Challenging Myths of the 1960s: The Case of Student Protest in Britain

Abstract

While much current scholarship and research on the 1960s takes the existence of a number of myths about the 1960s for granted, effective attempts to define and challenge such myths are rare. One aspect of the period that has suffered conspicuously from this neglect, and indeed from a lack of detailed research, is the series of protests by students that occurred in Britain in the second half of the decade. The myths that have been constructed around these protests are numerous, and many are, at first glance at least, persuasive. When they are analysed, however, they are found to be misleading, and have resulted in the creation of a distorted view of this aspect of the period.

In the late 1960s, while the streets of Paris and numerous other cities in America and Europe were occupied by rioting students and were littered with burning cars, students were also protesting in Britain. At the time these protests provoked extreme reactions, ranging from fear to hope, and from anticipation to contempt. In subsequent decades they have been

* Much of the research informing this article has contributed to my doctoral thesis, 'The British Student Movement from 1965 to 1972' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Warwick, 1997). Some of it also formed part of a paper entitled 'British Student Protest in the 1960s', which was given at the Coming Down Fast! Replaying the 1960s conference, at the University of Wolverhampton on 12 July 1998. I am grateful for the constructive comments and response toward the paper at this conference. I am also indebted to the advice and support of Professor Carolyn Steedman, Professor Gwynne Lewis, Dr John Stevenson, Dr James Hinton, my former colleagues at the Open University, and the staff and students of the History Department at the University of Nottingham. As ever, thanks are due for the proof-reading and suggestions of Gabriele Thomas-Neher of Nottingham University.

1 Quoted in Robert Murphy, Sixties British Cinema (London, 1988), 1, from Peter York,
viewed with affection or horror by some people, and by others they have been dismissed as the irrelevant rantings of an extremist minority or the growing pains of wealthy adolescents. Perhaps more than any other decade, the 1960s have been the subject of myth making. It has even been suggested that ‘most people under forty, in describing the sixties, at least defer to the media sixties’. At one of the rare conferences on the 1960s, at the University of Wolverhampton in July 1998, references to the ‘myths of the 1960s’ were made in almost every paper. The student protests of the 1960s are a particularly rich source of such myths, variations of which have also been applied to student protests in numerous countries in Western Europe and North America. By outlining some examples of these myths, analysing them, and then demonstrating their inaccuracy by applying them to examples of the protests, one is forced to reconsider the nature and origins of these protests, and this in turn provides a new understanding of their importance for post-war British society.

The research that informs this article concentrated upon two main forms of student protest. This included the wave of sit-ins that affected higher and further education institutions in the late 1960s, such as those at the LSE, and Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool, Bristol, Keele, and Leicester Universities in 1968. Research was also carried out upon street demonstrations, such as those against Enoch Powell, those against nuclear weapons, and above all those that targeted the Vietnam War. This latter issue prompted more people to engage in more protests than any other in Britain in the 1960s. This was part of a wider international phenomenon of student protest, and the protests in Britain will be discussed within this wider global context.

These protests were a new phenomenon, which took contemporary observers by surprise. For the first time, large numbers of young people challenged the decisions and attitudes of authorities and members of older generations. One commentator lamented that

no such thing could possibly have occurred . . . twenty years ago . . . first, because very few of us cared enough about politics; secondly, because we would have regarded such behaviour as a breach of hospitality; thirdly, because we were disposed to be courteous to our elders, even when we despised them; and finally, because in any case at all we should have had more amusing and profitable things to do.3

These protests also defied the usual explanations for protest, since unlike

2 Spectator, 19 April 1968, 7.
the marches of the 1930s, and unlike industrial action, they were not about employment, or the state of the economy. Indeed, they were usually altruistic in that they were about issues which did not have an immediate relevance for the everyday lives of those who protested: unlike protesters in America, for example, British students were not going to be drafted to fight in Vietnam. A further element of confusion, which observers could make little sense of, was that participants were members of a generation that had enjoyed unprecedented access to wealth, opportunity, education, and employment. The result was that contemporary observers floundered, desperately trying to understand this surprising new phenomenon, and their attempts to do so added to, and even created, a number of myths. These included suggestions that the protests had been caused by permissive parenting, or that the new influx of working class students was bringing down the tone of university life. There is insufficient space to discuss all of these myths in detail here, but a few key examples will be used to highlight the need for reinterpretation.

Perhaps most strikingly, the protests were dismissed as the work of an extremist revolutionary minority acting in defiance of the student body, or as an example of the corrupting influence of this minority on the majority of students. Sir Sydney Caine, the Director of the LSE during the sit-in of 1967, blamed the sit-in on ‘a small group of about 50 left-wing students who had enticed at most 200 of the school’s total of 3,500 students to join them’. In March 1968, Geoffrey Martin, the President of the National Union of Students (NUS), blamed sit-ins at universities throughout the country on ‘a minority of militants’ and ‘small extremist groups’. The Times even warned that ‘it is constantly repeated that the students who carry their intolerance to the borders of violence or anarchy are a very small proportion of the whole. That is doubtless true. But… they have been able

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3 See Bernard Levin, *The Pendulum Years* (London, 1980), 253–72, and also the *Guardian*, 15 March 1967, 1, for an article in which Sir Sydney Caine and members of LSE staff blame the sit-in at the school on a left-wing minority. See also *Listener*, 4 July 1968, 1, for a similar argument by the Warden of All Souls, Oxford. Other articles of interest are *The Times*, 8 May 1968, 11, the *Guardian*, 7 March 1968, 7, and the editorial in the *Daily Telegraph*, 18 October 1968, 18.
5 *Guardian*, 4 March 1968, 16.
to impose their will on the majority, and in doing so are able to modify the character of their institutions.\footnote{The Times, 8 May 1968, 11.}

To some extent, the left added to this perception. Far-left activists were usually at the forefront of student protests, and were usually the most vocal. Moreover, the rhetoric of far-left organizations portrayed student protests as revolutionary in aims and potential.\footnote{Alexander Cockburn and Robin Blackburn, Student Power: Problems, Diagnosis, Action (Harmondsworth, 1969) is a striking example of the way in which the left portrayed the student protests as being revolutionary.} Headlines in the \textit{Black Dwarf}, the mouthpiece of the International Marxist Group, such as ‘Students. The New Revolutionary Vanguard’ and ‘All Power to the Campus Soviets’, were viewed by contemporary observers alongside statements such as those by the \textit{Black Dwarf} editor Tariq Ali, a prominent figure in student protests.\footnote{\textit{Black Dwarf}, 5 July 1968, 1 and 15 October 1968, 1.}

Suggestions by him that the aim of the anti-Vietnam War demonstration in London on 17 March 1968 had been to invade the American Embassy ‘for just as long as the Vietcong held the American Embassy in Saigon seven weeks ago’ were widely reported and condemned by the press.\footnote{\textit{Sun}, 19 March 1968, 16.} They were used as evidence in support of what seems to have been a widely held view: that the revolutionary left and the student movement were synonymous.

It was a short step from this to the assertion that student protest was part of an international revolutionary conspiracy, and that it was a minority of foreign students who were responsible for ‘stirring up trouble’. Perhaps the most notable example of this line of argument was the coverage given by \textit{The Times} to the supposed entry, or plans for entry, by foreign revolutionaries for the mass anti-Vietnam War demonstration in London on 27 October 1968. Among its front page headlines warning of a ‘militant plot’ to use the demonstration as a cover for an attempted revolution was the headline ‘students enter Britain illegally for rally’.\footnote{\textit{The Times}, 5 September 1968, 1; 15 October 1968, 1; and 26 October 1968, 1. See also ‘Watch for Violent Students’, in \textit{The Times}, 16 October 1968, 1.}

A further twist on this argument, the idea that students were merely copying the example set by students in other countries, such as France, Germany, and the USA, was asserted frequently. The \textit{Guardian}, for instance, suggested in one of its many articles on the subject of student protest that ‘“me-tooism” is beginning to play a rather obvious part in the student revolution. Any student community without a protest of some sort on the stocks invites the charge of complacency, and will be looking for a grievance.’\footnote{\textit{Guardian}, 10 June 1968, 8.}

Clearly, these theories were hostile to, and condemnatory of, student
protest. None of them acknowledged the natural inertia felt by many people when asked to challenge those in authority. They failed to perceive the possibility that protesters could be protesting about issues that were important to them. They were patronizing toward participants, were not based upon research, and were often contradictory. They failed to provide any clear understanding of the issues involved, or of the origins of the protests, and instead added further to the many inaccurate myths about the decade in general that have since been taken for granted. Indeed, many of these ideas about student protests have become a part of the media myth of the 1960s, and have informed many subsequent accounts of the decade, which have either failed to challenge these theories or have actively perpetuated them. Most have concentrated upon the well-publicized leaders of student protests, and particularly the politically active members of far-left organizations. Many accounts have been written by participants themselves, though again these are dominated by leaders rather than reflecting the experiences of the majority. In contrast, some have argued that student protest in Britain was a parochial and small-scale activity in comparison with events in other countries. This subsequent treatment has therefore added to the unrepresentative view of the period created by the theories outlined above.

Although, like many myths, they often contain a grain of truth that makes them plausible, investigation of these theories makes it clear that at best they are amusing in their naivety, while at worst they are seriously inaccurate and misleading. The role of the left will be discussed first before moving on to the international aspects of the myths later in this article. This will make it possible to put forward a new interpretation that will further enable a reassessment of the national and international significance of these protests. It should be made clear at this point that this article is not intended as an attack upon, or support for, the 1960s, the left, the role of the left, or people’s beliefs. There is no intention to attack the idea that for some people these protests were part of a wider revolutionary struggle, or that students were, for some people at least, the possible vanguard of a future workers revolution. Instead, the role of the left will be clarified through an

14 Lin Chun, *The British New Left* (Edinburgh, 1993) is a perfect example of the way in which the view that the left and the student movement are synonymous has been perpetuated unquestioningly by authors in the decades after the 1960s.
15 Ronald Fraser (ed.), *1968: A Student Generation in Revolt: An International Oral History* (New York, 1988) is a particularly clear example of this.
16 See, for example, Tariq Ali, *Street Fighting Years: An Autobiography of the Sixties* (Glasgow, 1985).
18 See, for example, Cockburn and Blackburn, *Student Power*, or any edition of *The Black Dwarf*. 
understanding of the development of the protests in the context of contemporary student politics.

Contrary to the myth that the 1960s were the ‘golden age’ of student protest in Britain, most students seem to have been politically apathetic. Yet while only a very small minority placed themselves on the far left, this minority could rely on the support of the normally apathetic majority during most sit-ins. The NUS had been complaining about student apathy since its foundation in the 1920s, and it was still a problem in the 1960s, the high point of student political activity. A survey which was carried out at Warwick University in June 1968 found that only 7 per cent of students were active in politics, while a survey of Leeds University students discovered in January 1969 that only 15.5 per cent of students there were politically active. One Leicester University student lamented in 1967 that ‘virtually all intelligent and worthwhile debate . . . still takes place among relatively small groups in an atmosphere of comparative privacy. The subject of greatest concern has been the apathy that most of us display towards our Union and its role in the wider community of the University.’

While the 1960s were undoubtedly the period of the greatest political activism and support for protests among students, these statements and statistics do not indicate that it was a halcyon age of revolutionary fervour among the majority of students.

A Gallup Poll survey carried out in May 1968 at Sussex and Cambridge Universities provides further insight into the numbers of students who participated in protests. At Sussex University 270 students were interviewed, and 302 participated at Cambridge University. It was found that 60 per cent at Sussex and 43 per cent at Cambridge were sympathetic to those students who protested about the ‘lack of student representation in university academic affairs’. Only 16 per cent and 32 per cent were opposed respectively. At Sussex 67 per cent of students believed ‘that student protests and demonstrations serve a useful purpose’, while only 8 per cent regarded them as ‘harmful’. It was found, however, that despite this widespread approval of protests, most students did not take part in them on a regular basis. At Sussex University, 25 per cent of students had taken part in demonstrations against the Vietnam War, the largest figure to protest on any single issue. The next most common issue for protest was

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20 Campus, 25 June 1968, 6, and Union News, 24 January 1969, 1. Campus was the student newspaper at Warwick University; Union News was the corresponding publication at Leeds University.
21 Ripple, 12 January 1967, 3. Ripple was the student newspaper at Leicester University.
22 Gallup Poll, Student Demonstrations, May 1968.
nuclear weapons, about which 14 per cent had protested. At Cambridge only 21 per cent of students had taken part in a protest in the twelve months preceding the survey, while at Sussex the corresponding figure was 40 per cent. Similarly, it was found in a survey carried out by the author, amongst staff at Warwick University in 1994 and 1995, that only ten of the people who returned questionnaires had taken part in protests in the 1960s on a regular basis, while most of the rest had only taken part in one protest as a student.

Most students also supported the main parliamentary parties rather than far-left organizations. The majority of students seem to have identified with either the Labour Party or the Conservative Party. For instance, a survey of Liverpool University students in October 1969 found that 28 per cent supported the Conservatives, 27.5 per cent supported Labour, while only 1 per cent identified with the left.23 Only 6 per cent identified with what was termed the ‘extreme left’ in a survey of Manchester University students in February 1969.24 This is hardly surprising, since the far-left organizations only had very small memberships. One estimate has suggested that International Socialism (IS) had between 450 and 500 members in 1968, while the other main force in the student left, the International Marxist Group (IMG), had a mere forty members in early 1968.25 This imbalance was also reflected in the wide range of political allegiances of those who took part in protests. The survey at Warwick University in 1994 and 1995 found that most protesters were Labour Party supporters, but that there were also followers of the Liberals and the Conservatives, as well as the far left. Supporters of these parties were also among those who opposed protests by students. Again, this was also the finding of the survey at the LSE in 1967, making it clear that it is impossible to explain participation in protests as a reflection of political allegiances.26

Yet supporters of the left were generally the most politically active and the most vocal, and played a crucial role in prompting many protests. Members of these organizations were consistently at the forefront of clashes with universities, and in organizing demonstrations against the Vietnam War, for example. Through these activities, and the reaction from those in authority they provoked, these far-left groups were able to prompt normally apathetic students to take part in protests. It has already been

23 Guild Gazette, 14 October 1969, 1. This was the Guild newspaper at Liverpool University.
24 Manchester Independent, 25 February 1969, 8–9. This was the Students’ Union newspaper at Manchester University.
established that there was wide-ranging support among the majority of the student population for protests on a variety of issues. When the far left used these issues to provoke those in authority, they were then able to claim the support of the normally apathetic majority.

Protests are inherently a challenge to the legitimacy of authority. They are therefore a means of influencing decisions, as well as of undermining authority or of forcing the inclusion of protesters within official governmental structures. Student protests were, for the majority, about challenging the decisions of those in authority when these decisions were seen by students to have crossed the bounds of perceived justice, and this was why students from such diverse social and political backgrounds took part. In the wider sense, then, these protests were about changes in society in the post-war period, particularly with regard to the position of the young in relation to those in authority, and changes in attitudes to that authority.

Perhaps the best way in which this can be illustrated is to give detailed examples of the development of a sit-in and a major demonstration. The sit-in at Leeds University which took place in June 1968 and the anti-Vietnam War demonstration in London on 27 October 1968 have been chosen for this purpose. A number of other sit-ins and demonstrations could have been used, but not only do these provide very clear and rounded examples, the sit-in has also been almost completely ignored in subsequent texts, and both protests were the subject of particularly interesting and useful surveys.

The sit-in had its immediate origins in a demonstration against the visit of the right-wing Conservative MP Patrick Wall to Leeds University on 3 May 1968. The demonstration descended into violence, including a much publicized, and yet seemingly fictitious, attack upon Mrs Wall. After the demonstration, the university set up a disciplinary committee, in order to discipline students who were involved in the violence. Like all other universities at the time, Leeds acted in loco parentis, since the age of majority at this time was 21, not being lowered to 18 until 1970. As a result, it was deemed unnecessary to include students in disciplinary committees. Students were therefore tried and convicted by their prosecutors. This was a recurring issue in sit-ins at universities throughout Britain in this period, because few universities included students within their governmental systems. Leeds attempted to pre-empt any problems by co-opting six

27 The Times, 4 May 1968, 1.
29 See National Union of Students, Student Participation in College Government, October 1966, MRC, MSS 280, box 129. This survey of governments in all institutions of higher education in Britain found that only Bristol University allowed students to sit upon its Senate, and no universities allowed students to be represented upon their Councils. Only Birkbeck College allowed students to be represented on its Finance Committee, and students were represented
students to its disciplinary committee, along with six staff members and the
Vice-chancellor, Sir Roger Stevens, who had the casting vote.

At the same time radical students had established a 3rd May Committee.
This group said the selection of the student members of the disciplinary
committee was undemocratic because they were unelected. It also alleged
that there had been politically motivated investigations by the university’s
security service. On 19 June the 3rd May Committee called for a sit-in if its
demands were not met. These included the abolition of security files, the
abolition of the unrepresentative disciplinary committee, and the dismissal
of the heads of the security service. They demanded the acceptance of these
points or the resignation of the Vice-chancellor. Jack Straw, the President of
the Students’ Union at Leeds, and who is currently the Foreign Secretary,
described the calls for a sit-in as ‘bonkers’.

At this point the disciplinary procedures were concluded and five
students were fined a total of £16.10s. Following this, the Union made
investigations into the allegations against the security service, and evi-
dence was alleged to have been uncovered which suggested that the
allegations might be true. The Vice-chancellor then made contradictory
statements on this issue, which seem to have been interpreted as confir-
mation that the allegations were true. At a Union General Meeting on
21 June, there were calls for an inquiry, and the threat was made that if
this was not forthcoming, then a sit-in would take place. By 25 June, the
deadline for the Vice-chancellor’s acceptance of an inquiry, the Union had
received no reply, and so a sit-in was begun, this time with the full support
of Jack Straw and the Union.

Around 400 students immediately occupied the administrative offices
housed in the Parkinson building, and blocked off the Vice-chancellor’s and
the Registrar’s offices. Their numbers were added to throughout the sit-in
by the temporary participation of much larger groups of students. That
evening the Vice-chancellor issued a statement breaking off all negotiations
until the sit-in was ended. This was a classic tactic by university authorities.
Refusing to talk meant that students had to endure considerable physical
hardship, which became gradually worse, while of course, ending the sit-in
would remove the students’ leverage and destroy their unity. The con-
ditions for occupying students are adequately summed up by one
participant in the Birmingham University sit-in of December 1968, who
wondered, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, ‘when you’re sitting in what can
you do about changing your socks? After three days in the same pair they
not only have a very distinctive odour . . . but they also change their

on Disciplinary Committees only at Salford University, Sunderland College, and the
University of Wales Institute of Science and Technology.

30 Union News, 28 June 1968, 1.
A participant in the Liverpool University sit-in in March 1970 complained that ‘the floors were hard, even though the carpets were thick, and few people got any sleep during the whole of the occupation. Towards the end people were wandering around in a permanent stupor’.

Although in many cases student occupiers rotated their participation in sit-ins, in many cases this was either not possible or some students determined to see the protest through from beginning to end. Faced with the difficulties of supplying food, with maintaining hygiene, and even with sleeping, students involved in sit-ins could only expect to maintain continuous involvement for limited periods of time. After having endured similar conditions, on 27 June the students at Leeds sent a letter to the Vice-chancellor asking for a public inquiry. When this request was refused, the sit-in came to an end and the impasse continued. No inquiry was ever held, but later that year a committee was established by the university to look into proposals for a new disciplinary procedure and new involvement of students in university government.

This was a classic example of a sit-in at a British university in the 1960s. As with most sit-ins elsewhere, a small group of radical students prompted a reaction from university authorities after an earlier protest action. When that reaction was also perceived as undemocratic and unjust, this small group was able to command the support of large numbers of students who were normally politically apathetic and moderate. This is further highlighted by a survey of 546 Leeds University students which was carried out by the Student Union newspaper Union News in January 1969, just six months after the sit-in. It has already been stated that this survey found that only 15.5 per cent of students described themselves as politically active. It also found that 86 per cent described Union politics as boring and that 63 per cent did not agree with the demonstration against Patrick Wall, as opposed to just 22 per cent who supported it. With regard to politics, 22.5 per cent supported Labour, 35 per cent supported the Conservatives, 16 per cent supported the Liberals, 20 per cent were don’t knows, and only

31 Rodbrick, 4 December 1968, 3. This was the student newspaper at Birmingham University.
33 See Blackstone et al., Students in Conflict, which makes it clear that the length of time students took part in the LSE sit-in for was in direct relation to their political views. The more left-leaning the student, the more likely they were to stay for several days. A notable exception to many of the physical problems encountered at other sit-ins was the occupation of Hornsey College of Art from May to July 1968. Uniquely, students at Hornsey took over the running of the college as a whole, including the canteen and the supply of food. The result was that this was the longest sit-in in British history. See The Staff and Students of the Hornsey College of Art, The Hornsey Affair (Hammondsworth, 1968). See also MRC, MSS 280, box 52/HG, for extensive archive material relating to this occupation, and the sit-in at Guildford College of Art.
3.5 per cent identified with the left. This corresponds with the statistics provided above for Liverpool and Manchester Universities, and yet at Leeds, where the majority of students were politically inactive, the left was able to prompt large numbers of these moderate students into taking part in a serious challenge to the authority of the university government, because that authority crossed perceived boundaries of justice and democracy. Students used protest as a means of influencing those in authority, and they challenged the legitimacy of authority which excluded them from equal representation and consideration. For most students, then, the protests were about removing their disenfranchised condition. In other words, most students wanted to gain an official place in the system of government, rather than wanting to overthrow that government.

This case is further strengthened by an examination of other forms of protest, such as demonstrations which took place away from the university environment. The anti-Vietnam War demonstration in London on 27 October 1968 is a good example. Again, other demonstrations could have been discussed, and in some respects the unusual size of this particular demonstration makes it unrepresentative, but as with other aspects of the campaign against the Vietnam War, this demonstration does illustrate the numerous ways in which protesters viewed the aims of protests. The demonstration was organized by an ad hoc committee that was comprised of a variety of groups, with different political aims. These included such diverse organizations as the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, Australians and New Zealanders Against the War, International Socialism, the International Marxist Group, the Young Liberals, the Medical Aid Committee for Vietnam, the London Peace Committee, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), the Portuguese Students Committee, and the Young Communist League.35 It was the largest in a series of demonstrations by groups opposed to the Vietnam War that had been taking place since the start of American direct military intervention in Vietnam in 1965. The Vietnam War was, and remains, highly emotive. Nevertheless, it represented another issue that prompted people with a variety of political aims and allegiances to protest because of perceived injustice.

The events leading up to the October 1968 demonstration provide an important context for the attitudes of participants and the response from the press that informed many of the explanatory theories already outlined. Since its small beginnings in 1965 in demonstrations by CND in London, or by small university groups in other cities, the campaign against the

35 See ‘October 27 Ad Hoc Committee, Briefing to all demonstrators: “Street Power”’, printed leaflet, MRC, MSS 21/3369/29. This gives instructions to marchers at the anti-Vietnam War demonstration in London on 27 October 1968, such as the planned route, and advice on what to do if arrested.
Vietnam War had grown continuously. Among the kaleidoscopic variety of protests, such as sponsored walks for medical aid, teach-ins, and television debates, the most common form of protest against the Vietnam War was the march and demonstration. Although the British Council for Peace in Vietnam (BCPV) was founded in May 1965 as a pacifist group aimed at bringing the war to an end, it was rapidly overtaken in the size of its support by the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (or VSC; founded in June 1966), and it was this latter organization that played the most prominent role in organizing demonstrations against the War. It was dominated by IS and IMG, and in contrast to the pacifist opposition to the war, VSC was ‘committed to the victory of the Vietnamese people against the war of aggression [sic] and atrocity waged by the United States’.

VSC organized a series of increasingly violent, and ever larger, demonstrations in London in the period before the demonstration on 27 October 1968. The VSC demonstration in London on 2 July 1967 was attended by 5,000 people, and resulted in thirty-one arrests after skirmishes with police. The demonstration in London on 22 October 1967 attracted 4–8,000 people, and again forty-seven people were arrested after clashes with police.

36 See *Sanity*, July 1965, 8, MRC, MSS 181, for the demonstration in London by ‘several thousand’ CND supporters on 29 May. This was attended by Joan Baez, and was ‘in protest against the war in Vietnam’. See also the *Manchester Independent*, 7 December 1965, 5, for a description of the demonstration in Manchester by the newly formed Manchester University Peace in Vietnam Committee on 27 November. The march was attended by 200 students, eleven of whom were arrested after clashes with police.

37 One hundred students at Birmingham University took part in a twenty-mile walk around the city in aid of Medical Supplies for Vietnam in November 1967. See *Redbrick*, 22 November 1967, 3. Teach-ins took place at numerous locations. The first took place at the Oxford Union on 16 June 1965. It was televised as part of the BBC 1 programme ‘Gallery’ and was also broadcast on radio as part of the ‘Third Programme’. See *Daily Mail*, 17 June 1965, 16, and the *Guardian*, 16 June 1965, 1. See also *Guild Gazette*, 25 October 1966, 2, for a teach-in at Liverpool University. On 15 May seventeen British and European students took part in a satellite television debate in Vietnam with Ronald Reagan and Robert Kennedy. See *Manchester Independent*, 23 May 1967, 1. Also in May 1967 the Leeds University CND and Peace in Vietnam societies mounted an exhibition of photographs of the Vietnam War in an effort to raise awareness of the war. See *Union News*, 5 May 1967, 1. These are just a small number of the possible examples of protest activities against the Vietnam War carried out by British students.

38 Archive material for the BCPV can be found at MRC, MSS 189/V, box 1, file 1. Archive material for the VSC can be found at MRC, MSS 189/V, box 1, file 7, and at MSS 149, box 5, file 2. Of course, demonstrations were organized by other groups, and took place in other cities, and would be worthy of a volume in their own right. A good example is the demonstration by approximately 2,000 students in Sheffield against Harold Wilson, in which the US flag was burnt and protesters clashed with police. This was organized by Sheffield Universities’ Marxist Society and its Vietnam Action Group. See *Darts*, 7 February 1968, 7. *Darts* was the newspaper of Sheffield University Student Union.

39 ‘What is the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign?’, recruitment flyer, MRC, MSS 21/1124. MSS 21 contains posters and flyers for a number of other anti-Vietnam organizations, such as the British Vietnam Committee.

40 *VSC Bulletin*, July–August 1967, no. 6, 1, MRC, MSS 149, box 5, file 2. See also *Campus*, 3 October 1967, 1 for a participants’ account. *Campus* was the newspaper of Warwick University Student Union. *The Times*, 3 July 1967, 1, also gives a useful report.
police.\textsuperscript{41} Then, on 17 March 1968, VSC held the largest and most violent demonstration to take place in London in the post-war period up to that date, when between 10 and 20,000 demonstrators took part in a demonstration outside the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square. One estimate suggests that there were 300 arrests and thirty-six injuries.\textsuperscript{42} This was met by widespread condemnation from the contemporary media, whose fears of an escalation in violence were exacerbated by the rhetoric of the VSC organizers (see the comments by Tariq Ali, quoted above), the violent events in France in May, and the student protests taking place elsewhere around the world. The \textit{Daily Mail} argued that ‘this kind of thing has to be stopped’, while the \textit{Sun} suggested that demonstrations against individual targets such as embassies ‘should be banned’.\textsuperscript{43} The \textit{Daily Telegraph} lamented that ‘there were moments when the crowd seemed bent on violence as an end in itself’ and also discussed the banning of such marches.\textsuperscript{44} In the months following this demonstration, and especially after the events in France in May 1968, statements such as ‘it could happen here – but it needn’t’ in the \textit{Guardian} became so common in the British press that \textit{Private Eye} even satirized it.\textsuperscript{45} The mass demonstration planned for London on 27 October 1968 therefore became the target of a press campaign.\textsuperscript{46}

In September \textit{The Times}, which was the most vocal newspaper in its opposition to the demonstration, even carried a front-page story about a ‘militant plot’ to use the demonstration as the spring-board for a violent revolution.\textsuperscript{47} When the demonstration took place, however, the overwhelming majority of the 100,000 participants were peaceful, and only a small group broke away from the main march with the intention of marching on Grosvenor Square. When they were stopped by police violent clashes ensued, which resulted in approximately fifty injuries and forty-three arrests.\textsuperscript{48} Again, this was a classic, though extremely large, example of a demonstration against the Vietnam War.

Yet this demonstration, and the others named above, were more
complex and less threatening to existing institutions than the media image would seem to have allowed. While all participants, including the left, moderate students, the police, and the press, could and did claim to be defending or seeking democracy, this clearly meant very different things to different people. The Vietnam War was also a highly emotive issue that prompted varied and often contradictory views. The demonstrations against it reflected some of that complexity in that they were by no means simple in their aims, and people took part in them for a variety of reasons. While VSC and many of the far-left organizations involved in planning the demonstration on 27 October 1968 campaigned against ‘American imperialism’, and used the demonstrations to challenge the legitimacy of the American and British states in favour of a revolutionary alternative, other participants did not necessarily agree with these viewpoints. It was possible for supporters of the left to argue that ‘we thought the revolution was going to start then—The Times was even predicting the possibility’ and that ‘we would have welcomed a major confrontation which would have raised the stakes’, so that ‘if there had been fighting, with serious injuries, possibly even a killing, I’m quite sure a major student rising across the country would have taken place, and the thing would have exploded’.49 A Maoist group that took part in the demonstration has even been described as having ‘distinguished itself in violent confrontations with the police’.50 Yet the Gallup Poll survey conducted at Sussex and Cambridge Universities found that while 69 per cent of students expected demonstrations to get more violent, only 5 per cent approved of this.51 A survey of 270 participants in the demonstration by New Society found that 83 per cent did not expect to be involved in violence.52 Support for political parties varied among participants, so that although 24 per cent had actively supported ‘communists’, 28 per cent had actively supported the Labour Party, and there was even a 4 per cent support for the Conservatives. While the organizers of the demonstration wanted victory for the North Vietnamese, 42 per cent of those questioned wanted a compromise solution to the War. Far from being an attempt at revolution, the demonstration was a chance for people to influence the policies of governments and to put forward alternatives. Indeed, for 96 per cent of participants the march was about changing American policies in Vietnam, and for 85 per cent it was aimed at influencing the British policy of support for American actions in Vietnam. Once again, the demonstration is a good example of the way in which the left were able to raise awareness of an emotive issue that appealed to people’s sense of justice. They were therefore able to attract support for

49 Fraser, 1968, 280.
51 Gallup Poll, Student Demonstrations, May 1968, questions 8 and 9.
protest action from people of widely differing political views and aims, many of whom were normally politically apathetic: for 30 per cent of participants this was their first demonstration.

A note of caution should be introduced here, however. While looking at the make-up of the protests, and the issues that prompted students to protest, shows the theories that were outlined earlier to have been crude and deterministic, an examination of these aspects of student protest can only explain so much. It does not explain why these protests took place at this particular point in time, and this is the key to challenging the myths about the 1960s outlined above. If student protests in the 1960s had simply been responses to new behaviour by those in authority, which was perceived as unjust, then the theory outlined may well provide a complete explanation of why these protests took place at this time. Yet many of the issues about which students protested had existed prior to the 1960s. The Vietnam War was not the first war to be perceived as morally questionable, yet it was the first to provoke protests on such a scale. Similarly, the issue of student participation in university government had been pursued by the NUS for decades but had not prompted sit-ins before.53 In this sense, then, establishing that student protests were a response to perceived transgressions of acceptable behaviour by those in authority is insufficient to explain student protests in Britain in the 1960s. It explains local events, and it provides an insight into the causes of student protests around the world in the 1960s (see below), but something more is needed here. It becomes necessary to look at the wider social and cultural context within which these protests took place. This also helps in the assessment of the significance of these events in social and cultural terms; the above detail on the sit-in at Leeds University could be seen as evidence of a relatively small number of students protesting about parochial issues, but this protest, and the others like it, were a reflection of wider changes in British society. If students, and indeed young people in general, were unwilling to challenge the decisions and actions of those in authority before the 1960s, then this seems to point to a fundamental shift in the position of young people in British society which made it possible for young people to question authority, and to demand participation in government, in the 1960s. Student protests therefore both exemplified, and were caused by, this change in the social position of young people.

As early as 1977 Ronald Inglehart argued that there had been a change in values in Western societies in the post-war period. He suggested that factors such as rising levels of education, distinctive cohort experiences, the expansion of mass communications, and economic and technological

development were the keys to these changes.\textsuperscript{54} For the young of the 1960s, common cohort experiences included a lack of military service after the end of National Service in 1960.\textsuperscript{55} Unlike previous generations, they did not experience economic depression, world war, or the austerity of the immediate post-war years. Instead they experienced a cold war world in which the West supposedly represented freedom and democracy in the face of Soviet totalitarianism. Events such as the Vietnam War and the lack of representation for young people in university and parliamentary governments placed such assumptions in doubt. The young of the 1960s also experienced the liberating economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s, with the resultant raising of their expectations for their personal lives. In that period consumer spending rose from £7 billion in 1946 to £30 billion in 1970, and spending by teenagers alone accounted for £850 million per annum by 1960.\textsuperscript{56} By the 1960s young people represented a powerful consumer interest group, and were targeted as a market for products which were aimed specifically at them, notably forms of entertainment and clothing. The position of young people in society had therefore changed: for many young people the financial dependence upon parents and other members of older generations, which had been the experience of previous generations, was greatly reduced or ended entirely. This included many students who received state grants from the early 1960s onward.\textsuperscript{57} As a result, young people were able to demand the right to express themselves, the right to their own opinions, and to create or buy forms of cultural expression that reflected their own views and tastes. Unlike previous generations, they no longer had to behave, or even dress, like their parents, and could instead choose to partake of, or contribute to, the commercial products of a youth culture.\textsuperscript{58} It was therefore difficult to maintain that young people should

\textsuperscript{54} Ronald Inglehart, \textit{The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Changing Political Styles Among Western Publics} (Princeton, 1977), figure 1.1, 5.

\textsuperscript{55} For the impact of National Service, with its inherent attempt to instil respect for authority, see Trevor Royle, \textit{The Best Years of Their Lives: The National Service Experience 1945–1963} (London, 1988). In particular see 273–4.


\textsuperscript{57} Although the majority of students before the 1960s received state scholarships, these were available only through competition. The state grant was introduced after the implementation of this recommendation in ‘Grants to Students, Report of the Committee Appointed by the Minister of Education and the Secretary of State for Scotland in June 1958, under the Chairmanship of Sir Colin Anderson’, May 1960, Cmnd. 1051. This then unintentionally opened the way for the funding of the greatly expanded number of university students later in the decade.

\textsuperscript{58} This is not to suggest that the youth culture of the 1960s caused student protests. The rebellious youth culture of the period was also a reflection of social change, and was a further example of the common cohort experiences of 1960s youth. For a subtle approach to this interplay of popular culture and social change, see Brian Longhurst, \textit{Popular Music and Society} (Cambridge, 1995).
know their place in reference to those in authority, and student protest was a reflection of this change in the expectations of young people, as well as forming yet another example of a common cohort experience in which the young demanded that democratic institutions live up to their democratic rhetoric via a process of reform rather than revolution.

Indeed, it is an irony that the rapid economic growth of the post-war period should have provided one of the central catalysts for such social change. The left, and notably the theorist Herbert Marcuse, condemned the effects of capitalist mass consumption in stripping the working class of its revolutionary potential. Marcuse in particular singled out students as the social group which was sufficiently removed from the corrupting influences of capitalist society to be able to challenge and undermine it.59 Conversely, the right promoted capitalist growth and condemned protests by students. Yet this same capitalist boom appears to have been the key to social changes which resulted in the challenging of authority by students. While this may not have been the kind of political revolution envisaged by the far left, it was a social revolution of sorts, and reflected a fundamental change in British society and culture. By providing young people with the financial ability to ‘do their own thing’, the post-war boom also gave them the ability to challenge their previous position of social and cultural deference, and to attempt to change accepted norms of behaviour.

With regard to student protests, this can perhaps be identified most strikingly in protests about halls of residence. A survey of women’s halls of residence at ten universities which was carried out in 1959 by the Exeter University student newspaper, the South Westerner, illustrates the nature of the problems that students were to protest about in the 1960s.60 At Cambridge University, female students had to return to their accommodation by midnight, by 10.00 p.m. at Newcastle, and by 10.30 p.m. at University College Cardiff. Fines were ‘imposed on latecomers strictly at Leeds and Newcastle regardless of legitimate excuse’, while ‘some colleges require the parents’ written consent for late functions’. At University College Cardiff, female students were allowed to have male visitors in their rooms only on Saturdays from 2.00 p.m. to 6.30 p.m., and on Sundays from 2.00 p.m. to 7.00 p.m., ‘and first and second year students must entertain in groups’. At Leeds University, which was described as having a ‘liberal attitude’, ‘men are allowed in from 2 pm to dinner time on weekdays and from 2 pm to 10 pm on Saturdays and Sundays’. The authors of the survey concluded that ‘it is surely time a radical change took place in the attitude of the majority of authorities towards students. Whether it is to be regretted or


60 Quoted in Broadsheet, 29 January 1959, 5.
not, we are not living in the Victorian Age, although it appears that a great
many wardens and college authorities are.’ Nevertheless, it was only
irregularly that such restrictions provoked active opposition from students
in the 1950s and early 1960s, so that by the mid-1960s the regulations in the
halls of most universities were still intact: in 1965 Liverpool University
banned female students from being out of their accommodation after
midnight.61

By this time in the 1960s, however, attitudes among students had
hardened, and they were more willing to challenge these restrictive rules.
At Liverpool University in 1965 female students held three mass meetings
in order to demand the end to restrictions on the time that they could spend
away from their hall, and to extend ‘man hours’. They also sent a petition
to the University Senate which had the support of three-quarters of all
female students at the university.62 At Keele University in 1968, students
threatened ‘militant action’ in response to attempts by the university to
increase the restrictions on visiting hours in halls and even in off-campus
accommodation. The students were successful in gaining a relaxation of the
restrictions which were placed upon visiting hours, but the university still
proposed to implement rules against ‘fornication’.63 Sit-ins against rules,
particularly against those governing visiting hours between the sexes,
also took place at Liverpool and Manchester Universities in 1969.64 Such
protests provide valuable evidence of a change in attitudes to norms of
behaviour with regard to authority, and particularly with reference to sex,
gender relations, and the position of the young in society. The Latey Report
of 1967 recognized this change, and recommended that the age of majority
be reduced from 21 to 18, thus removing the in loco parentis status of uni-
versities which allowed them to justify their rules in halls of residence. It
argued that while the in loco parentis position of universities was ‘based
upon the assumption that those between 18 and 21 need someone to look
after them . . . we have been convinced that they do not’.65 The committee’s
decisions reflected what it perceived as a change in the nature of young
people in British society, and its recommendations reached fruition on
1 January 1970, when the voting age was reduced to 18.66

This change in the social position of young people is an important link
with the protests that took place in other countries. While it is difficult to draw parallels between the events in Western societies and protest movements in Eastern Europe and the Third World, it is possible to highlight a number of similarities between protest movements in the West.67 All of these societies had experienced economic booms in the postwar era that affected the position of the young with regard to authority. While it is important to acknowledge the importance of local conditions in influencing the nature of the protests in such diverse countries as France, Germany, Italy, and the USA, all of the student protest movements in these countries were characterized by a desire for the young to play a new role in the government of universities, and to have a new influence upon national governmental policy. All of them were inextricably linked to changes in acceptable modes of behaviour, especially with regard to those in authority. In all of these countries the left played a similar role as a catalyst for the involvement of the politically diverse majority, though the size of direct support for the left varied greatly from country to country. In this sense, widely differing issues, such as halls of residence, university representation, and the Vietnam War, could be part of similar developments in different countries.

The international connection can be overdone, however. Immanuel Wallerstein even goes so far as to suggest the extreme view of 1968 that 'its origins, consequences, and lessons cannot be analysed correctly by appealing to the particular circumstances of the local manifestations of this global phenomenon, however much the local factors conditioned the details of the political and social struggles in each locality'.68 While it is clear that many students around the world, and of differing political outlooks, believed that they were a part of an international youth movement that would change the world, it is difficult to identify the existence of a genuinely global force for change. Not only were there fundamental differences between the communist East and the capitalist West, for example, but, as has been seen in the case of British student protests, there was no consensus on what the protests were about, even among protesters. The influence of events abroad and the role of visiting foreign students in prompting

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students from other countries to protest are also difficult to establish. In almost every country affected, the press blamed foreign agitators, or copying the example of protests abroad, for causing the disturbances.\footnote{See Todd Gitlin, The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left (Berkeley, 1980) for the media coverage of demonstrations in America. See also Stuart J. Hilwig, 'The Revolt Against the Establishment: Students Versus the Press in West Germany and Italy', in Fink et al., 1968: The World Transformed, 321–49. A useful primary source on press reactions to student protests in Germany and student responses to this press coverage is by the Allgemeine Studentenausschüsse of the Freie Universität Berlin, Dokumentation: zum gegenwärtigen verhältnis der Berliner Presse zur Studentenschaft, Bundesarchiv Koblenz, B/166/1318. This is a critical study of the press reaction to the police shooting of student Benno Ohnesorg in Berlin on 2 June 1967.} Not only was this a useful device for ignoring the issues that were being protested about, it also presents a circular theory. If foreign students were being blamed in almost every country, then where did the protests start and who started them? Similarly, suggesting that the protests were the result of students copying events elsewhere does not allow a consideration of the issues involved, nor does it resolve the problem of identifying the origins of the protests being copied. More work is necessary in this area before the numerous problems of interpretation are resolved. In many respects such theories of international linkage have obscured the more fundamental similarities in the origins and aims of student protests in different Western countries in the 1960s, and have further added to the numerous myths of the period. Nevertheless, the numerous parallels between events in different countries mean that the in-depth analysis of protests in Britain provided here makes it possible to take a new view of protests in other Western countries in the 1960s, in which the majority of the young strove to change, rather than replace, existing institutions.

Having undermined the myths outlined above has given the potential for a reassessment of the meaning of these protests. If these events were about reform rather than revolution for the majority of participants, then previous interpretations cannot stand. The protests of the 1960s were not an exceptional and failed attempt at revolution by an extremist minority, nor were they, consequently, a novelty or curiosity. Similarly, they did not represent a caesura in 1968, but were part of wider social and political changes taking place throughout the post-war period in numerous Western countries. In the light of the above debate, attempts in subsequent decades by the right to dismiss the protests of the 1960s, or to blame the 1960s for the complex social problems of later years, must be examined afresh. It has been claimed that the 1960s polarized political opinion, that the real beneficiaries of the upheavals of the 1960s were supporters of the political right, and that liberalism was the main victim.\footnote{See Alan Brinkley, ‘1968 and the Unraveling of Liberal America’, in Fink et al., 1968: The World Transformed, 219–36.} This may indeed have been

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\textsuperscript{69} See Todd Gitlin, The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left (Berkeley, 1980) for the media coverage of demonstrations in America. See also Stuart J. Hilwig, 'The Revolt Against the Establishment: Students Versus the Press in West Germany and Italy', in Fink et al., 1968: The World Transformed, 321–49. A useful primary source on press reactions to student protests in Germany and student responses to this press coverage is by the Allgemeine Studentenausschüsse of the Freie Universität Berlin, Dokumentation: zum gegenwärtigen verhältnis der Berliner Presse zur Studentenschaft, Bundesarchiv Koblenz, B/166/1318. This is a critical study of the press reaction to the police shooting of student Benno Ohnesorg in Berlin on 2 June 1967.

the case, but far from being destructive, these protests were concerned with the strengthening of existing institutions. Far from encouraging social division, they were about inclusive representation. They were the acts of ‘ordinary’ people, for many of whom they were personal turning points. Although student protests continued in Britain in the 1970s, they never reached the size and frequency of the protests of the late 1960s. This may have been the result of reform by universities themselves, to include students within their governmental structures, while young people were also included within the processes of parliamentary government. After 1968 and the announcement of phased troop withdrawals by Richard Nixon, the Vietnam War no longer provided a unifying issue for such a large number of people, and support for the protests split to pursue other issues, such as feminism or environmentalism, or to return to non-political life. Yet by challenging the decisions of those in authority through acts of protest, and thereby informing democratic debate and changing democratic institutions, these protests were of significance for British politics and society. They both reflected and continued changes in values, acceptable forms of behaviour, and attitudes to authority. As such, they were among the precursors of further attempts by previously voiceless groups, such as the young, women, and ethnic minorities, to be included within democratic processes, and to change their position within British society. The interpretation outlined here makes it impossible to dismiss the protests as parochial in-fighting, the work of an extremist minority, or the insignificant growing pains of spoilt adolescents. Rather, they reflected and contributed to wider social changes. They were also part of a series of social and cultural changes in of post-war Western Europe and North America. The nature of the changes that took place in the 1960s, whether they lasted, and even their desirability are still subjects for lively academic, media, and political discussion. It is only through challenging the myths of the 1960s that these changes can be understood, though debates about this controversial period will no doubt continue unabated.