

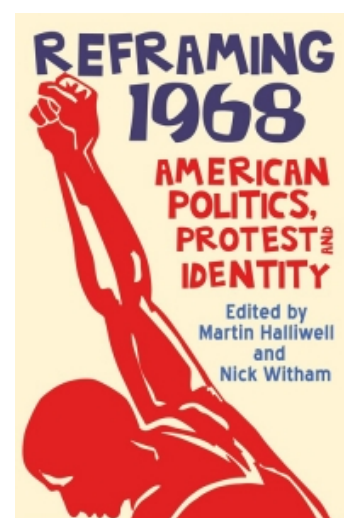
Book Review: Reframing 1968: American Politics, Protest and Identity edited by Martin Halliwell and Nick Witham

Edited by Martin Halliwell and Nick Witham, the collection Reframing 1968: American Politics, Protest and Identity offers a volume of essays exploring the social and cultural currents that contributed to the making of a defining year in an iconic decade. The volume's robust investigation of the socio-economic dimensions of power and protest complicates and enhances our understanding of 1968 as a unique and contested moment in US and global history, writes Jeff Roquen.

Reframing 1968: American Politics, Protest and Identity. Martin Halliwell and Nick Witham (eds). Edinburgh University Press. 2018.

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It was a spectacle never before witnessed in US political history. In the tense days leading up to the 1968 Democratic National Convention, wave after wave of politically active youth poured into the city. They came by the hundreds and the thousands. As the idealistic and energised flocks gathered in the streets of Chicago to protest the US war effort in Vietnam and demand an immediate military withdrawal, Major Richard J. Daley, a seasoned machine politician, would brook no dissent. Beyond denying permits to circumscribe the movements of the protesters, he also assembled a massive force of more than 20,000 police officers and Illinois National Guardsmen to 'maintain order'. Shortly after Democratic Party leaders inside the Convention rejected a proposed platform to end the war, the increasingly frustrated activists decided to defy city ordinances and march through restricted areas, provoking a 'police riot' captured on live television. As demonstrators chanted 'The Whole World Is Watching!', Americans from coast to coast processed images of young people being kicked, punched, clubbed, dragged on cement and sprayed with mace by authorities. Were these scenes of progressive change and revolution, or disorder and anarchy?



Unlike the other years in the tumultuous 1960s, 1968 continues to be regarded as a long, twelve-month defining moment for the US. In *Reframing 1968: American Politics, Protest and Identity*, editors Martin Halliwell and Nick Witham offer a perceptive volume of essays exploring the social and cultural cross-currents in the making of an iconic year and decade.

The opening chapter 'The New Left: The American Impression' by Doug Rossinow in Part One of the book, 'Politics of Protest', supplies readers with a well-written, requisite overview of the rise of anti-establishment coalitions and their far-reaching impact on US society. By rejecting the economic determinism of orthodox Marxism and focusing on both eliminating racial segregation and reducing the power of the 'military-industrial complex' through the introduction of democratic checks and balances, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) mobilised a significant portion of the young baby-boomer generation to wage direct action campaigns against institutionalised racism and the Vietnam War. In March 1968, the SDS faction at Columbia University in New York created a *cause célèbre* and exemplified its dual political strategy by occupying several campus buildings to protest both the affiliation between Columbia and a think-tank associated with the Department of Defense as well as the impoverishment of the African-American community in Morningside Heights and Harlem. Although the students prevailed, their disruptive approach to politics alienated many of the general public.

Chapter Three, 'The Irony of Protest: Vietnam and the Path to Permanent War' by Andrew Preston, presents a near-perfect complement to Rossinow's analysis. In the weeks after President Lyndon Johnson announced his decision not to seek re-election on 31 March, the assassinations of anti-war and Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. on 4 April and presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy on 6 June stalled the momentum of the New Left. At the same time, however, Preston astutely acknowledges the unintended, long-term consequence (or irony) of the Vietnam War protests. Rather than ending US military involvement in South East Asia, the anti-war chorus ultimately served to placate public opinion by transferring combat operations to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), thereby reducing US ground forces and combat deaths while simultaneously enabling the expansion of aerial bombing campaigns on North Vietnam. Despite the new tack in war fighting, air power failed to save South Vietnam. When Saigon surrendered to Hanoi on 30 April 1975, the internecine conflict finally ended after two decades of war, and the United States suffered declines in its international prestige and credibility.



Image Credit: 'I'm a Man' mural designed by Marcellous Lovelace, Memphis, TN, USA, showing Sanitation Workers Protest March on 28 March, 1968, originally captured by photographer Richard L. Copley ([Xzelenz CC BY SA 4.0](#))

In Part Two, 'Spaces of Protest', two accomplished essays, 'On Fire: The City and American Protest in 1968' by Daniel Matlin and 'Centering the Yard: Student Protest on Campus in 1968' by Stefan M. Bradley, examine how grassroots organising effectively challenged the institutions of power and privilege. Although American prosperity remained unrivalled upon the election of President John F. Kennedy in 1960, massive income inequality existed due to de-industrialisation and widespread racial exclusion. In his objective 'to capture the importance of the American city [...] as both a *site* of protest [...] and a *focus* of protest', Matlin briefly summarises the 'urban crisis' resulting from the decline in manufacturing jobs and the flight of white professionals to suburban communities (109). While the loss of tax revenue from businesses and property owners in the inner cities resulted in decaying infrastructure and poorly-funded schools, the concomitant absence of employment opportunities, especially for African Americans, created an impoverished section of society fraught with destitution and despair. To combat the pernicious effects of poverty, SDS rolled out the Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP) in more than a dozen cities for the purpose of rallying residents to '[demand] full employment or a guaranteed minimum income' (112). Through years of hardship and race riots in Harlem (New York, 1964), Watts (Los Angeles, 1965), Newark (1967) and Detroit (1967), ERAP attained some success in calling attention to the plight of the poor and securing economic aid programmes.

According to Bradley, scholarly literature on the 1960s largely overlooks the pivotal role of black college student-activists in campus protests against Eurocentric curricula and the paucity of non-white students at universities nationwide, standing at only 4.8 per cent in 1965 (143). In his compelling chapter, the leadership exerted by young, black, college-educated students in alliance with white college activists at San Francisco State, Yale, Northwestern, Duke University, The University of Alabama, Howard University and Pembroke College not only opened the doors to increasing admissions for minorities, but also literally altered the course of history. Consequent to their demands, institutions of higher learning inaugurated Black Studies programmes to rethink Western civilisation from the perspective of slavery and oppression. During the Black Studies Movement (BSM), female and Latino college students simultaneously pressured administrators to design Women's Studies and Ethnic Studies classes and departments to deconstruct the patriarchal norms of society and reflect the full diversity of US life.

Of the twelve articles in the collection, Part Three, 'Identities and Protest', brings together four salient and substantive critiques on the intersectionality of race, class and gender. In '1968: End of the Civil Rights Era?', Stephen Tuck extends the timeline of the Civil Rights period to include several critical legal, political and organisational victories into the 1970s. Through Title VII of the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Philadelphia Plan (1969), which set a precedent for 'affirmative action in federal hiring', elected officials and activists leveraged the anti-discriminatory legislation to win concessions in the public and private sectors (213). As black residents of the District of Columbia banded together to obtain their fair share of jobs on the new Metro train system in 1970, African American mayors in cities across America recruited minority candidates into a plethora of civil service positions. When Congress enacted the Public Works Employment Act (PWEA) requiring the government to 'set aside 10 percent of federal contracts for Minority Business Enterprises' seven years later, it was a crowning achievement after years of struggle (214).

Many high school and college history textbooks trace the birth of the modern LGBT movement to the Stonewall riots in response to the intimidation tactics employed by NYC police at the Stonewall Inn in June-July 1969. Readers of 'Gay Liberation and the Spirit of '68' by Simon Hall, however, will likely be persuaded to regard events in the previous year as equally foundational. Five weeks after staging a rally at Independence Hall in Philadelphia for gay rights on 4 July 1968, the North American Conference of Homophile Organizations (NACHO, pronounced 'Nay-Ko') convened in Chicago to promote a 'Homosexual Bill of Rights', stipulating that 'private consensual sex between persons over the age of consent shall not be an offense' and 'a person's sexual orientation or practice should not affect his eligibility for employment' (228). From Los Angeles to New York City, members of NACHO and their supporters chanted 'Gay is Good' and marched for dignity and equality, emboldening LGBT people to stand up for their rights and thus setting the stage for Stonewall.

Beyond the two erudite closing essays, 'Women's Movements in 1968 and Beyond' and 'Organizing for Economic Justice in the Late 1960s' by Anne M. Valk and Penny Lewis respectively, three additional articles, including one dissecting the competing strands of right-wing populism in the Southwest, complete the study. Through its robust investigation of the socio-economic dimensions of power and protest, *Reframing 1968* complicates and enhances our understanding of 1968 as a unique inflection point in history – and one still contested in academic, social and political circles.

Jeff Roquen is an independent scholar based in the United States. [Read more reviews by Jeff Roquen.](#)

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.