

Introduction: The Still Vacillating Equilibrium of the World

Christopher Connery and Hortense J. Spillers

Roberto Retamar began his work on Jose Martí—appearing here for the first time in English—in the middle of the revolutionary sixties, at a time when the course and character of the Cuban Revolution were still difficult to discern. Retamar, like Fidel Castro, turned to Martí to find language and meaning not only for the revolution, but for the evolving character of Cuban socialism and for Cuba’s place in the world revolutionary upheavals of that time. In turning to a poet, thinker, and revolutionary who had died in an 1895 battle, before Cuban independence had been won, Retamar and Castro were signaling the deeply rooted national-liberationist character of the Cuban Revolution, and the capacity of a national liberation movement to have universal political import—in “our America” and beyond. They were also reminding us that interventions into “the still vacillating equilibrium of the world”—Martí’s words—will demand new and distinctive temporalities, new histories.

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This as yet irresolvable problem of temporality and history is foregrounded in many of the essays here. Was there a world sixties? Christopher Connery's essay follows from that premise, but also registers that the claim of a world sixties is a political, and not merely historiographical, act. This problem of period identity is registered most forcefully in Wlad Godzich's essay, for the question of Poland puts us squarely within the historical problem of synchronicity. Where and when is Poland? The uprising of 1968 was, in addition to its political eventfulness, an act of historical sense making, giving narrative sense not only to the struggles of the midfifties, but to the solidarity movement as well. The sixties presents a challenge to a host of temporalities, and making sense of the sixties will require a periodic revisiting and resituating, a reconstellating and a regenealogization, as long as human liberation remains a dream and not a reality. "Nostalgic commemoration of the glories of the 60s or abject confession of the decade's many failures and missed opportunities are two errors which cannot be avoided by some middle path that threads its way in between."¹ Thus wrote Fredric Jameson in 1984, in what remains the strongest essay in English on the sixties, an essay which ends, as have many essays marking the decadal anniversaries of the project, with a view toward a renewed oppositional force on the horizon, in Jameson's case a resurgent and reorganized working class, coming on the heels of an attenuated class-based politics in the sixties movements. We know what became of that. One would think that now, at the fortieth anniversary of the events, a more sober and defeatist mood might be expected. But what strikes one, above all, is the very different tone, from the "long time" hopefulness of Hortense Spillers's essay, to the liberationist energy of Anthony Bogues's, to the perduring creativity of rebel art examined in Silvia Spitta's piece. Even Boris Kagarlitsky's essay, describing what he judged to be a failed, defeated, or co-opted group of oppositional thinkers and activities, on whose energies the post-perestroika Soviet government would in the eighties vampirically feed, ends with the assertive claim that newly emergent oppositional forces, many shouting the same slogans as in the earlier period, would be more successful than their predecessors. It would be easy to criticize this tone as utopian, wishful thinking, but it is also the sign of a battle engaged.

The Right has never deviated from its explicit struggle to defeat six-

1. Fredric Jameson, "Periodizing the 60s," in *The 60s without Apology*, ed. Sohnya Sayres, Anders Stephanson, Stanley Aronowitz, and Fredric Jameson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 178–209.

ties energies, and the ranks of the powerful—from Barack Obama to Hu Jintao—are filled with those who proclaim the era’s end or transcendence. But there is surely some element of fear and discomfort on the right in particular, in its continuing and explicit struggle to defeat sixties energies, to, as Nina Power and Alberto Toscano quote Nicolas Sarkozy, “liquidate” the sixties. All of the essays in this issue, whether they directly engage that polemic or not, are written against the historical current that seeks the liquidation of the sixties. Most often, the project of reaction and restoration is clear and explicit. Given that African American liberation struggles were at the center of the U.S. sixties, Spillers’s examination of the various forces that sought to neutralize that struggle and negate its gains—Clarence Thomas is one of Spillers’s primary foci—is a necessary register of the depth of that reaction. John Beverley’s essay, meanwhile, analyzes a trope of sixties containment practiced by veterans of Latin American armed struggle who have rejected armed struggle from a standpoint of “maturity.” Sober reflections on youthful idealist abandon—a trope that Beverley traces to the Baroque picaresque novel—risk more than simply throwing out the baby with the bathwater. This position foregrounds a retrograde temporality, whereby political transformation becomes unthought and unthinkable. Beverley’s reconsideration is not suggesting a renewal of armed struggle but a consideration of Latin American armed struggle as a fundamental orientation, one that allowed for a variety of political, social, and artistic innovations. The contemporary success of the Latin American Left, many of whom were veterans of the armed struggle, could be viewed, if not as a vindication of the earlier period of armed struggle, certainly as a development of its original milieu. Power and Toscano’s essay centering on Alain Badiou, meanwhile, provides a different way of thinking those forces of reaction, containment, and obscurantism, by analyzing their dependence, in Badiou’s sense, on revolutionary truth. Containment and continuation become more difficult to sort out. As many of these essays make clear, we remain in a postsixties era: many of the forces that arose to combat the sixties remain in power. These forces understood the challenge of the sixties. We should, too.

Badiou once described his entire philosophical project as an attempt to answer, in Power and Toscano’s words, “how and why many of his generational peers could betray their revolutionary convictions.” It remains important to trace the dynamics of movement and reaction, to consider the varied forms of containment and opposition. This is another register of the most fundamental, and still unanswerable, question, “What happened?” For the present time, the sixties remains the singular event in the twentieth

century to pose the question of what happened. Analytical engagement with the sixties over the past few decades, then, is not simply an opportunity for academic exercises in historical revision; it is the continuation of the period's dynamic. "What happened?" is a question of burning import for our present and future. It is no accident or surprise, then, that engagement with this question brings new light on "old" issues—Beverley's armed struggle or Bogue's Black Power—that allow a thinking beyond the current situation. This engagement also finds resources for the present in the projects of a range of sixties thinkers. Walter Rodney, for example, in Bogue's piece, is not simply, in intellectual genealogy and life trajectory, emblematic of what happened in the Caribbean sixties. He becomes, as Martí was for Retamar and Castro, a node in the construction of a new temporality. Several of the essays note our particular historical relationship to the period—many of the participants in the struggle are still living and active, just as several of the authors in this issue were active participants in the events. Spitta's consideration of the project of Peter Schumann and the Bread and Puppet Theater, a group that arose in the sixties and remains one of the few practitioners of explicitly political art, is among many essays that make clear that the period has not wholly ended. But we are entering the period—the fortieth, fiftieth, and perhaps sixtieth anniversaries of the events—when discussion, reconsideration, and furtherance of the political project will no longer include so many participants of the earlier struggle. What legacy will this "middle period" of reconsideration leave to the future?

Many of these essays are speculative, provocative, or experimental in character; their judgments are provisional, with the understanding that further, more important chapters remain to be written. The fortieth anniversary of the sixties movements is, as Connery's essay suggests, perhaps a particularly difficult vantage point for an appreciation of the period's yet-to-emerge truth. That difficulty will give us, and those who were born later, much to work on in the coming years, and we hope that these efforts will continue in the pages of *boundary 2*. *boundary 2* itself was a sixties product, emerging out of that confluence of new, post-metaphysical thinking in literature, poetry, and what was coming to be known as "theory"—the first issue, in 1972, had an essay on Foucault by Edward Said—with a nascent worldliness that grew from the conviction that a U.S.-based intellectual project had to face the nature of U.S. power in the world. In addition to Said's essay, the first issue contained a dossier of poems introducing, to an English-speaking audience, the revolutionary and antijunta Greek poet Yannis Ritsos, who had been imprisoned as soon as the military junta, to

the delight of U.S. anticommunism, took power.² In the intervening years, the journal has built on that sense of purpose, both in its critical stance and in its broadened geographical reach. We, the issue's coeditors, are grateful for this venue, which has deepened and strengthened our own fidelity to the event. More to come . . .

2. William Spanos, one of the founding editors of *boundary 2*, has, in his forthcoming memoir, made clear the connections between the intellectual moment and his Greek encounters with the geopolitical. An excerpt was published as "Eis tin Polis: Istanbul, December 1969," *boundary 2* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 127–68.