

Young Lives on the Left: Sixties Activism and the Liberation of the Self by Celia Hughes.
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At least since the appearance of *The Cheese and Worms* and the *Life of Martin Guerre* in the early 1980s, the modesty screen that divides history from biography has looked increasingly fragile. Historians today are increasingly comfortable with constructing their accounts from the ungraded, unvarnished and potentially worm worn timber of subjective individual experience.

Celia Hughes' *Young Lives on the Left: Sixties Activism and the Liberation of the Self* fits this expanding seam of research. Hughes' book provides ballast for the ongoing historiographical project of moving beyond the hackneyed caricatures, slogans and images that still form our primary points of reference when discussing the 1960s. This makes *Young Lives* a worthy addition to the growing body of work that's serving to build up a richer and more nuanced picture of the changes that took place during the mid-20th Century.

Young Lives seeks to reconstruct the "psychic" states and experiences that shaped the personal growth, development and political outlooks of left-wing activists. Delving into the realms of psychology, Hughes' work challenges traditional notions of what constitutes a source fit for historical study. The primary material that forms the basis of *Young Lives* is largely comprised of oral testimony from participants in the social movements and far-left political parties that characterised the landscape of radical left-wing Britain in the 1960s.

Despite her subjects' radicalism, the degree of continuity expressed in her subjects' lives can be striking; showing that the "liberated self" - forged by the contradictions of post-war affluence - was rooted in longer standing traditions and cultural formations.

She cites the testimony of Bob Light, a working class Trotskyite from East London. Light describes how events like Vietnam and the crushing of the Czech Spring led him to reject his father's Communist Party politics (pp. 89-95). However, he also says how his father's values, his dreams of a better world, and internationalist outlook served to inspire him. In a similar vein, a number of respondents cite how they struggled to reconcile sexual liberation and Marxism with the Christian faith they were raised in (pp. 39-49, 118).

Hughes shows how the landscape and experiences of childhood - the socially visible and psychologically submerged markers of class - shaped adult experience. Gilda Peterson, who left Hartlepool to study at the University of Birmingham, was left wondering "where the works were" upon her arrival at Birmingham's suburban campus (pp. 120-121). Peterson later explains how in addition to throwing herself into radical politics, a sense of dislocation from the overwhelmingly middle class environment that she found herself in encouraged her to join the Longbridge Austin's women's hockey team (pp. 120-121).

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Hughes' source base shows she is working in fresh territory. Aside from the work of participants in the movements that she describes - like Sheila Rowbotham - almost all her research is comprised of oral testimony (p. 49).

This allows Hughes to build up a rich picture of the backgrounds and formative experiences that a generation of radical activists shared in the 1960s. She is right to argue that their ideas and causes continued to shape conceptions of the self and personal identity to this day. On a different, underplayed note, the ways Hughes traces the networks that interlinked groups like the LSE Student Socialist Society, and the Tufnell Park Women's Group (an organisation that proved pivotal the development of second wave feminism in the United Kingdom) will doubtless prove invaluable to future scholars as the field continues to open up. Her approach to unravelling the kinship between groups should interest scholars of other periods, whilst her focus on how gender shaped activist groups and activist relations should aid historians of sexuality and gender.

On the other hand, her method at times lends itself more to description than analysis meaning you can be left feeling that Hughes is merely describing states of feeling. She does a good job of explaining why certain actors felt a certain way, however, at times it seems like this doesn't link into a wider narrative. Unlike, for instance, in the work of Carolyn Steedman, another historian who pierces the boundary between history and biography (who Hughes cites as an influence), there can be something of a lack of focus.

This however, is doubtless because whereas other historians of subjectivity such as Steedman or Matt Houlbrook, tend to focus their attention upon a single subjectivity, or a closely knit group, and then build out from there, Hughes goes in for a wide ranging approach. This is understandable given the range of subjects that she was able to speak to and the current paucity of studies of the period.