

Matthew Levin
*Cold War University: Madison and the New Left
 in the Sixties*

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Public universities are political institutions, not only in the sense that they are state-funded, but also that they function as cradles of social and political dissent against the state. In *Cold War University*, Matthew Levin explores the paradoxical relationship between these two aspects of the public university in postwar America. His study centres on the University of Wisconsin-Madison (hereafter, “Wisconsin” or “UW-Madison”), one of America’s leading public universities, and, in the 1960s, an important centre of New Left student activism. Levin argues that Wisconsin was one of many “Cold War universities” in the postwar years. In other words, the federal government funded such universities generously for Cold War-related research. This unprecedented infusion of government money allowed universities to expand, but in the process, it created the conditions for the emergence of a vibrant movement of student radicals. As Levin explains, this “was the contradiction in American higher education that emerged during these years, with universities becoming increasingly central to the Cold War struggle even as they became centers of protest against Cold War policies” (7). The author’s framework of analysis is not entirely new; Rebecca Lower coined the term “cold war university” in her study of Stanford, and Jeremy Suri has written about the “contradictions of the Cold War” in the context of West Berlin’s Free University. What makes Levin’s argument unique is that he uses this framework to analyze radical student activism at a large American public university.

One of the strengths of Levin’s work is that it demonstrates how the Cold War university environment of the 1940s and 1950s laid the foundations for the appearance of a New Left scene in the 1960s. Consequently, he devotes the first three chapters to the history of UW-Madison in the early postwar period. The first chapter explores the growth of federal funding in the decades following the Second World War. The next

two chapters concern the campus left of the 1940s and 1950s, and the university's progressive intellectual environment. Wisconsin's left-wing student milieu consisted of Jewish youth from out of state (especially New Jersey and New York) as well as home-grown radicals, who gravitated to Communist-affiliated campus groups such as the Labor Youth League. Such groups were never large and they faced opposition, but Levin argues that UW-Madison administrators were relatively tolerant of them, because of the university's long-standing commitment to free speech. Consequently, the university made space for a campus left—not only Communist-affiliated groups, but also the Socialist Club and the Student Peace Center formed in the late 1950s. Left-wing students—including many graduate students—found mentors and role models in faculty such as William Appleman Williams, a diplomatic historian and critic of America's Cold War foreign policy. Furthermore, many Wisconsin graduate students developed their critique of “corporate, Cold War liberalism” on the pages of *Studies on the Left*, which began publishing out of UW-Madison in 1959.

The chapters that follow focus on the 1960s and the emergence of a New Left at UW-Madison. The civil rights movement provided young activists with an opportunity to travel south and put their bodies on the line in the Freedom Rides and voter registration; it also provided a model for civil disobedience strategies that they could employ on university campuses such as UW-Madison. However, the Vietnam War was an even greater spur to activism in the mid- to late 1960s. It also spurred the growth of radical campus-based groups at Wisconsin such as Students for a Democratic Society, the Committee to End the War in Vietnam, and University Community Action. Levin shows how these groups resorted to confrontational, disruptive methods to protest the University of Wisconsin's complicity with the American government's prosecution of the war in Vietnam. For Levin, the two key examples of confrontation between students and university authorities are the May 1966 “Draft Sit-In,” and the October 1967 protests against Dow Chemical's recruitment efforts on campus. Levin devotes an entire chapter to the latter episode (which involved thousands of students and ended in a violent police crackdown), in which he paints a sympathetic picture of the chancellor William Sewell as a tragic figure with little room to manoeuvre. For Levin, the Dow Chemical protests, and the university's response, were “the culmination of the paradoxes of Cold War-era higher education at the University of Wisconsin” (136).

Levin's final chapter, “Endings and Beginnings,” is the weakest chapter in an otherwise strong monograph. He briefly touches on a multitude of developments, some of which would merit chapters in themselves. For example, in August 1969, radicals bombed Sterling Hall, resulting in the death of a physics postdoctoral researcher. Their intended target was the Army Mathematics Research Center, a symbol of the university's complicity with the “war machine.” Though this is a prime example of the contradictions of a Cold War university, Levin devotes merely four paragraphs to the episode; his account lacks the drama and depth of detail with which he treats the Dow protests. Furthermore, the gay liberation and environmental movements receive two sentences each, while the counterculture and second-wave feminism merit each approximately a page and a half. These four movements are seen as extensions of New

Left activism, but “outside the confines of the New Left” (177), an interpretation that some scholars would find debatable.

Such qualms aside, *Cold War University* is an impressive book, rooted in extensive archival research and oral interviews. It is a readable and informative work exploring the New Left at an important public university in the American Midwest, in the context of the problematic postwar relationship between the university and the federal government. Moreover, readers familiar with the trajectory of 1960s radicalism at other universities in the United States and Canada will find many parallels with the events described in Levin’s study. In short, *Cold War University* is a welcome addition to the growing body of scholarship on the North American student left in this turbulent era.