What Really Happened to the 1960s, by Edward P. Morgan

Reviewed by Eliza Bryant:

Journalist Edward P. Morgan’s captivating book, What Really Happened to the 1960s, examines the intersection between capitalism, democracy, and the mass media through the lens of the social movements of the 1960s. Morgan breaks down common misconceptions about 1960s activism to demonstrate how the media’s depiction of the social movements ultimately reinforced dominant ideological beliefs of the American capitalist political economy. More than a simple historical analysis, however, Morgan’s book is especially important because it uses the legacy of the 1960s, a very politically provocative era, to speculate on the future of American politics, economy, and democratic participation.

Through a close analysis of how the American mass media framed the Civil Rights, Women’s Liberation, anti-war, New Left, Black Power, and student movements, Morgan suggests that the 1960s birthed a “counter-democratic public discourse” with regard to social activism that still permeates in modern society. In other words, by focusing on visual representations of protest as opposed to their salient political messages, the mass media has created a superficial outlook on activism that distances the public from crucial aspects of the fundamental democratic process. He argues that such a discourse, contingent on the confines of “legitimate” media framing of events, has contributed to an ill-informed collective memory of the 1960s and ultimately a “depoliticization” of sixties-era social movements. Morgan contends that, today, Americans regard 1960s protestors as a “restless generation” instead of a democratically empowered one and, due to the commoditization of countercultural images, tend to pay more attention to protestors’ appearance than their political ideas. For example, he notes, the public associates images of “long-haired youth” and “black militants in afros” with 1960s counterculture but is unable to link such images to specific events or political convictions.

Morgan orients the reader toward the numerous factors that inspired 1960s political unrest by providing a thorough cultural, political, and social context beginning at World War II. He includes sources like Life Magazine, the New York Times, Newsweek, and Time Magazine, as well as political speeches, television programs, and films. By putting these sources in conversation with social, cultural, and media theory, he creates a thoughtful and intelligent analysis of the mass media coverage allotted to sixties-era activism.

Morgan acknowledges the existing high level of grassroots activism regarding issues of social justice and environmental sustainability today in American society and, therefore, deliberately situates democracy as a central theme in his text. While he writes that contemporary social and political conditions such as “war, shattering poverty, and ecological erosion” demand collective action, he indicates that the mass media’s control over public memory of the 1960s inhibits this. The mass media, he says, “have been the major vehicle used by the Right and the corporate center in fanning the flames of ideological backlash against sixties-era social movements”. Morgan’s book becomes politicized through his linkage between the mass media and the political Right along with his attempt to discredit such ideological backlash by proving that much of it was based on media-driven myths. He calls upon readers to recognize that as a partial result of “free market” economic imperatives of the Right, the sixties movements have been “converted
into their antithesis” and now are central to many marketing schemes and consumer products. Morgan’s argument leaves a lasting impression on the reader by portraying the power of the media over Americans’ democratic instincts and history’s incredible power over the present.