Much like the Berkeley students in 1964, the vast majority of my students belong to a privileged class. Learning about the Sixties give them a chance to develop a more acute awareness of the unequal foundations of our society. The New Left built their critique on foundations laid by civil rights groups of the late 1950s and early 1960s. They took strategies and goals from them. The early Sixties represent a shining example of interracial organization, a moment in which white protestors followed the lead of black leaders to getting a step closer to a more equal society. Exploring their struggles fifty years later is a way for our students to reflect on their own racial and class privilege. Through the example of white protestors who followed in the footsteps of black activists and put their lives on the line in the Students for a Democratic Society, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the myriads of organizations that sprang up in the U.S. after 1965, students can come to terms with the advantageous position their whiteness has offered to them, and perhaps understand how they can use it to serve the greater good of the antiracist cause.

These are but two of the many aspects I have been trying to work on when pushing my students to expand their understanding of the “political.” The history of the Sixties is full of many teachable moments that can be turned into pedagogical opportunities for our

students. In this way, the analytical skills acquired through historical thinking contribute to educate not only skilled employees but also self-conscious and critical citizens.

#### CONCLUSIONS: THE SIXTIES BEYOND THE SIXTIES

Two aspects I would like to mention in conclusion pertain to strategies that I have been using and I intend to use to further improve my module on the Sixties. First, and I am aware this will sound obvious, no module on the Sixties should really finish in 1969 or 1970. Discussing the legacy of the Sixties is as important as exploring the decade itself. More crucially, what I have found extremely useful is staying away as much as possible from the narrative of “declension” and “failure” that permeate many autobiographical narratives of former protagonists of Sixties’ movements (Hall, 2014). This narrative underestimates many of the most important results brought about by social movements started during the Sixties and tends to erase movements that started in the late Sixties and proliferated in the following decades. The Stonewall riots, the pivotal spontaneous protest that kicked off a national LGBTQ rights movement, took place in June 1969. When the decade was drawing to a close, gay rights movement was blossoming across the whole country. Women’s rights, anti-war, black power movements, they all continued well in the Seventies, and the consequences of the Civil Rights movement, from affirmative action to a larger presence of African American elected officials, shaped the American political scenario and society for decades (Gosse and Moser 2003). Disentangling the conversation on the Sixties from a declension narrative help students situating the decade in the longer trajectory of U.S. history, understanding it as a phase within a broader set of dynamics that panned out throughout the twentieth century (Dowd Hall 2006; Hall 2015; Sugrue 1996).

At the same time, it is refreshing and useful to place the Sixties into a geographical context that transcends the narrow borders of the United States. In the past decades, scholarship on the Sixties has moved towards a “globalization” and “transnationalization” of its geographical approaches. This has meant, on the one hand, rediscussing national movements in the context of international struggles (think, for example, to the civil rights movement in the context of decolonization struggles across the world); on the other, decentering the narrative from a focus on a single country to larger analyses on the links across several areas of the world (Dudziak 2002; Munro 2017; Von Eschen 1997). How to bring this development in the scholarship into the classroom is perhaps the biggest challenge I see ahead of me in the future revisions of the module program. Students would enormously benefit from being exposed to the newest methodological innovations brought forward by historians adopting global and transnational approaches. At the same time, using their works put teachers before new challenges: how is it possible to give students the adequate historical background to understand events taking place on opposite sides of the world? Is it necessary to know “national” narratives to understand the value and significance of transnational and global approaches? How limited and narrow can a university module be? Is it plausible

to design a module focusing on one year, or one movement only, if it covers a global geographical span? In the next couple of years, my department will test team-taught option modules on a variety of subjects. Perhaps, creating a teaching team and covering a similar topic across different countries could be a way to solve some of the problems mentioned above. It would solve problems of expertise, in a knowledge exchange that could be fruitful also for research purposes. My hope is to being able to test this arrangement and report back on its outcome in the future.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bailey, Beth and David Farber. 2006. "The Histories They Are A-Changin'." *OAH Magazine of History* 20, no. 5:8-13.

BBC News. 2018. "Hundreds of Birmingham students sign crime petition in two days." *BBC News*, October 10, 2018. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-45801586>

Bloom, Alexander and Wini Breines. 2010. *Takin' It to the Streets: A Sixties Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Bloom, Alexander. 2001. *Long Time Gone: Sixties America Then and Now*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bryant, Nick. 2006. *The Bystander: John F. Kennedy and the Struggle for Black Equality*. New York: Basics Books.

Caffarella, Rosemary S., and Shara B. Merriam, Lisa M. Baumgarten. 2006. *Learning in Adulthood: a Comprehensive Guide*. London: Josey-Bass.

Child, Simon, Ellie Darlington and Tim Gill. 2014. "An Analysis of the Unit and Topic Choices Made in an OCR A level History Course," *Research Matters: A Cambridge Assessment Publication*. <https://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/Images/465802-an-analysis-of-the-unit-and-topic-choices-made-in-an-ocr-a-level-history-course.pdf>

Cohen, Robert, Tom Hayden, Robert Reich, and Lynne Hollander Savio. 2014. *The Essential Mario Savio: Speeches and Writings That Changed America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Dale, Edgar. 1969. *Audiovisual Methods in Teaching*. New York: Dryden Press.

Dale, Edgar. 1972. *Building a Learning Environment*. Bloomington: Phi Delta Kappa Foundation.

Dickstein, Morris. 1977. *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties*. New York: Basic Books.

Dowd Hall, Jacqueline. 2005. "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past." *Journal of American History* 91:1233-1263.

Dudziak, Mary. 2002. *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Farber, David. 1988. *Chicago '68*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Farber, David. 1994. *Sixties: From Memory to History*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Gitlin, Todd. 1987. *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*. New York: Bantnam Book.

Gosse, Van and Richard Moser. 2003. *The World the 60s Made: Politics and Culture in Recent America*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Green, John Robert. 2010. *America in the Sixties*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Hall, Simon. 2011. *American Patriotism, American Protest: Social Movements Since the Sixties*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Hall, Simon. 2014 "Framing the American 1960s: a Historiographical Review." *European Journal of American Culture* 31, no. 1:5-23.

Hanisch, Carol. 2009. "The Personal is Political, <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>

Hartman, Andrew. 2015. *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*. Chicago: Chicago university Press.

Hogan, Wesley C. 2007. *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Isserman, Maurice and Michael Kazin. 1999. *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kazin, Michael. 2018. "America's Never-Ending Culture War," *New York Times*, August 24, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/24/opinion/sunday/chicago-protests-1968-culture-war.html>

Lee, San Joon and Thomas C. Reeves. 2007. "Edgar Dale: A Significant Contributor to the Field of Educational Technology." *Educational Technology* 47, no. 6:56-59.

Lekus, Ian. 2006. "The Long Sixties." *OAH Magazine of History* 20, no. 2:32-38.

Levy, Peter B. 2004. "Teaching the Sixties with Primary Sources." *The History Teacher* 38, no. 1 (November):9-20.

Lieberman, Robbie. 2019. "Teaching the Vietnam Antiwar Movement: Confronting Myths and Misconceptions." *The Journal of American History* 105, no. 4 (March):959-965.

Lytle, Mark H. 2006. *America's Uncivil Wars: The Sixties Era from Elvis to the Fall of Richard Nixon*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Mason, Robert. 2004. *Richard Nixon and the Quest for a New Majority*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

McGirr, Lisa. 2001. *Suburban Warriors: the Origins of the New American Right*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

McGirr, Lisa. 2011. "Now That Historians Know So Much About the Right, How Should We Best Approach the Study of Conservatism?" *The Journal of American History* 98, no. 3 (December):765-770.

Monteith, Sharon and Martin Halliwell. 2008. *American Culture in the 1960s*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Munro, John. 2017. *The Anticolonial Front: The African American Freedom Struggle and Global Decolonization, 1945-1960*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Perlstein, Rick. 2001. *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus*. New York: Nations Books.

Rosen, Ruth. 2006. *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*. New York; London: Penguin.

Sugrue, Thomas. 1996. *The Origins of the Urban crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Tarnopolsky, Oleg. 2012. *Constructivist Blended Learning Approach to Teaching English for Specific Purposes*. London: Versita.

University of Birmingham. 2019. "Student Population Key Statistics," <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/planning/Key-Statistics/Student-Numbers-Key-Statistics.aspx>.

Von Eschen, Penny. 1997. *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957*. Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press.

Walker, Jonathan. 2018. "West Midlands has the biggest increase in knife crime outside London." *Birmingham Mail*, April 9, 2018, <https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/west-midlands-biggest-increase-knife-14509100>

Ward, Brian, ed. 2010. *The Sixties: A Documentary Reader*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Wilentz, Sean. 2010. *Bob Dylan in America*. New York: Anchor Books.

**Lorenzo Costaguta** is a Teaching Fellow in US History at the University of Birmingham. His first monograph, provisionally titled *The Origins of Colorblind Socialism: Race and Class in the America Left, 1876-1899*, is forthcoming with the University of Illinois Press. His recent publications include the essay collection *Working-Class Nationalism and Internationalism until 1945: Essays in Global Labour History* (co-edited with Steven Parfitt, Matthew Kidd, and John Tiplady; Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018) and the article "'Geographies of Peoples': Scientific Racialism and Working-class Internationalism in Gilded Age American Socialism" (*The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 2019). In the past two years (2017-2019), he served as co-chair for the Graduate Forum of the Italian Association of North-American Studies (AISNA).