

Bryan D. Palmer
*Canada's 1960s: The Ironies of Identity
 in a Rebellious Era.*

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009. 605 pp.

Paul Axelrod

York University

The "Sixties" are back, at least in the world of academic historians. A number of rich and fascinating publications have recently appeared, and others will soon flow from current graduate student theses. It is a little sobering to witness the historicization of the era in which one came of age, though not unusual. The previous generation of historians (including many of our own university teachers) produced original works on the Depression and World War II some thirty to forty years after these events. Historiographically, it would appear, the Sixties' time has come.

That one of Canada's most prolific historians would take up the subject will do nothing to diminish interest in the period. Bryan Palmer has produced a lengthy, readable, and provocative volume. The study is, as advertised, deeply ironic, but alas, not for the reasons that the author contends.

The first third of the book is an engaging account of the economic, political and cultural context of the Sixties, including surprising chapters on the Gerda Munsinger sex scandal, and the title fight between boxers George Chuvalo and Muhammad Ali in 1966. Munsinger symbolizes an era in which women were used by politicians and molested by the media for moral "crimes." As an East German working class emigrant who had affairs with Pierre Sévigny and George Hees (both Diefenbaker cabinet members), Munsinger was especially vulnerable to such treatment. In Palmer's view she represented the pervasive sexual commodification of women, the brutality of cold war politics, and Canada's loss of political innocence on the world stage (though one would have thought that the Gouzenko fiasco in 1946 had accomplished that a generation earlier). George Chuvalo, also the child of non-British immigrants, was simultaneously caricatured and celebrated as Canada's "Great White Hope" and was caught up in a political-racial American drama starring the (anti-) hero, Ali, himself

an iconic emblem in a “rebellious era.”

Though the argument is not always easy to follow, these cases represent elements of the “irony” that characterizes the Sixties. Canada’s secure, age-long identity as a neo-British capitalist colony began to unravel, and continues its fragmentation to this day. In Palmer’s words, “[T]he great irony of the Sixties was that while it decisively declared the end of one Canada, it defeated, for a generation or more, the possibility of realizing a new national identity that so much of the decade seemed to both demand and promote” (429). The country neither forged a new national identity, which Palmer believes to have been a foolish objective, nor, more regrettably for the author, did it realize the Marxist vision of a fully socialist Canada which was proffered by many of the decade’s activists.

Indeed the escapades of those who challenged the old order take up the last two-thirds of the volume. They include hippies, “wildcat” workers, new left students, Quebec revolutionaries, and Aboriginal activists. The book, therefore, is not as broad or penetrating as the title suggests. It is concerned less with the full complexity of the Sixties than of the dreams and adventures of the minority of mostly young people who sought, or thought they sought, radical social change. Education was a major preoccupation of the period, but Palmer explores only students’ political “resistance,” devoting extraordinary attention to radical fringe groups, and ignoring virtually every other facet of schooling and the post-secondary system.

Sympathetically, even wistfully, he recounts one militant activity after another, including the silencing of former University of California President Clark Kerr by the (University of) Toronto Student Movement in 1968, and the torching of the computer room at Sir George Williams University in 1969, an event “ignited” (and justified?) by racism. He revisits the FLQ bombing campaigns in Quebec, which culminated in the killing of politician Pierre Laporte and the Trudeau government’s imposition of the War Measures Act in October 1970. Before turning his back on the use of revolutionary violence, Pierre Vallières, one of the founders of the FLQ, published the influential book, *White Niggers of America*, which Palmer describes in almost biblical terms. “The ideal of an uncompromised freedom achieved in a revolutionary upsurge of collective humanity explodes throughout the pages” of the book (344).

Palmer takes seriously all such radical prescriptions, which in retrospect, frequently seem shallow or delusional, produced in some cases by individuals who may well have become unhinged in the dramas of the decade. I recall one student conference at Glendon College at which renowned University of Toronto Marxist scholar, C.B. Macpherson, critiqued capitalism but defended academic freedom in the university as a liberal gift that should not be abused. After his presentation, one of the radical leaders approached Macpherson, shook his fist in his face, and announced “we’re going to get you!” presumably for being too much of a “liberal.” The student later joined one of the fringe left-wing groups described in Palmer’s book.

The real irony of the Sixties, was that it actually strengthened the liberalism that the radical left so deplored. Barriers *were* burst in the wake of that era. Universities abandoned “in loco parentis,” enrolled more students per capita than practically

any country in the world, and forged a culture which made it possible for Marxist scholars to obtain tenure and even secure research chairs. Canada secured universal health care and officially recognized minority rights. These and other such changes dramatically affected the quality of Canadians' lives but what matters more to Palmer than any of it is the fact that capitalism did not collapse. Had the liberation-seeking revolutionaries succeeded, they would likely have governed repressively, not unlike their political mentors, Lenin, Mao and co., another irony of the era, thankfully unrealized.