

Paul Lauter, *Our Sixties: An Activist's History*

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- 1 Paul Lauter's new book – a task of twenty years! – presents itself as “a fine piece of social history masterfully woven into a very moving, honest, and personal memoir” (Ramalho 1). The reader is indeed exposed to an honest and self-critical reappraisal of a long and rich life story of an intellectual profoundly committed to political causes. But, at the same time, the reader is given access to a personal lens into “the sixties” as a founding moment in the history of the United States of America.
- 2 The book is composed of thirteen chapters and two Appendixes – “A Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority” and “Syllabus for a Course on the Sixties” – the titles of which clearly signaling the two main sides of Paul Lauter's life journey: activism and teaching. There is also a carefully selected bibliography on the Sixties that includes items authored, coauthored, edited and coedited by Lauter but does not include references to materials of the archival collections he set up at Trinity College's Watkinson Library (many of them recorded in the notes). Stitching the whole narrative we find quotes from poems, poetry proving to be one of his passions.
- 3 The chapters follow a timeline between the late fifties and the present, from his “political coming out” (14) in the early 1960s to his evaluation of the present scenario. The early 1960s provided him with a long series of enriching experiences, including his contact with a local branch of the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE). Currently, he hopefully observes that “white power, male power, National Rifle Association power, military ‘warrior’ power, ‘conservative’ austerity power are being

brought into question, together with the power of the billionaire's purse" (224) by "what links the variety of reforms directed against the operations of power in our society – for example, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, gun control, opposition to an intolerable military budget, Red for Ed." He is also hopeful about the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, the Green New Deal and Medicare for All.

- 4 Chapter One, "The Movement and Me," perfectly connects up with the last one, "Authority and our Discontents," composing a sort of frame for the said "recollection" that is narrated in the book as a whole. Both chapters offer a chance for establishing a line of coherence but also the adequate distance between two times. It was, after all, Lauter's purpose: "to illuminate that earlier period of upheaval we call 'the sixties' for 2020" (225). The coherence has to do with the will to change, in pursuit of perennial values, such as freedom and equality, and the distance with updated goals, such as "supporting public schools, ending gerrymandering and other threats to voting rights, and seriously addressing climate change and inequality" (2).
- 5 As Lauter states in the first chapter, his involvement in the "movement" of the sixties should not "be seen primarily as an autobiographical phenomenon, related to [his] personal growth" (16). This he does not deny, but "more to the point, the movement would come to transform [his] understanding of education and work, and therefore of politics" (16-17). Thus, the reader should not expect this book to be simply an account of the social history of an era. It is a multifarious lens on the learnings of an inquiring and critical mind, profiting both from personal successes and setbacks, constantly searching for a transformation of the institutions of a nation wrecked by so many contradictions. As his words set it modestly but clearly: "This is a report, then, of an ordinary participant learning to carry out the progressive values of the sixties movements for change" (18).
- 6 Chapter Three leads us to one striking learning experience, his participation in the Freedom Schools in Mississippi, where Lauter was confronted with the crude reality of segregation along with invaluable lessons in the connection between schooling and empowerment: "the teacher," the holder of a PhD in English from Yale, turned actually into the "student," learning from the kids about what it meant to be Black in America. The sharing of this primal lesson is worth quoting: "The movement perspective I learned in Mississippi thus redefined for me the fundamental objectives of teaching and learning. How we study and what we learn express what and who our society sees as important, essential to know, and thus to respect; the curriculum defines not just what matters but who 'matters'" (51). That's why he says that he first encountered Black Lives Matter in Mississippi in 1964!
- 7 In this report, that goes through the paranoiac years of the Cold War in the United States, there is no fear of speaking the word socialism and embracing it as a way to combat the ills of capitalism, militarism, racism and sexism, and produce "a social and political difference in a divided and often enraged nation" (3). He addresses the lengthy history of derogation of the term socialism in the United States, but gets satisfaction from verifying that the sentiments about it have significantly changed, especially those of the young (223). Today, as in the years of the movement, the idea of socialism ("democratic socialism" or "new socialism", for that matter) is "based on radical principles of equality and people before profits [...] a way of implementing fundamental change in the world." (5). While American capitalism stays as "an anti-democratic, indeed dangerous form of economic organization" (222) and "the mainstream

American assumption that money equals power” (224) prevails, it is imperative to resist.

- 8 A life of activism started with his long years of involvement in anti-Vietnam war, Anti-draft organizations, and Peace studies, interrupting a budding academic career only to be resumed in the early 1970s. In *Resist*, the organization that emerged from the “Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority,” and to which he became national director, the work was extended to include anti-racism, feminism and other progressive activities. He is also the man who declares that “one cannot deal with the oppressive structure of patriarchy without from the beginning addressing race (190), “the main wall blocking progressive change in our society” (221), and was often the only male attending feminist meetings, later co-founding The Feminist Press.
- 9 One of his fights – and one particularly difficult – was to find a place for activism in the academy, an emerging debate in the sixties but a longstanding conflict still prevailing today, I would say. Academy is supposed to rhyme with objectivity and neutrality, however Lauter is aware of “the political implications of the choices we make about what to study and what to teach” (36). He is also aware that academics help “reproduce the structure and culture of American capitalist society” (155) and American moral exceptionalism. For our benefit, his efforts had important outcomes, like the revision/expansion of the canon, which led to the *Reconstructing American Literature* project and, growing out of it, the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, and enterprises like The Feminist Press and the archive at Trinity. As the author acknowledges, experiences of organization, travel, pedagogical experiments (at the Morgan Community School, the New University Conference at UMBC, or the SUNY at Old Westbury), and new relationships with activist-scholars like Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn and Staughton Lynd changed him as an academic and an intellectual. And I would say that his achievements changed American literature and pedagogy forever. The Trump election in 2016 and its calamitous consequences reinforced his determination to return to this agenda (33).
- 10 Although Paul Lauter argues that the movement “never really succeeded in moving from protest to resistance” (179), from beginning to end of this chronicle, we find a vibrant voice of brave and consistent resistance: a practice of a lifetime for human rights and against what he designates as “illegitimate authority,” (133, 134, 138, 143, 221, 222, 227) a valuable lesson in citizenship and a pedagogy for liberty, equality and peace (“action from principle,” as he learns from Thoreau [“Civil Disobedience,” qtd Lauter 35]). By the end we can say that his vision is not optimistic, rather a lucid perspective of a scrupulous and uncompromising mind: “Neither pacifism nor socialism emerged from the peace movement. American policies remain arrogant, violent, and chock-full of fraud. But we taught ourselves, and many others, to stand up – often by sitting down. We’re still teaching, and thereby learning, the lessons of this movement” (182).
- 11 Following a far from stable period of activism, unionism and love relationships, Paul Lauter finally became a distinguished, prize-winning scholar of English and American Studies, currently Allan K. and Gwendolyn Miles Smith Professor of Literature, Emeritus, at Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut. Therefore, it is salutary to have the author confronting his own location of privilege (“mine is in some sense an American success story” [225]) in his journey of self-discovery and self-reappraisal. And it is certainly rewarding to find out that he has not given his heart away! (225).

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