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"'THE NINETIES ARE THE SIXTIES.' NOT SO.": A CONVERSATION WITH TODD GITLIN
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A CONVERSATION WITH TODD GITLIN

Keith Beattie


K.B.: Reviewing *The Whole World is Watching* Richard Flacks commented that technologies such as cable t.v., videodisc and videotape promise 'opportunities for alternative expression to find large constituencies ... Whether this new era can lead toward diversity and decentralization of control over mediated reality is now an open question.' I realize that Flacks made this comment some time ago but do you think that this question has since been adequately answered?

T.G.: Yes, I think the question has been answered and the answer is not auspicious. The open door was closed and I think the outcome was not inevitable. Obviously in the media system capital seizes the initiative and one's presumption must be that having created the landscape on which media operate that large concentrations of capital have a great deal to say about the disposition of media space so that, for example, cable channels were set up by aggregations of capital headed by, for the most part, executives whose training and understanding were in the roles of commercial television. Cable seized upon the same sorts of profit maximizing strategies that the networks had long since established and those exceptions that did exist quickly became commercialized. The remaining exceptions are CNN, which is not precisely alternative in the sense that Flacks meant it, and C-Span*, which is not of interest to most people who are not political aficionados. So it seems to me that the new technologies were organised toward the refinement of the formulas and categories that already existed. Now this isn't to say that it was preordained that alternative

* A cable television station that features live coverage of Congressional sessions.
voices would be completely marginalized. I think it has to be said that some of that continued marginalization is self-marginalization and that for a very long time it has been more congenial for the left to criticize the order of culture than to try to enter the spaces and arenas that exist. I felt in 1980, 1981 that there were opportunities to enter into the world of cable before the categories had fossilised and to create debates and documentary forms which might be politically tonic and at the same time commercially viable. Alas, those opportunities were not seized. As for forms like VCRs and so on I know that there’s a tendency on the left which is almost an inversion of conventional capitalist reasoning about consumer sovereignty. Here we are supposedly dealing with the capacity of the audience to perform a sort of judo operation upon the messages and turn them to their uses as if the ability to time shift on video or the ability to make new recordings out of snippets of old recordings constituted the generating of alternatives. I think that this is profoundly wishful thinking and to flatter this sort of defensive operation with the glorious affirmation of resistance is to cheapen the idea of resistance and to purchase a sort of phony populism on the cheap without actually having to pay a political price for it. So I don’t, in short, think that we are now besieged by alternatives.

K.B.: I noted a comment that you made recently in the San Francisco Examiner relating to the need for the development of a critical reading of media texts. Is the search for alternatives to the present hegemony more profitably sought in this direction rather than in the search for new technologies?

T.G.: Let me back up a step and answer that indirectly. I think that the problem of hegemony has to be recast. Gramsci was writing about a setting in which ideas were the currency of discourse but in this sort of consumer society ideas are not the currency of discourse. Dispositions, expressions, emotional articulations of pleasures are the currency of discourse. One set of ideas has not drowned out another set of ideas but a sort of soup of trans ideas, or post ideas, or even non ideas, has drowned out the capacity of people to articulate ideas. Therefore to blame the media for monopolising thought under one heading as if the insertion of other ideas through the media would automatically generate a different politics I think is ludicrous. We’re dealing with a different situation in which the society is depoliticised, not politicised mistakenly, but depoliticised. This is partly because of the fragilities and failures of the political system to generate ideas which make sense or mesh with a person’s common sense in the Gramscian sense, but also because the capacity of the political culture to sustain political discourse has been damaged. Therefore it’s hard for me to see a technical solution to this. Yes critical faculties need to be sharpened and the capacity to have critical faculties needs to be taken very seriously as a cultural and political problem, but this is not an easy task because everything in the culture works against the capacity to sustain, or to find value in, critical reasoning.

K.B.: The work of Ronald Lembo, once a student in the sociology department at Berkeley, can be seen to support such a conclusion.

T.G.: What Lembo found was that the younger the audience the more it thought or perceived in images rather than the capacity to sustain narrative, and there’s something really quite chilling about that.
K.B.: Both *The Whole World is Watching* and *The Sixties* focus on SDS and central to any analysis of the organisation is the concept of a participatory democracy which has been defined in a variety of ways. How would you define it, if that’s not too large a question?

T.G.: It’s been a long time since I’ve thought to define it. What may be more interesting than my definition is that no sooner did some people think they understood what is meant by participatory democracy than other people began to fill those words with a very different meaning. When I read the *Port Huron Statement* in draft I had no doubt that participatory democracy referred to a society yet to be brought into being and it startled me when, starting sometime in the mid sixties, I began to hear people speak of it as a means by which to organize meetings — that is free-form, endless, decentred, non-authoritative. I hadn’t thought of participatory democracy as a meeting style. I think the concept is baggy. I don’t think any longer that it was a major new departure in political theory. I think that it reflects the experience of a sector of society which, to put it crudely, has the time to go to lots of meetings — and stay late. In that sense it is not capable of addressing the objection that Oscar Wilde once brought to bear against socialism: that it would take too many evenings.

K.B.: Reading your account of SDS in *The Sixties* it appeared that one reason for its failure to survive was that it became too large, making it difficult to enact the idea of a participatory democracy.

T.G.: Well, SDS never was a participatory democracy — it was a band of brothers and sisters who, to put it in an old-fashioned way, loved each other and formed something between a network and a tribe or, as some people eventually said, a church. The problem therefore became the traditional problem of the consolidation of the church and the relationship between the believers and the hierarchy. SDS was always an ironic organisation because it was a hierarchy of those who didn’t believe in hierarchy and in this, inadvertently, SDS put its finger collectively on the central problem in participatory democracy, namely, the source of authority. I should say that it also put its finger squarely on America’s central cultural problem which is the legitimation of authority. So its dilemma was not simply one of size because even when it was small there was a tension within it between the actual structure of authority and the formal structure of legitimacy and, as I wrote in *The Whole World is Watching* when SDS grew larger and when the media came to the fore as a channel for politics-making SDS was hard-pressed to find a way of holding its own leadership accountable. It’s that inability that opens the way for the Jerry Rubin, Abbie Hoffman style of politics which is completely disdainful of accountability. So eventually you pay dues for not being able to face squarely your own dilemmas.

K.B.: In the colloquium *Vietnam Reconsidered* you made the point, repeated in *The Sixties*, that the movement against the war in Vietnam, of which SDS was a part, was the most successful movement against a shooting war in history. Your assertion has been commented upon by others. It would seem a bold statement to make.

T.G.: When I gave the talk at the Vietnam conference at the University of Southern California in 1983 Roger Hilsman came up to me afterwards — he had been Kennedy’s assistant secretary of state for Asian affairs I believe — and had resigned
early over the Vietnam war, and said, 'There is another antiwar movement that was more successful than yours' and I said 'what's that?' and he said 'The Bolshevik revolution!' But of course I meant antiwar movement in a narrower sense. I still think my comment is true and there's even better evidence for it now than when I wrote The Sixties. My graduate student Tom Wells has written a dissertation about the antiwar movement and in particular about its impact on policy. Having spoken with most of the important Vietnam war policy makers from the Johnson and Nixon administrations he comes to the conclusion that they were always aware of the anti-Vietnam war movement and frequently felt it to be a restraint upon them — a restraint not against pursuing the war altogether but against escalating the war in certain ways and at certain times.

K.B.: In The Sixties you offer an important and interesting discussion of the counterculture's societal impact. Do you consider that the recent spate of books on the sixties pays adequate attention to the role or legacies of the counterculture?

T.G.: I don't want to sound excessively self-serving, but I gave the weight to the counterculture that I thought it deserved and books that don't I think are faulty. I think there is a rationalist heresy in some books on the left on the sixties to view the manoeuvres and decisions of people eighteen and twenty years old as if they were motivated by elaborate political theories. The New Left is an embodiment of ideas but it's also the lives of teenagers and young people who were seriously involved with, even in opposition to, the counterculture. So, to my mind, a strict history of ideas that separates the cortex from the rest of the body misses something important about what drove the sixties.

K.B.: It would seem that if mentioned at all the counterculture's legacies are largely restricted to the cultural. On this aspect it can be seen that the New Left spawned its own style of cultural expression in the form of underground newspapers, street theatre, novels — if I can include Marge Piercy's novels here, poetry — yourself and Marge Piercy again, films — such as Robert Kramer's Ice. Can you see a lasting legacy of the New Left in this way?

T.G.: I think the fact that you're seizing upon examples in the sixties shows how time-limited that reverberation is. The political movement/counterculture overlap was heavily indebted to the specific circumstances: the Vietnam war, the black insurgency in the form that it was taking in the late sixties, drugs, the cultural polarization, and when that configuration came to an end so did the culture that attended it. If you compare, let's say, a newspaper such as the San Francisco Express Times, where I worked in 1968, to the Bay Guardian or the East Bay Express today you find that they are a very different kind of paper — intellectually more serious but also more staid. We do not have replicas and if we did they would be fossilised, they would be like Grateful Dead concerts and tie-dye t-shirts or like the person I saw with a sign at the antiwar march in San Francisco on January twenty sixth, 'The nineties are the sixties.' Not so.

K.B.: In 1987 you wrote that the changes since the sixties were from 'J'accuse to jacuzzi,' from 'kicking ass to kicking back.' It's a depressing picture. Can you see a coherent political opposition emerging in the nineties that may alter this situation?
T.G.: No, I don't. But I have to preface any such discussion with some unease about speaking about the nineties or any other decade as a unit. In fact, parenthetically, I'm interested in when it came about that people began to ideologize decades. I don't actually remember that the end of 1959, the beginning of 1960 were full of prophecies about what 'the sixties' were going to be. I'm not happy with the tendency, nonetheless it does seem irresistible at this juncture. With that hesitation I would say that the odds are against some sort of coherent opposition emerging because the very ideology that has established itself as the most prominent among the segments of an American left is in fact a tribalistic, an anti-coherent ideology, looking to difference as the central political fact. This is especially conspicuous on campuses, but not only on campuses. By definition an ideology which looks to the parcelisation of reality and which denies the possibility of arriving at collective definitions of society is a collection of margins and there is at this point, in many quarters, a commitment to the assemblage of margins as the intellectual work of the left. Such a tendency would have to play itself out in order to generate any kind of comprehensive movement — and that's not on the horizon.

K.B.: If we relate this to the groups that compose the present antiwar movement it would appear, from what you say, that they lack agreement on a common ideology.

T.G.: I think they do. One of the strengths of this anti-war movement starting when it did, that is starting early, was its diversity but the other side is that all it had in common was opposition to the war. It ranged from minority communities, to families of veterans, to pacifists, to one or another stripe of anti-imperialist and marxist federated on one disposition, and I say disposition rather than position because I don't think it did actually cohere around a position. Some people were for bringing the troops home, some people were for sanctions. As the war ground on it became increasingly difficult to sustain that movement. Even as we speak, February twenty seven, nineteen ninety one, that movement has already been seriously outdistanced by events. I think the antiwar movement was a great success in helping to generate the debate that took place between November eighth when Bush doubled the troop size and January sixteenth when the ground war started but it has not been able to go beyond that. Questions such as do we believe in collective security and if we do what do we propose about it; what do we have to say about the U.N.; what do we have to say about force; have been skirted and they can't be skirted if the movement is to be serious. I fear that the movement won't play much of a part in the subsequent political developments, including the need for some very serious chastening of the victorious in this country.

K.B.: What do you consider to have been the most impressive demonstration against this war?

T.G.: The University of Montana was the first big demonstration that I'm aware of. On October thirty first they had six hundred to eight hundred people on a campus of ten thousand. Even now it's impressive; I spoke to five hundred and fifty people there last week at a teach-in. Mostly students. Extremely interesting, sophisticated group of people, very much coalition minded. Very much concerned about speaking to people who are outside the charmed circle of the taken-for-granted. Yet my sense is at this juncture that even the best movements, and I count them as the best I know
of, have reached a limit. The war rush, the war enthusiasm, was so powerful as to run us over— it has to be said.

K.B.: It’s interesting that there was a student movement in the face of such war enthusiasm and amidst talk of student apathy.

T.G.: Yes, and in fact it’s not the first time in the last twenty years. Five years ago there was a major student movement against investments in companies doing business with South Africa. There is probably a growing ground level of student activism and a culture sympathetic to activism on the environmentalist front. There’s a co-ordinating group called the Student Environmental Action Coalition which counts representatives on eleven hundred campuses and has had a national meeting that included more than seven thousand delegates. This is considerable, the likes of which didn’t even come to pass in the sixties. In addition, of course, the multiculturalist networks—loose associations of minorities, gays and lesbians etc.—that also have considerable spread, though they tend to define their concerns so narrowly as to collide with each other while competing for scarce resources. (Moreover, lacking the desire to create a political majority, most of these remain purely expressive—and, to the majority, offputting.) Just as the fifties, as I argued in my book, were not as flat and silent as was subsequently made out neither were the eighties so pulverized. However what most groups do not have is either a coherent set of ideas which are attractive to large numbers or an organisational structure which gives them some sort of continuity, but I think that’s probably normal for student movements. Thus we shouldn’t think that the sixties were normal. There are many reasons why they weren’t, structurally and historically, the Vietnam war being of course an important reason. Absent the Vietnam war, the sixties would not have been ‘the sixties’ as we know them. The notion, for example, which I’m particularly amused by teaching at Berkeley that what drove the student movement in the sixties, especially at Berkeley, was fundamentally resistance to the multiversity and to the conversion of the university to the service station role vis-a-vis large corporations in the state is laughable. The university is far more bureaucratic, students are far more pushed around now by regulations than they were then but this doesn’t produce a vast student movement. In this case it produces resignation and yet more preoccupation with personal careers and advancement. Obviously many other conditions are different. Economic conditions are importantly different today but I lean heavily to historical over social structural impetuses in the sixties.

K.B.: Is this preoccupation with careers among what you have elsewhere called the post-Reagan youth solely attributable to the economic and political climate that grew up under Reagan?

T.G.: Not entirely, no. Obviously the return of scarcity—scarcity of prospects, scarcity of money, the need of many students to work, the general sense of the contraction of America’s position in the world and of the middle class’s position in America all add up to hesitancy and timidity and a reluctance to try and stake out some new political or cultural position. I would add that the presence of the remnants of the sectarian left worsened this problem considerably. It was in retrospect a considerable advantage for the New Left of the sixties to have a vacuum preceding it on campuses but today we have on many campuses, including Berkeley, something worse than
a vacuum. We have a version of the left which is off-putting to reasonable people because of its shrillness, because of its wilful marginality, because of its insistence on the monopolisation of truth and so on. It's not intellectually serious and therefore not alluring to students who are looking for some political, cultural alternative to complacency.

K.B.: The final thing I would like to inquire into is the nature of the project you are working on at the moment.

T.G.: It's actually something quite different from what I've done before. I've just finished a novel and it's about many things but one is the ironies of political experience. I've also for years been accumulating ideas and questions for what I think of as an extended meditation on the emergence of the global society and the peculiar parts that media play in that emergence.