The Times, the Place, and the Students: 1960s Activism at the University of Michigan and Long-Term Political Identity

A THESIS

Submitted to the University of Michigan Department of Political Science in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

HONORS BACHELORS OF ARTS

Department of Political Science

By

Claudia Leigh Hurst

March 2026

Advised by Robert Mickey

"History is constantly being rethought and reimagined and re-understood, but because you have to make decisions right here, right now, without a road map, in the fog and in the mist and in the muddle of who the fuck knows, and still, you have to choose . . . you have to choose who you want to be so you don't make a mockery of your values."

- Bill Ayers (interview with the author)

Abstract

This thesis seeks to understand the influence of student activism on the formation of political identity by studying how college student participation in the anti-Vietnam War movement impacts students' long-term political engagement. To study this phenomenon, I conducted interviews with nineteen student activists who attended the University of Michigan during the 1960s. I found that my subjects' partisanship and active engagement in politics has remained consistent since their time in Ann Arbor; however, their approach to activism, understanding how to make the greatest impact, has evolved throughout their lives. This research presents a unique opportunity to study how worldly events shape human behavior, which provides a better understanding of the environmental factors that influence our composition as people. I reflect on these larger questions throughout my writing as I describe the conversations I shared with my subjects about their childhood experiences and political consciousness at a young age, their time involved in student activism at U-M, and their professional trajectories and life choices since leaving Ann Arbor. Each of these parts of my conversations builds on one another, seeking to understand larger questions of how political identity is formed and how this composition may change or persist throughout the rest of our lives.

Acknowledgments

I am immensely proud to share my contribution to political science literature in the following pages. I recognize that this meaningful achievement for me would not have been possible without the profound support from so many others.

Karla Goldman, thank you for inviting me to be an active audience member during your women's liberation movement event and roundtable discussion. The introductions you facilitated greatly shaped my research sample. I am grateful for the greater diversity in the stories I was able to tell as a result of this experience.

Mika LaVaque-Manty and Rebecca Wai, thank you for your guidance throughout this process. The thought and intentionality behind your leadership, from our interactive weekly workshops to the neatly organized Canvas resources, made me feel consistently prepared and confident to navigate this challenge.

My interview subjects, the core of this research, thank you for your generosity in sharing your time and stories with me. The highlight of this process for me was meeting each of you and engaging in conversation about your lives. I am also grateful for your willingness to connect me with your friends and peers, which was essential to making this research successful.

Robert Mickey, this project would not have been possible without you. At every stage, you have been deeply engaged in my work and willing to share the weight of this process – helping me develop ideas, pointing me towards sources of inspiration (often from the mountains of books in your office), and providing insightful feedback and encouragement throughout my research and writing. You kept me grounded, often reminding me to relax when I needed it most, and brought humor and perspective through our conversations about scholars and moments in

history and tangents about rock and roll and the Ann Arbor food scene. I never felt alone in this process, which is a testament to your unwavering support as my advisor.

My friends and roommates, thank you for your patience, positive reinforcement, and enthusiasm as I embarked on this journey. Every week for the past year, as I shared updates about this project, you responded with thoughtful follow-up questions, excitement for the part of the process I was navigating, and often concluded with, “We are so proud of you.” I feel immensely grateful for this support, knowing that none of you were familiar with this subject matter before, yet you embraced it with curiosity and became enthusiastic supporters because of your excitement for me.

My family, there is no acknowledgment that could fully express the lifetime of gratitude I feel for you. As I reflect on the themes of this research, I want to thank you for providing me the invaluable gift of an excellent education. I would not be the version of myself writing this without my formative learning experiences and my time at the University of Michigan, which challenged me intellectually and taught me to approach the world with thoughtful curiosity. You know better than anyone the important role writing plays in my life. Thank you for being my greatest source of inspiration in every piece I write. The values you instilled in me from a young age—to listen and engage thoughtfully, to make a friend of every person I meet, and to continuously seek opportunities to grow and learn—have deeply shaped who I am and always find their way into the words I share. Thank you for your love, steadfast counsel, and always sharing in the joys of my journey. Home is my favorite place, and home to me is wherever I am with the three of you.

Thank you to the Gerstein Family Research Stipend, whose financial support made this project possible.

Table of Contents

Abstract **2**
Acknowledgments **3**
Table of Contents **5**
Chapter One: Introduction **7**
Literature Review 9
Familial Influence on Political Socialization 9
Social Movement Influence on Political Socialization 11
Hypothesis & Research Design 14
Hypothesis 14
Research Method 14
Finding Interview Subjects 16
Preview of My Findings 19
Chapter Two: The 1960s – Parallel Forces of Change **20**
Introduction 20
Historical Context 21
The University of Michigan 22
Leaders of the Movement 23
Creating "The New Left" 25
The Port Huron Statement 25
American Radicalism 27
Dissolution 29
Existing Scholarship 30
Conclusion 32
Chapter Three: The Origins of an Activist **33**
Introduction 33
Overview of Interview Questions 33
Environmental Influence on Socialization 34
Class 34
Education 35
Politics 36
Familial Influence on Socialization 38
Parents 38
Religion 39
Household Dynamics 39
Social Advocacy 40
Adolescent Activism 40
Writing and Counter-Culture 41
Conclusion 42
Chapter Four: Navigating a World on Fire **44**
Introduction 44
Campus Environment 44

Secondary Education.... 45
Students for Democratic Society (SDS).... 47
Widespread Campus Involvement.... 47
Origin.... 48
Splintered Groups.... 50
SDS Fallout.... 51
Impactful Demonstrations.... 51
A Generational Tale.... 52
Conclusion.... 54
Chapter Five: An Entire Life That Follows.... 55
Introduction.... 55
Education-Related Work.... 56
Research.... 56
Teaching.... 57
Education as an Institution.... 57
The Real World.... 59
Motivations.... 59
Two-Fold.... 59
Empathy.... 60
The Lifetime Activist.... 61
Reframing Approach.... 62
Impact of Age.... 62
Conclusion.... 63
Chapter Six: Reflections of a Lifetime Activist.... 64
Introduction.... 64
Reflections on Participation.... 64
Failure.... 64
Naivete.... 65
Responsibility.... 66
Reflections on Activist Evolution.... 67
Attribution to U-M.... 67
Shifting Approach.... 68
New Priorities.... 70
Illusion of Time.... 70
Reflections on the University of Michigan.... 71
Affection for U-M.... 71
Critiques of U-M.... 72
Conclusion.... 73
Chapter Seven: Conclusion.... 74
Bibliography.... 79
Appendix.... 81

Chapter One: Introduction

Nearly 3,000 students gathered in Angell Hall on Wednesday, March 24, 1965, for the first teach-in at the University of Michigan. Activists and students alike participated in seminars and listened as their peers and professors emphasized the significance of this moment in Ann Arbor (Rapoport 1965). The senior editors of *The Michigan Daily* published an editorial on the event, observing that "the usually unorganized and ineffective intellectual community is beginning to stir." The teach-in demonstrated that U-M "faculty and students are seeking a greater role in shaping American politics," as well as a growing recognition that "the larger the number of people openly expressing opinions on policy issues… the more viable our democratic processes will be" (1965). At the conclusion of the 12-hour marathon, *Michigan Daily* reporter Roger Rapoport quoted a freshman who said, "This teach-in shows me what a University has to be" (1965).

My thesis seeks to understand how student activism at the University of Michigan in the 1960s influenced the students' long-term political identities. Social movements demonstrate how generations respond to the social and political environments of the time period. However, social movements are rarely investigated in terms of their long-term influences on citizens' behavior. Doug McAdam (1990: 11) explores how socialization influenced participation in the civil rights movement. He concludes that the "result is often a period of thoroughgoing resocialization, as biographies and identities are modified in accordance with the newly perceived historical imperatives." I want to better understand how student activism influences activists' long-term belief systems. I focus on college students who are starting to become politically active because their perspectives are moldable in this stage of their life. I limit my pool of activists to students at the University of Michigan to analyze the specific experience in Ann Arbor. I am interested in

exploring whether students' ideas and perspectives are permanently shaped by attempting to enact social change.

The 1960s were an era recognized for the mobilization of young activists, especially on college campuses. McAdam (1990: 5) writes that the "vast majority were radicalized by the events of the mid to late sixties. Many of them played prominent roles in those events. Virtually none were unaffected by them." The anti-Vietnam War movement was the central campus-based social movement during this time period. I have long been fascinated by the way the Vietnam War politically mobilized citizens through disillusionment (Wells 1994). Thus, I examine the relationship between social movements and citizen behavior by researching the socialization of young American activists within the anti-Vietnam War movement and other social movements occurring at the same time. This research will be useful to analyze how current social movements will influence future generations of activists and observers.

In this chapter, I describe how social scientists have attempted to explain young adult socialization, presenting the possibility that different environmental factors can shape political identity from a young age. After describing past research on the impact of socialization on political identity, I present my hypothesis and research design for interviewing U-M alumni to understand their activist experiences and its influence on their long-term political identities and engagement. In Chapter Two, I provide important historical context to help the reader situate the interviews I draw on in Chapters Three through Five. Each of these chapters explores a different facet of these activists' lives: the political environments in which they were raised, their political engagement and other experiences in Ann Arbor, and their professional and civic lives after college. In Chapter Six, my interview subjects reflect more broadly on their lives as politically engaged adults. In each chapter, I provide extensive quotations from these interviews, identify

connections across conversations, and demonstrate their significance in relation to the central themes of this study. Chapter Seven recapitulates my main findings, discusses some limitations of my research, and suggests next steps for researchers interested in these questions.

Literature Review

Familial Influence on Political Socialization

Research on political socialization, the "development of political identity during childhood" (Healy and Malhotra 2013: 1023), has widely focused on the transmission of political perspectives from parents to their children. Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers (2009) investigate parental influence on political ideology of subjects' children utilizing data from a "parent-child socialization project." Drawing on the concept of "persisting predispositions" (Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers 2009: 796), they find that the earlier a child adopts their parents' political views, the more likely the child will retain these views through adulthood. They also found compelling evidence that children's political socialization is shaped by their parents' political views through environmental exposure. For example, a more liberal parent will bring their children to more liberal environments, and vice-versa. Social settings are highly influenced by parental involvement and thus will reflect parents' political identities, reinforcing the transmission of political views from parent to child (McFarland and Thomas 2006).

Alternatively, the influence of an environment on developing political views could be interpreted as the influence of institutions on the political development of young adults. Even if a parent does not directly share their perspectives with their children, the ideas and practices they value will maintain a strong presence within the household. This influence can also be demonstrated through the clubs and organizations children become active in, as parents have a

strong influence on the activities of their children. Relatedly, McFarland and Thomas (2006) find that politically salient clubs and organizations have a large influence on long-term political socialization. Involvement in National Honors Society, service clubs, student council, drama clubs, musical groups, and religious groups was found to have an influence on long-term political participation. Therefore, parental influence to join one of these clubs could indirectly impact the politicization of their child.

A child's observation of how the political climate influences their parents can also impact their politicization. Johnson and Dawes (2016) seek to understand the influence of the Vietnam War draft on the eventual political participation of children whose fathers were drafted into the war. They found that this forced service and isolation from fathers lowered children's political participation. When the draft began, there was an overarching antidraft sentiment in American society. Disillusionment only grew after the highly unpopular draft did not translate to improvements in the war effort (Useem 1972). This finding is clearly in tension with the usual view that the antiwar movement spurred political engagement in the form of protest participation. Instead, this evidence portrays the same motivation resulting in a decrease in political participation.

Other studies have continued to explore the influence of family on political socialization, but shifted the focus of parent to child transmission to sibling to sibling. Healy and Malhotra (2013) argue that siblings can impact political socialization in the same manner parents can, but sibling influence has a larger impact because it includes both parental and sibling influence (Useem 1972). This research focuses on the impact of political socialization through gender dynamics between siblings. By comparing men who have a sister as their next youngest sibling to men who have a brother as their next youngest sibling, Useem finds that men with sisters have

a more conservative perspective of gender roles, and posits that this is reinforced by gendered household chores (Useem 1972). This research suggests that familial dynamics have a large influence on the political socialization of children.

However, Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers (2009) find that familial political influence was greater in 1965 than in 1997. This suggests a growing possibility of peer-to-peer influence on socialization over time. There may be other explanations for observed similarities between parent and child political views that are independent of a transmission of views from parent to child. Parents and children in the same environment will similarly be influenced by major events and social dynamics outside of the home that mold similar attitudes (Healy and Malhotra 2013).

Social Movement Influence on Political Socialization

Other scholars also dispute the authority of familial perspectives and argue instead that political events are the most important influence on socializing individuals and solidifying long-term political identities. Political and social trends in society prominently influence the socialization of young adults, which influences their long-term political beliefs (Cutler and Bengston 1974). Flacks argues that political alienation of young citizens contributes to enhanced political activity in the future. Alienation contributes to a sentiment of powerlessness and when someone feels powerless they prefer that feeling to go away. Increased political participation is a popular way to establish control and resist alienation (Flacks 1967). Cutler and Bengston (1974) seek to understand this phenomenon by examining trends in a range of effects. The generational effect measures how citizens within the same birth year react to the social climate, while the maturation effect uses age to compare accumulated knowledge and response to societal conflict. This presents a challenge, because the measurement of generational effect and maturational

effect are both dictated by age, creating an ambiguity in findings because the same variable (age) is being used to make two different arguments about the influence on young adult socialization. The third effect, the period effect, shows how important societal problems influence generations differently. My research is primarily concerned with understanding the period effect -- how the 1960s generation was socialized differently than other generations by the Vietnam War era -- and the generation effect -- how the political development of peers in one's age group are shaped differently.

Research has also shown that the more actively an individual participates in a social movement, the more strongly this experience influences their political views over the long-term. Hoge and Ankley (1982) study student involvement in social movements in the 1960s and compare subjects' perspectives during the civil rights movement to their political trajectories ten years later. They find that individuals who were involved in liberal social movements retained these perspectives through adulthood. Previous studies similarly find that involvement in social movements influences long-term political beliefs. Demerath *et al* (1971) focus on White youth from the North in 1965 who conducted voter registration drives with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. They surveyed this group in 1965 and four years later and find that participants retained liberal views or were even more liberal than previously (Hoge and Ankley 1982). As Hoge and Ankley (1982) discuss, Fendrich and Tarleau (1973) compare 50 male southern university students who were involved in student government with 50 males who participated in the civil rights movement. They find that the 50 males from southern universities became more moderate or conservative over time; however, the males actively involved in the civil rights movement retained their liberal views 10 years later (Hoge and Ankley 1982). This evidence strengthens the argument that active involvement in social movements influences

long-term belief systems. This evidence suggests that individuals who are socialized within these movements, and take an active role, retain these formed perspectives over the rest of their lives.

Scholars also suggest that participation in social movements influences individuals' overarching approach to life in addition to their political views. Weiner and Stillman's 1979 study focuses on 1,000 individuals born between 1940 and 1952 who were involved in the youth movements of the 1960s. As Hoge and Ankley (1982) discuss, measuring outcomes ten years after the movement, they found that many participants held professions centered on human service, and that the majority retained their earlier political positions. This strengthens the argument that active participation in social movements carries a long-term influence on citizens. However, this long-term influence cannot be assumed to occur in response to participation in all social movements. There is a possibility that the social movements of the 1960s were unique in their ability to socialize students and transform long-term belief systems.

Many studies have examined how significant events or phenomena shape long-term patterns of thought. Valentino and Sears (1998) argue that political events imprint on children and influence their future behavior by changing their attitudes. However, a glaring absence in this literature is the failure to address why certain political events solidify political views at an early age and others do not. Similarly, Bartels and Cramer (2026) argue that a past experience can shape an individual's political views in the future. This is especially true when the previous event was a direct attack on their social identity. Cramer and Bartels (2019) reiterate that "social identities, or psychological attachments to social groups, such as partisanship, race, gender, class and place affect what information people pay attention to and influence how they process it," enhancing the reaction to an attack targeted at social identity. Individuals construct emotional connections during monumental events when the values of the events challenge their social

identities. This explains why the Vietnam War is an especially important case study to measure the long-term influences of a social movement. While many social movements held value in changing conventional perspectives of freedom and equality, the Vietnam War movement is unique in that America invested their people in this conflict, as "more than 2,700,000 Americans" in the military in Vietnam and "over 58,000 lost their lives" (Bartels and Cramer 2026: 128). The Vietnam War abroad, and the social movement in the U.S., touched the lives of every American household with a teenage boy that feared being sent to war. The way this social movement influenced almost every American in a personal manner explains why this movement had the propensity to impact long-term political behavior more than other social movements.

Hypothesis & Research Design

Hypothesis

Prior research has found that the primary influences on young adult socialization are familial factors and involvement in social movements. I hypothesize that U-M student activists in the anti-Vietnam War movement, and other social movements in the 1960s, were liberally socialized during their childhoods and their political engagement in Ann Arbor reinforced the formation of their liberal identities.

Research Method

To begin to explore this hypothesis, I conducted nineteen interviews with 1960s student activists from the University of Michigan. My interviews were semi-structured, meaning that I used a common set of questions for all respondents, but follow-up questions differed based on their responses and my desire to elaborate on certain aspects of their unique experiences. This

interview method highlighted the stories and interpretations of the subjects by allowing their answers to pave the way of the research. In each interview, I asked participants to recollect their childhood experiences, describing moments that developed their political consciousness that perhaps led them to their involvement in student activism in Ann Arbor. I then prompted subjects to describe their experiences as a student in Ann Arbor, focusing on their contributions to various student movements during the 1960s. Next, I asked respondents to recount important parts of their lives since their time at U-M, specifically their professional aspirations and family lives. In the last part of the interview, I invited respondents to reflect on moments they experienced any climatic transitions in their political identities, time periods where they felt politically encouraged or discouraged during their lifetime, and how their relationship to the University of Michigan as an institution has changed. My intention with this line of questioning was to find if my hunch was correct: progressive activists in the antiwar movement continued to support liberal policies later in life.

The interviews lasted an average of 51 minutes, with the shortest lasting 21 minutes and the longest 92 minutes. Two of the interviews were conducted in-person in Ann Arbor, Michigan, while the rest of the conversations occurred over Zoom. I recorded each interview, with the consent of the participant beforehand, on Otter.ai, an AI service that transcribes and summarizes voice recordings. I would run this program on my computer at the same time as the Zoom call. After reviewing and editing the transcripts for any auditory mistakes, I would import the document into Atlas, another AI service that specializes in organizing and analyzing qualitative data. In this program, I would highlight quotes from the interview that resonated with me and organize stories into thematic buckets. This stage of the process ultimately shaped how I

organized the interview evidence that I discuss and analyze in the chapters to come. Full interview transcripts are available upon request.

Finding Interview Subjects

I drew on a variety of resources to identify and reach out to potential interview subjects. I visited the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan and reviewed pamphlets, petitions, and student government records from the 1960s to find names of members of various student activists. The most effective part of my outreach process was snowball sampling. At the conclusion of each interview, I asked every respondent if they had any peers that they thought would be interested in speaking to me. If so, I would follow-up and ask for their contact information. These recommendations were essential in making contact with many of my subjects.

On November 12, 2025, I attended a panel with female alumni from the women's liberation movement at the University of Michigan that was hosted by Professor Karla Goldman in the School of Social Work. I did not expect to meet and exchange contact information with five women activists from 1968–1972, but this opportunity greatly influenced my sample. Prior to this event, I intended to focus on anti-Vietnam War activism, which would have resulted in a male-dominated subject pool. However, as a result of this event, I broadened the types of political engagements represented in my subjects. This decision enhanced my research by diversifying the stories I heard and shaping the comparisons I made between subjects involved in different movements.

I provide a brief introduction to my pool of subjects before going more into depth about their individual lives and campus experiences in the following chapters. I had conversations with

nine women and ten men. Many of the subjects attended U-M during their undergraduate years, some were graduate students, a few were both, and one subject was involved in the university as faculty. Most of the subjects described growing up with progressive parents. In Chapter Three, I discuss the subjects' stories about their political consciousness from an early age in greater detail, but the consensus was that this group of respondents arrived at U-M with an understanding of the social inequalities around them. The majority of my subjects majored in the liberal arts during their time in Ann Arbor, many studied American culture, anthropology, and English. Respondents shared their involvement in campus organizations centered around activism, most notably Students for Democratic Society (SDS). After leaving the University of Michigan, many respondents engaged in academia at some point in their careers, whether as a professor, through research, or writing. Every interviewee described remaining involved in activism in some way throughout their lives. Even in their older age, when they can, they continue to attend demonstrations, sign petitions, and involve themselves in the social issues that are important to them—just as they did sixty years ago. The Appendix features brief biographical sketches of each subject.

An advantage of interview-based research is that personal accounts of these experiences shaped my findings on this topic. Interviews allow for a much richer exchange of views than survey instruments because of the variability and interpersonal connection of this method. However, a disadvantage of relying on interviews is selection bias. People that have a desire to be interviewed are commonly not representatives of the entire population; they are outliers with an interesting story. Similarly, activists listed in the Bentley archives are assumed to be leaders in the antiwar movement, and also not representatives of the entire population. These drawbacks of my research design demonstrate other possible threats to inference in my study. Snowball

sampling was integral to recruiting a large number of willing participants; however, it does pose another possible threat to inference because many of my subjects were connected to at least one other person in the research pool.

It is extremely likely that my sample is not representative of all of the student activists in the 1960s at the University of Michigan. However, this thesis is not intended to directly test my hypothesis. My sample is not representative of U-M student activists as a whole, and without also comparing a sample of activists to a sample of students who were not activists, I cannot make a causal claim about the impact of college experiences on subsequent political engagement. It is also important to note that there is little variation in the political backgrounds of my subjects' parents or in their childhood upbringings, reinforcing that what follows is speculative.

Another threat to inference in my study is the reliability of my subjects. The participants in my study were between 70 and 90 years-old. This older demographic poses potential problems to the subjects' accurate recollections of certain events and ability to articulately answer the questions I pose. I attempted to manage this problem by making my questions clear, concise, and easily digestible. I also engaged in extensive historical research about the 1960s and biographical research about each of my subjects before I spoke to them, so I was able to corroborate elements of their stories and better understand parts of their experiences that might have been difficult for them to recall. I drew inspiration from Doug McAdam's *Freedom Summer* in crafting my interview questions. McAdam explores how early life in the civil rights movement changed activists' lives and impacted their long-term socialization.

Preview of My Findings

This thesis aims to understand the influence of activism on young adult socialization by researching how student participation in the 1960s student movements at the University of Michigan impacted the students' long-term political identity and engagement. In order to understand this potential relationship between activism and long-term political engagement, I interviewed nineteen U-M alumni student activists from this time period. I hypothesized that the findings of this research would demonstrate that active participation in a social movement, during a time of peak socialization, triggers political engagement to remain consistent through the rest of the activist's lifetime. I found that the nineteen subjects from my study have remained liberal throughout the rest of their lives. However, their long-term political identities were shaped not only by their involvement in activism, but also by their childhood socialization. While the partisanship of their politics has largely remained unchanged, their perspectives of government systems and how to best effectuate meaningful change has evolved since their time in Ann Arbor. This topic is important to study because it presents the relevance of early political consciousness and activity on long-term political engagement, which is not widely studied in political science research.

Chapter Two: The 1960s – Parallel Forces of Change

Introduction

The United States entered the 1950s with a prosperous economy and soaring national pride. An advantage of this economic stability and affluence allowed many Americans to embrace lifestyles and purchase materials beyond the bare necessities. This luxury paved an age of affluence, coupled with a surplus of new ideas that followed this newfound freedom to creatively explore. Many of the new conversations and cultural influences Americans were inspired by at this time originated from a growth in media and entertainment. For former activist and historian of the 1960s, Todd Gitlin (2013: 31), "[n]othing influenced me, or the baby-boom generation as a whole, as much as movies, music, and comics did. America was mass-producing images of White youth on the move yet with nowhere to go." In this transformed society, counterculture surged through music and political ideas and brought newfound attention to a necessity for societal change, and hope that they could make it happen (Gitlin 2013: 286).

This chapter provides background on the historical moment and environment in which the subjects of this study began to understand the world, offering context for their perspectives upon arriving at U-M. First, I introduce the political climate of the 1960s, including the civil rights movement, high-profile assassinations, and rising Cold War tensions that fueled fear of communism and a sense of widespread alienation. Next, I examine how this period of heightened discourse and new ideas reshaped the identity of universities, tracing the emergence and evolution of key student activist groups in Ann Arbor. Then, I focus on the central student organization in Ann Arbor, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), exploring its role in shaping the New Left, its emphasis on participatory democracy, and the broader social movements at the time. Finally, I describe the decline of SDS and the New Left, concluding with

a discussion of how existing literature interprets the long-term impact of these experiences on this generation.

Historical Context

The 1950s ushered a period of discourse through these new ideas and an insistence to look at society differently. Americans began to align themselves with the ongoing civil rights movement with the Supreme Court's landmark decision to desegregate schools in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). At the same time, Cold War tensions were growing as proxy wars sparked international discourse. On the national level, Americans were divided by a pressured mistrust of left-leaning political thinkers, as their ideas were assumed to be connected to the Soviet Union. These issues were heightened in the 1960s with greater attention on the Cold War and its proxy wars, assassinations of important figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy Jr., and growing mistrust in the motivations and activity of the federal government. The college students of the 1960s grew up in a society that increasingly felt fractured.

The way the interviewees interacted with the world, and each other, from their earliest memories was heavily influenced by these national affairs around them. For example, the development of a left-leaning identity in its foundation was heavily influenced by the presence, and ostracization, of red diaper babies. As Gitlin (2013: 67) argues, while "the majority of the original New Leftists were not children of Communist or socialist parents, but sometime in adolescence were touched, influenced, fascinated, by children who were. From them the rest of us absorbed, by osmosis, the idea and precedent and romance of a Left." This generation of people romanticized the idea of change, creating a society that was more concerned with social responsibility than any of the generations that came before. The student movement "was in part

about the possibility of redefining 'adulthood' in our society" (Whalen and Flacks 1989: 2). But perhaps more impactful than this romanticized desire was the immense pressure this generation felt to actually create change. As they embraced new ideas and witnessed injustices that did not align with their idealistic perceptions of the world, this generation carried a heavy burden to reshape the world for their own future selves. McAdam (1990: 10) argues that from "its beginnings in the early sixties, it was clear that the New Left was fueled by a discontent that some young people were feeling with their prospective lives."

What was most unique about this period of time was that the change that was brewing was not exclusive to one area of life. This time period was "not simply about politics. Nor were they exclusively about experimenting with new lifestyles. What made the era unique was the combination of these two emphases" (McAdam 1990: 126). The impending college student activists of the 1960s were bred to become active participants in the society around them, holding a desire to breathe life back into a political agenda they believed in (Miller 1987: 28). Growing up inspired by the prospect of change, these individuals transformed students' relationship to the university when they arrived on campus: "The university had become 'a mechanism they can utilize, that they can manipulate to gain certain ends which they consider important'" (Miller 1987: 178). Young people began to understand the important role they played in creating change, asking questions, "Why are we doing this, and why does it matter?"

The University of Michigan

In historical portraits of social movements during the 1960s, activists at the University of Michigan surface again and again. A theme that is striking throughout the literature is the reciprocal influence the people and the time had on one another. Gitlin (2013: 286) describes

how “the student movement and the counterculture intersected, a *youth* identity said: in effect: ‘To be young and American is to have been betrayed; to be alive is to be enraged.’” The 1960s was politically and socially unprecedented as a time period, and the people within this era perceived themselves to be unprecedented, too. The new ideas they advanced reinforced new forms of action. Ann Arbor was at the center of this influential time period, filled with young people motivated to act. Miller (1987: 28) characterizes this group as the epicenter of the movement: “Young radicals in Ann Arbor and elsewhere found themselves allied with other nonconformists on the fringes of the mainstream culture.” The group of socially conscious young people to first create tides of change in Ann Arbor were Al Haber, Tom Hayden, and Paul Potter. Gitlin (2013: 102) described his admiration for “the caliber of these individuals,” noting that he “felt graced to be in their company.”

Leaders of the Movement

Tom Hayden grew up in a Catholic household with a Republican father. When Hayden arrived at the University of Michigan in the fall of 1957, his environment redirected his perspectives (Miller 1987: 41-44). Hayden started his career in advocacy as a reporter for *The Michigan Daily*. In 1960, he traveled to Los Angeles to cover the Democratic National Convention. During his time in California he interacted with various student activist organizations, such as SLATE[1], politicizing him to become an activist in addition to a reporter when he returned to U-M. Hayden would become an influential leader and president of Students for Democratic Society (SDS) in Ann Arbor. Gitlin (2013: 102) describes how Hayden “seemed to have read everything. Hayden’s every word seemed chosen; he never hesitated, never stumbled.'"

[1] University of California, Berkeley political party; cannot confirm if name is an acronym.

Al Haber grew up in Ann Arbor, but spent time living in Germany as a young teenager when his family relocated for his father's job. This experience greatly influenced him into becoming a progressive thinker. Miller (1987: 27) quotes Haber's reflections on his time in Germany, when he saw "the Marshall Plan kick into gear. I saw how changeable the world was." As a freshman at U-M, Haber lacked many opportunities for organized political activity at the university, so he created them. Haber's reputation on campus in the late fifties was as "Ann Arbor's resident radical" (Miller 1987: 22). Haber started and led the Political Issues Club. His political philosophy and activist style were distinctive in Ann Arbor; Haber valued dialogue and conversation as means to create change. Together, Haber, Hayden, and more influential voices grew SDS in Ann Arbor to become the core of the student movement. Miller (1987: 65) notes that Haber and Hayden were seen as twins, as both "talked tirelessly about a new form of politics—what they had begun to call 'participatory democracy.'"

Hayden founded VOICE[2], modeled after SLATE, in the fall of 1960 (Miller 1987). The primary function of this student organization was to support candidates for student government with platforms that related their campus politics to the national perspectives of the New Left (Miller 1987). Simultaneously, Haber was working on his own platform as a subset of the Student League for Industrial Democracy (SLID). Hayden and Haber joined forces and built SDS by approaching anyone empathetic to the cause and convinced them to join the group growing in Ann Arbor (Miller 1987). Haber's foundational principle of "participatory democracy" was at the core of building the New Left movement.

To deepen the student movement in the North, Haber proposed treating "participation as a continuing educational process." Organizers should present issues in a broad analytical context. Instead of being regarded as an end in itself, direct action should become the pretext for a

[2] University of Michigan political party; cannot confirm if name is an acronym.

"deeper appraisal of social problems," drawing on the Northern student's special talent for discussion, research and debate (Miller 1987: 40).

The term "participatory democracy" was an invitation for people to become involved in their futures. Miller (1987: 73) quotes a line from *The Michigan Daily* that read, "Former Student Government council member Haber, now president of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), said that students could identify with the democratic values of taking a role in the process of determining what affects his life." SDS was constructed to be a place to exchange ideas in hopes that conversations among students would create a better world.

Creating "The New Left"

In addition to the core of "participatory democracy," the foundational principles and vision of SDS were also modeled closely on the work of C. Wright Mills, a leading radical sociologist and author of many books, including *The Power Elite*. His influence was widely recognized within the New Left movement, and "to the small circle of young radicals who gathered around Al Haber and Tom Hayden, Mills was a hero, an oracle, a model of the radical intellectual" (Miller 1987: 87). A central message, to resist the urge of conformity, deeply resonated with Hayden and inspired the leadership role he played in the organization (Miller 1987). However, the true intentions and purpose of SDS were ultimately decided in June, 1962 in Port Huron, Michigan.

The Port Huron Statement

In June 1962, SDS hosted a national convention meeting in Port Huron, Michigan with the intent of producing a document that outlined their vision for the future of the organization.

Their intention was to curate "a document with which SDS officially identifies, but also as a living document open to change with our times and experiences. It is a beginning: in our own debate and education, in our dialogue with society" (Miller 1987: 329). The statement was strongly influenced by the state of affairs in the world and feeling responsible and energized to change what appeared to be wrong.

The document focused on several central themes that were important to the organization. The writers introduced the necessity for a movement through a "Values" section, which attempts to relate and create comradery between the reader and the vision. They claimed that "[l]oneliness, estrangement, [and] isolation describe the vast distance between man and man today" (Miller 1987: 332). "The Students" section focused on themes of urgency; the desire to break the mold of a typical college life and understand what else young people can be doing. This section mocked the dynamics and environments of regular society, arguing that the collegiate education does not appear to prepare students in a necessary and meaningful way—their role in this world feels larger. The political rhetoric in the statement framed the organization as anti-communist, but the foreign policy elements focused on the negative social consequences of the U.S. government's anti-communism stance. The document claimed that the paranoia and pressure to point fingers at one's neighbors had done more harm to democracy in the U.S. than limit the spread of communism.

The part that resonates most with me in this statement outlined the important role of universities in societal change: "We believe that the universities are an overlooked seat of influence. . . First, the university is located in a permanent position of social influence. Its educational function makes it indispensable and automatically makes it a crucial institution in the formation of social attitudes. Second, in an unbelievably complicated world, it is the central

institution for organizing, evaluating, and transmitting knowledge" (Miller 1987: 373). To me, part of what makes the New Left movement so special is a shift in perspective that young, educated individuals are best positioned to create change. Surrounded by motivated peers, constantly involved in the exchange of ideas, and old enough to understand the world around them, but young enough to recognize that their perspectives would evolve. This continues to ring true to current generations of students, but this is the first time we observe this change in hierarchical power structures toward the young and idealistic.

American Radicalism

The statement concluded with inspiration for what the "New Left" must be. It served as a call to action to those who felt energized to join and an inspiration for the work that must follow. *The Port Huron Statement* was intended as both a critique of the Old Left's relentless focus on justice in economic terms, and as a call to action for the future (Flacks and Lichtenstein 2015). Its publication brought national attention to SDS in Ann Arbor, and left a legacy of empowerment as "this tiny band of students succeeded in creating a striking new rhetoric of American radicalism," defining the young identity of the student movement (Miller 1987: 15).

The Vietnam War, more precisely the anti-Vietnam War movement, would become the core of the attraction and mobilization of student organizations like SDS. This conflict is in part what made the student movement so influential. The shared mistrust these college students held towards their government, the disdain they felt for the United States' actions overseas, and the impending pressure to become involved in something they did not believe in brought this generation together in opposition to the war. Many of these students had never protested or been involved in anything like this before, but the world felt like it was "on the brink of madness" and

this created a mobilization of students all across the country (Gitlin 2013: 244). However, even "on the brink of madness," there was reason to be inspired; with circumstances so dire, young people were energized with the belief that change had to happen. Bob Dylan echoed this sentiment: "The battle outside ragin'; Will soon shake your windows and rattle your walls; For the times, they are a-changin" (Dylan 1964). The 1960s were characterized as a time of unparalleled conflict, but there was a shared sentiment that change was unavoidable.

The female liberation movement was also constructed in the pressures of this environment. Women active in the anti-Vietnam War movement felt their positions were underused and underappreciated because of the gender dynamics within the New Left organizations. "Although Casey Hayden, Becky Mills, Mickey Flacks, Sharon Jeffrey, and Mary Varela played significant parts at Port Huron, and Carol McEldowney was central in Ann Arbor thereafter, the SDS Old Guard was essentially a young boys' network" (Gitlin 2013: 367). While students concentrated on fighting large-scale international injustice, they overlooked misogyny and prejudice within their own organizations. Many women continued their work against the Vietnam War and other social justice issues while building a movement to focus on women-centered issues and increase female visibility: "The women's movement grew out of the experiences of consciousness raising, and argued that 'the personal is political'" (Flacks and Lichtenstein 2015: 800). Student activism in the 1960s was created on behalf of young people's desire for transparency and refusal of the old guard, and yet the majority of these organizations remained ignorant of the power imbalance structures in their own organizations. It is not unreasonable to assume that the intersecting identities of an activist would include any form of injustice visible to them, but the necessity for a women's movement demonstrates that this assumption was not accurate.

In addition to the movements already mentioned, the Stonewall uprising, the gay and lesbian rights movement, the Chicano movement, and the Native American movement also energized young Americans during this period. At the same time, right-wing movements, such as the rise of the conservative movement following Barry Goldwater's 1964 nomination, captured the attention of many youth. Although these social movements persisted beyond the 1960s, SDS began to fragment before the end of the decade.

Dissolution

By the end of the 1960s, SDS was torn apart by different visions and approaches to securing social change (Miller 1987). A vocal part of the organization wanted to become more action-oriented, while others wanted to remain with the organization's roots, creating change through intellectual conversation. The groups that advocated for more action-oriented work were frustrated by their inability to stop the war: "Many of us were divided…We still wanted the system to work, and hated it for failing us" (Gitlin 2013: 310). Led by interviewee Bill Ayers, the action-oriented faction of SDS, the Jesse James Gang (later the Weather Underground Organization), began to splinter SDS from its intellectual roots (Miller 1987). The organization fell apart by the end of the 1960s due to this inability to agree on action or platform and radical action enveloping the rest of the movement. Miller (1987: 254) describes how "the spirit of open-minded tolerance that had once characterized SDS was dead…The new spirit rising within SDS—and within the avant-garde of the youth culture—was impatient, raw, hard with anticipation."

When the U.S. pulled out of Vietnam in 1973, the urgency of politics subsided for students of the New Left. Many remained distrustful of institutions, but they no longer

experienced the same urgency or need for revolution that they previously did. The movement fulfilled its purpose amid the chaos and upheaval of the era, but once that conflict subsided, its values endured even as its actions were no longer deemed necessary. As Miller (1987: 259) writes,

> [u]ntil the end of the decade, the escalation of the war kept the idea of participatory democracy alive. In city streets and college campuses across America, in scores of demonstrations and marches against the war, in situations tense with anxiety and chiliastic hope, fantasies of revolution flared. Old political premises collapsed. To young radicals, anything seemed possible–including, certainly, a 'democracy of individual participation' (Miller 1987: 259).

Without the common goal of ending U.S. intervention in Vietnam, people became more motivated and energized in their own personal lives rather than the collective action that once inspired them. As Gitlin concludes, "As the antiwar movement subsided, many students found it an opportune moment to trade in their activism for a ticket to the less risky, more pleasurable counterculture" (2013: 425).

Existing Scholarship

The most significant question guiding my research was how this formative experience shaped student activists as they moved through adulthood. Literature appears to paint the picture that many activists experience "dreams deferred" and regret for giving up a life of passion to make a respectable living and create families (Kasdan 1983). McAdam (1990: 218) describes that the subjects of this study "are not individuals who remained active only as long as it was stylish to do so…Instead, theirs is a reluctant withdrawal tinged with guilt and sadness at the loss of political purpose and personal connection their lives once had." This question lingered as I began my research: Do activists grow up, settle down, and abandon their dreams of changing the

world? In comparison, other literature suggests the profound influence that adolescent activism has on adulthood, McAdam (1990:11) presents how "the interplay between history and biography takes on a disjunctive quality, as the orderly progression toward adulthood is interrupted by historical events and processes."

In attempting to make sense of these questions in preparation for my own research, I read *Beyond the Barricades* by Jack Whalen and Richard Flacks. This book describes a study that measured the long-term influences of activism on former civil rights workers. They were also interested in understanding childhood socialization as a root of activism. Through long interviews, Whalen and Flacks found that these activists abandoned their liberal perspectives when they left university and grew up. Through the childhood socialization lens, they found that activists came from liberal parents, with strong professional careers, that enforced these value systems in their children. Using this project as inspiration, I was able to start hypothesizing what trends I might ultimately reveal in my own research.

This study appeared to support the claims that many students retained the liberal perspectives they cultivated through experiences in activism. Whalen and Flacks found that many of their subjects did not marry for a longer time after graduation in comparison to their non-activist counterparts and they were less likely to work in the private sector because they preferred to follow a meaningful career trajectory (Whalen and Flacks 1989). "Contrary to some popular mythology—former student radicals have hardly joined the mainstream, even if most are leading lives less politicized and experimental than when they were younger" (Whalen and Flacks 1989: 247). I was curious to see if my conversations would align with these same conclusions.

Conclusion

Scholars often repeat the trope that activists evolve into moderates, not by choice but as a product of their environment, arguing that once the threat of conflict and the urgency for revolution passes, the persistent drive for change subsides. However, Whalen and Flacks (1989, 283) note that "[t]he spirit of the sixties did not die as its bearers got older, nor did they betray that spirit." This chapter explores how the spirit of the sixties was shaped by both the shifting political and social environment of the period and the particular characteristics of the individuals involved. Chapter Three draws on research interviews to suggest how children who grew up during the sixties were socialized by their families and the broader social and political climate to adopt this "spirit," seeking to understand how it endured even outside the chaotic world of that era.

Chapter Three: The Origins of an Activist

Introduction

The beginning of each of my interviews focused on the childhood socialization of my subjects. As I describe in Chapter One, learning about previous studies that explore how political beliefs form and develop was the focus of my literature review. The previous research examining childhood political socialization argues that individuals' political beliefs are heavily shaped by familial and environmental factors. I began my interviews by asking questions aimed at understanding how the political beliefs of the nineteen subjects in my study developed during childhood. In this chapter, I first explain how my interview questions were designed to explore the subjects' childhood political socialization. Next, I examine themes that emerged across interviews, focusing on shared experiences related to socioeconomic status, education, and other environmental factors that shaped the development of their political consciousness. Then, I explore similarities in the left-leaning political views of subjects' parents, and the moral values that shaped many of their childhood homes. Finally, I conclude the chapter by presenting early experiences of social responsibility and advocacy that respondents described prior to arriving in Ann Arbor, which leads into Chapter Four which focuses on their roles as student activists at the University of Michigan.

Overview of Interview Questions

In order to further explore the political socialization of the respondents in my study, I prompted them to discuss details about both their childhood family dynamic and living environment in greater detail. To better understand the role familial influence may have played in shaping their beliefs, I asked subjects about their parents' political participation and perspectives,

their parents' careers, and the dynamics within their household. I also explored the potential role of environmental influences by asking subjects about the development of their political consciousness and participation in adolescent activism. Similar to the socialization literature I discuss in Chapter One, I found it difficult to determine what can be attributed solely to parental perspectives and what can be attributed to the broader time period and environment, as the two are often mutually reinforcing. However, beginning my interviews in this way helped establish a narrative of how these formative experiences socialized subjects to become involved in student activism when they later arrived in Ann Arbor and these accounts also allowed me to compare and contrast experiences across subjects.

Environmental Influence on Socialization

Class

My interviews suggest that class was an important factor in shaping many subjects' awareness of inequity and their willingness to challenge it. I define "class" as social status that is determined by education, income, wealth, and social capital (i.e., networks). The majority of my subjects described middle-class suburban upbringings, academically excelling at public high schools and attending the University of Michigan as one of their top choices. I observed many of the young selves of my interviewees as bright and dedicated students, but also comfortable. This sense of comfort appears to have primed them to notice the injustices around them. "I grew up with a perfectly adequate middle-class education, and so close to us, kids were getting so short changed, it was unbelievable" (Rapp). I attribute the middle-class upbringing as a factor in shaping the respondents' consciousness development because they appeared to be close enough to be aware of inequities around them, but privileged enough to be able to engage this interest in

helping others. There is not a lot of class variation in my study which prevents me from making decisive assessments on the direct role that a middle class plays in determining political beliefs in comparison to those of higher and lower economic statuses and educational backgrounds. However, it was striking that many of my conversations began with similar details about the subjects' individual upbringings before they arrived at Michigan and became involved in a shared activist experience.

Chapter Four focuses on the subjects' time at the University of Michigan; however, I want to highlight that many subjects described their academic classes at U-M as secondary to their true educational experiences that occurred through their activist careers. Subjects' desire to become college student activists was rooted in a sense of responsibility to improve the world around them. However, these students arrived in Ann Arbor with foundational education and class privilege that allowed them to take on this role. Their ability to study the liberal arts while dedicating significant time in the Diag reflects this privilege. They could focus on broader social issues rather than needing to more strategically use their time on campus to advance their own academic and professional goals. While Chapter Four examines this in greater detail, I found it important to acknowledge this relationship between class and privilege when discussing the influence of class on political socialization.

Education

The subjects' awareness of injustice from an early age was influenced by their environment. Throughout my interviews, subjects shared the important role education and literature played in helping them understand the world around them. For some respondents, reading fostered an early defiance for norms, "I went to Lake Forest Academy, and being a bit of

a rebel, I read beyond the curriculum … You can have multiple experiences if you read" (B. Ayers). Other subjects used reading as a departure from their reality, "I got to read anything I wanted to and sit on the fire escape and read, and that was my place to escape from all of them" (Schneider). As I listened to these stories from various respondents, I connected the shared positive influence of reading across subjects. I considered how this experience continues to reflect themes of a privileged middle-class upbringing through the surface level ability to read, access to a variety of reading materials, and the freedom to read what you choose. To me, this appears to be a small alliteration of the previous commentary I made about these subjects' eventual academic experiences in Ann Arbor. These perceived insignificant acts of childhood reading molded young adults who became politically aware and continued to be socially curious. "I read I.F. Stone's Weekly … I knew I didn't know what I wanted to know, so I was very anxious to develop my understanding of the world, and this seemed like a good way to do it" (Levine). Reading served not only as an escape from their surroundings, but an opportunity for these motivated adolescents to feel included in what was happening in the world around them. For many subjects, the first step toward activism was self-education through reading.

Politics

Every subject who grew up in the 1950s described how the civil rights movement transformed their environments. "The civil rights movement was bubbling up and breaching the wall of privilege that Lake Forest Academy was" (B. Ayers). However, this group differed from many of their peers in how they embraced this movement, "In high school, [the] civil rights movement was going on, beginning all over the country. I became sort of a fanatic as a young teenager" (Cassady). This demonstrated support of the movement came in the form of education

for many young students. For Schneider, “if anything was of interest to me during that time, it really was about racism. What I was learning at school and what I could see for myself, was that was the problem” (Schneider). I imagine that growing up during the civil rights movement shaped social and political conversations into every facet of life. It forced these young adults to be politically aware, but the subjects’ experiences with Black people provides more of a lens as to how growing up as White children during this time period shaped their perspectives on this social issue. “Some of the printers were African American, and I would just sit there and talk to them while [my dad] was fixing their presses. So I had just some sense of more than one race when I was growing up” (Cassady). In addition to her experiences through her dad’s work, Cassady also recounted how her unique academic environment also exposed her to diversity, “[My teacher] had many Black friends, highly educated Black friends, and they would come in, and we would go to their homes and different programs. In the very late 50s, early 60s, this was very unusual and had a big impact” (Cassady). Bluestone echoed the “extremely rare” experience of “growing up in a fully integrated neighborhood” as a “White family in the 1950s,” reflecting with gratitude that “some of [his] best friends in the world were Black” which shaped his perception of society (Bluestone). These moments demonstrate how the families and environments of many of my subjects welcomed diversity and treated everyone as people during a time when that was not universally recognized. In turn, these children grew up to fight to continue projecting these teachings of equality that were instilled in them from a young age. It also makes me consider how fear and hatred is cultivated through misunderstanding. If everyone were raised to not distinguish themselves from those who are different, the world would likely be more inclusive in all facets. Parents are an integral part of putting these teachings into practice.

Familial Influence on Socialization

Parents

The influence of parents on their children's socialization has been extensively studied. In my literature review in Chapter One, I present research that shows a correlation between children adopting their parents' political perspectives through environmental exposure. The childhood experiences of the subjects in my study aligned with this finding. All nineteen respondents in my study grew up in a left-leaning household; however, the degree of their parents' left-leaning politics varied. Two subjects were "red diaper babies," the children of Communist parents or of so-called "fellow travelers." Even if their parents were not directly affiliated with the Communist party their politics were (Mutnick; R. Meeropol). Other subjects recalled the environments they grew up in being open to Communist ideas. As Magidoff shared:

> [I] met a group of girls who were all red diaper babies … When the first one of them proclaimed that she was a communist, it was kind of alarming. But, we actually had these conversations. We were fourteen years old, and they had suffered from McCarthyism, which I knew about as just an abstract bad thing … You thought about these things, and in the end, we all became best friends.

I felt a deep admiration for the subjects who, even as children, resisted societal pressure to alienate their peers by recognizing their shared humanity. "I was not a red diaper baby, but some of these guys were literally sons of former members of the Communist Party, and those were not my politics, but it created a certain circle in this little town that was open to these ideas" (Levine). It was particularly striking to hear first person accounts like this, of people who grew up in the McCarthy Era and learned to listen to the political ideals of a group of people they were conditioned to reject and fear.

Religion

Throughout my interviews, I noted the influence religion played in shaping the political identity of many of my subjects' families, specifically the Jewish families. Around 50% of respondents described how World War II led their family, and other Jewish families in the United States, to develop more liberal political identities. They described growing up with a reminder that "nobody was ever really safe," which profoundly influenced their politics (E. Meeropol). "I think that growing up after the Holocaust, after World War II, even for Jews who were not religious, there was always this sort of dark cloud hanging over families … I grew up with this feeling that things were good now, but bad things could happen again" (E. Meeropol). For some subjects, I observed that the integration of religion and politics played a significant role in the development of their political consciousness. A foundation of equity and respect informed their empathetic perspective on politics; their relationship with religion, in these secular Jewish households, was shaped more by social and political values than by religious practice.

Household Dynamics

Separate from their religious affiliations, the parents of my subjects were "Stevenson liberals" (E. Meeropol), "big FDR fan[s]" (Levine), and "avid New Dealers" (Magidoff). Many of the subjects grew up in households that "celebrated the American working class and American labor" (R. Meeropol), were involved in a union (Parrent; Schneider), and recalled having conversations about politics with their parents. I infer that the left-leaning perspectives in these households encouraged these open conversations about the state of the world. "They talked to us a lot about politics. My father in particular, liked to preside over the dinner table, which was sometimes irritating, but we learned a lot from him" (Mutnick). These open conversations

between politically conscious parents and their children appeared to have profoundly enhanced the children's political education. "By the time I was able to understand what I was hearing in news or radio or whatever, I knew that McCarthy was bad, the Democrats were better than the Republicans, that sort of thing, and people should be treated equally" (Magidoff). Other subjects described how their parents' emphasis on staying socially informed shaped their understanding of the world around them. "When we watched, in 57, the children in Little Rock having a chance to go to school, integration, and the fight between the national government and states' rights, and then Birmingham and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, my parents were very clear who was on the right side" (Feldman). When these memories arose in my conversations, I observed subjects describing these formative experiences with appreciation, acknowledging how their long-term belief systems were positively influenced by this open discourse and the left-leaning values their parents reflected. "Nowadays, we would call it liberal. Back then, I think we just said not prejudice" (Cassady). More important than their political affiliation, it appears to me that the value systems taught in these households were rooted in the importance of empathy and concern for others. There was not necessarily anything political about it.

Social Advocacy

Adolescent Activism

This awareness of other people's struggles and inequities in the world prompted many subjects to become active in advocacy and community organizing even before their arrival to Ann Arbor. "By the time I was in middle school, the Vietnam war had started, and I was definitely involved in antiwar activities in Plainfield. We would march around and make signs" (Mutnick). Other respondents shared similar experiences of demonstrating as young children

with the support and supervision of adults in their lives. “My first political memory was that we were picketing Woolworth's department store, ‘2468, Southern Woolworth Segregate’ in our neighborhood. I was an eight or nine year old carrying a picket sign” (R. Meeropol). However, Robert Meeropol’s political consciousness was shaped even before his first political memory, as the United States’ execution of his parents, Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, for espionage profoundly influenced the formation of his political identity.

Multiple subjects also recounted memories of engaging in social responsibility by becoming involved in underprivileged communities. As Parrent shared:

> I tutored younger Black kids when I was in high school. I would go downtown and tutor kids. And that was really interesting. I got to see more about the Black experience in the Detroit area. And also feel like I could be part of something which, even though I couldn't go to some of the big demonstrations and things going on, at least I could be part of that, in that small way.

Regardless of the form of political action these subjects chose to pursue, my interviews made it clear that their desire to advocate for change developed and was already actively expressed prior to their arrival at the University of Michigan. This distinction helps me visualize the full arc of a “lifetime activist” that is revisited later in this thesis.

Writing and Counter-Culture

Another popular form of social advocacy among the subjects was spreading ideas through their high school newspapers, “I became the editor of an underground newspaper in our high school … I was writing a column that was about politics, and Vietnam was my issue above all others” (Levine). As I listened to respondents share this experience, I considered how high school newspapers were an early opportunity to “demonstrate [subject’s] interest in pointing out injustices in [the] high school and in the world” (E. Meeropol). Writing became both a means of

expressing outrage and a creative outlet for many students. In a similar way to using writing to explore their newfound freedom in identity, subjects described an interest in elements of counter-culture. Some subjects described this exploration of identity through certain films, "*Rebel Without a Cause* connected very much with my sense of alienation" (Haber). Others explored community through alternative forms of expression, "I heard beatniks reading poetry. It wasn't so much radical activism. It was discussing the American dream. So I was [an] outsider that way" (R. Ayers). In many accounts, subjects reiterated this interest as less political and more a search for community. "It didn't seem political, but it was definitely an introduction to 'outsider' culture in that period" (Wald). These experiences of engaging with ideas about alternative ways of life were not directly tied to adolescent activism, or even inherently political, but they reflected this generation's growing desire to speak out and challenge the status quo.

Conclusion

The left-learning experiences and influences the subjects described that socialized their upbringing prior to their arrival in Ann Arbor prepared them with critical information about the world around them. In Chapter One, I present studies that environmental factors and parental influence shape the socialization of children as they grow up. Speaking to these subjects, and analyzing their experiences, reinforces the findings of these studies and supports the evidence of the centrality of both of these influences. After conducting conversations about socialization with this research pool, it is impossible to say if the left-leaning political perspectives of their parents or their middle-class, well-educated, empathetic upbringing was the central influence in creating the student activist. It is a conglomerate of each of these factors, understanding that these factors also influence and reinforce one another. Every subject reflected on this social education they

received before college with gratitude, as it primed them to notice injustices around them, and encouraged a desire to do something about it. When young Americans began to mobilize in response to their government's shortcomings in the 1960s, these subjects were among the first lines of defense on the University of Michigan's campus. Rapp recalled a memory from the day she moved into Michigan:

> My dad was building bookshelves in Mary Markley Hall, and teaching me how to balance a checkbook … My mother was shouting birth control instructions, and I'm like, 'Mom, shut up. I don't want to hear about that,' but I arrived with knowledge about what you're supposed to do, and consequently, when the first young woman in my dorm was pregnant, I was part of the group that figured out how to get her an illegal abortion.

Armed with information and prepared to apply the critical social education of their childhood into practice, these subjects played an integral part in the heart of the student movements. Chapter Four offers a detailed analysis of these subjects' experiences as activists at the University of Michigan, focusing on how the socialization described in this chapter intersected with a specific place and historical moment to produce the New Left student movement.

Chapter Four: Navigating a World on Fire

Introduction

The previous chapter examines the formation of my subjects' political beliefs, showing how the development of their politics was shaped by both environmental and familial influences. These findings are supported by the research I present in Chapter One. While this discussion introduces the individuals and their beliefs, the student movement was shaped not only by its participants – place and historical context both played crucial roles in its broader societal impact. This chapter connects the personal experiences I describe in Chapter Three with the historical context I present in Chapter Two, examining how these students shaped the culture at the University of Michigan, and how the university environment, in turn, influenced them. In this chapter, I first analyze the political and social environment that welcomed these students upon their arrival in Ann Arbor. Next, I examine their university experiences as students and members of tumultuous activist organizations. Then, I highlight the demonstrations that participants recalled as most significant in shaping their political identity during their time on campus. Finally, I explore how these experiences illustrate themes of community and collective action, and how participation in demonstrations reinforces the initial desire to engage in activism.

Campus Environment

Over the course of the 1960s, the civil rights movement remained prominent in the United States, tensions with Cuba and the nuclear arms race were intensifying, and the nation became increasingly involved in the Vietnam War. When many of my subjects arrived in Ann Arbor, the world around them was fragmenting. "I got to Michigan, and suddenly my neat, clean, bordered little suburban existence blew open, and I saw a world on fire" (B. Ayers). This

increasing awareness of the crippling state of the world was intensified by the unique culture at the University of Michigan. Flacks reflected that "something was stirring in Ann Arbor at that time that was pretty remarkable to us … there was a lot more pro civil rights activity going on but also anti arms race and peace movement activity … My point being Ann Arbor was quickly, in the early 60s, becoming a real center of activism and intellectual activity around opposing the nuclear arms race." My conversations illuminated the reciprocal influence that the university and the students had on one another. Bluestone pointed out that there was a movement brewing among young people: "It was really Michigan, Columbia and Berkeley that led the antiwar movement on campus, and then it spread everywhere," but there was something specific about the University of Michigan. In Ann Arbor, "you were part of history" (Feldman). Intellectually curious and politically aware students were drawn to continue their academic careers at the University of Michigan for various reasons; however, their experiences at the institution were shaped by the campus culture that welcomed political discourse and an openness to change.

Secondary Education

Academically, subjects described their time in the classroom at the University of Michigan as secondary to their experiences in the Diag. "My head was more in radical politics than it was in academics" (Levine). The majority of my subjects were liberal arts majors, studying theories of Marxism and reading Lenin through a variety of anthropology, sociology, psychology, political science and English courses. They described that at the time, the societal middle-class expectation was to become a doctor or a lawyer. The University of Michigan attracted many students with these professional pursuits, there were "a lot of people going into medicine [but] they weren't as focused on this stuff as the people down closer to campus"

(Parrent). My interview subjects described being more excited about pursuing liberal arts degrees as an opportunity to understand the world around them than as a path toward a specific profession. Rapp reflected that "school was just a footnote to what we were trying to do because we needed to be in school to understand the situation we were in." This choice in academic trajectory was influenced by the worldly events of the time period, but more importantly a response to the socialization of these students that had taught them to care about what was happening in the world around them. "[In] 1964 and 1965 being in college did not feel like the most important thing to do. There was so much work to do in the world to make a revolution" (E. Meeropol). However, as I briefly present in Chapter Three, it is important to indicate the level of privilege that comes with the ability to pay tuition for classes and not attend them. Even, in regards to this time period, the privilege to focus on philosophical ideas rather than technical skills to use towards a professional career. Feldman described how "professors [would] give out credits for the work [they] were doing, because [they] were the activists," but his degree, "independent study in intellectual political philosophy," had "nothing to do with anything [he] did." As an idealistic learner who has used academia to understand the world, I found this troubling, having always been socialized to believe in the power of formal education. However, I recognize that in this time period, the most meaningful learning occurred outside a classroom. B. Ayers reflected:

> I went to Michigan to get an education, and I got an education, not so much from the classes as from the experience with meeting kids way outside the parameters of what I knew and getting perspectives…The fishbowl [was] much more interesting than anything happening in class. So as I say, I was limping through academically, but on fire intellectually.

The student movement disrupted societal expectations, prompting reflection on why norms existed in the first place. Part of the resulting societal shift came from a recognition that

individual passion could guide new paths. If the role of a learning institution is to stimulate young people, then that is exactly what happened, regardless of whether it was a result of the University of Michigan as a learning institution, the environment the school fostered produced the desired outcome. A central element of the student movement that took precedence over academic study for many of these subjects was their involvement in Students for Democratic Society (SDS).

Students for Democratic Society (SDS)

Widespread Campus Involvement

Every subject who attended the University of Michigan at some point during the 1960s described either active membership in or loose affiliation with Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). As I introduce in Chapter Two, SDS played a central role in the student movement on campus, and is often among the first organizations mentioned in recollections of student activism in Ann Arbor, which housed the organization's most active chapter. Many subjects explained that they were encouraged to join by older siblings, friends, significant others, or the sense that participation was already widespread in the community. "My boyfriend at the time and everybody we knew were against the war, and SDS seemed to be the most active organizing group about doing stuff against [it]…I can't even tell you exactly what moment I said, 'Oh, I think I'll go to this meeting'…it just seemed part of the water, almost part of the ethos" (Parrent). Others were drawn in through SDS outreach efforts at new student events, where initial interest grew into a sense of belonging. "Along the path student organizations set up tables, and at one of these tables sat two young co-eds. They were with something called the VOICE political party and given my background in civil rights, I was interested. So I started going to their meetings"

(Bluestone). While subjects described a range of motivations for attending their first meeting or demonstration, a clear pattern emerged in my interviews. The group's prior experiences had primed them to socially engage when they arrived at U-M, making them especially inclined to join when introduced to SDS.

SDS brought together like-minded individuals committed to societal change, but it did not operate as a formal student organization with a defined membership process. Levine recalled:

> SDS in 1967 had an enormous unofficial membership and [was] tremendously influential…I immediately walked up to [the SDS table] and said, "I want to join. What are the dues? I want a membership card" and the guy behind the table gave me a blank look, looked over his shoulder and said to somebody else, "Do we have dues? Do we have a membership card?" I actually think I may have been the only member of SDS in Ann Arbor who actually did pay dues.

This lack of formal organization reflected the organization's original intent: to serve as a space for open dialogue about the state of the world and generate collective ideas among young people about how to address it.

The flexibility of the organization allowed members to participate in SDS while also engaging with parallel groups. "You [could] just say 'I'm in SDS'… In fact, I joined every organization of the left that I could at Michigan" (B. Ayers). Subjects described involvement in other national organizations, such as the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), Young Socialist Alliance (YSA), and Friends of SNCC, in addition to campus groups like student government and *The Michigan Daily*, before, during, or after their time in SDS in Ann Arbor.

Origin

When Alan Haber began his undergraduate studies at the University of Michigan in 1954, there was no "political organization on campus" for him to join (Haber). Recognizing his ability

to foster politically engaged conversation, his peers encouraged him to form a political discussion group. Haber established the Political Issues Club, which quickly attracted widespread student interest. “There was a notice on a white piece of paper, something to the effect of, ‘If anybody's interested in social political action, come to this meeting.’ I went to the meeting, and I was home…I loved Al Haber because he was just so right on and we became instant friends” (Lehrer). What began as a small campus discussion group expanded, eventually becoming sponsored by the national Student League for Industrial Democracy (SLID). SLID brought legitimacy and visibility to the growing organization in Ann Arbor. However, Haber sought to distinguish his vision from that of SLID, emphasizing the “need [for] a different sense of activism” with “a new vision” which ultimately led to the emergence of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) (Haber). Haber envisioned this New Left movement as distinct from the Old Left, which had primarily emphasized economic concerns. In contrast, Haber’s vision saw this new generation prioritizing social freedoms through intellectual dialogue (Gitlin 2013).

SDS became known for the intellectual curiosity and thoughtful discussion that Haber had envisioned. “One thing about SDS was that it was pretty intellectual” (Wald). These conversations were shaped by engagement with political theorists such as Marx, Foucault, Lenin, and Trotsky. The work of C. Wright Mills was especially influential; his ideas informed both the Port Huron Statement and SDS’s commitment to participatory democracy, as discussed in Chapter Two. Beyond theory, SDS also played an active role in campus politics, calling “themselves VOICE political party” and “often electing people to student government” (R. Meeropol). SDS not only focused on conversations about national societal change, but the organization also shaped and amplified campus political discourse. However, the organization’s loose and informal structure often limited its effectiveness. Meetings were described as

"extremely loose [and] chaotic" and "not well planned," and even participants recognized that, despite a shared sense of purpose, the organization "was going to fall apart" (Wald).

Splintered Groups

Disagreement among SDS members over how best to represent the interests of the New Left began to fracture the organization. As Cassady recalled, "It was very intellectually based conversation. What is Marxism really mean? What does it mean at the University?" But many members wanted to do more than discuss, they were interested in "direct action" (Cassady). The organization's decentralized structure, combined with its reluctance to move beyond intellectual debate, ultimately contributed to its dissolution. Several groups splintered from SDS, including the Thursday Night Group and the Jesse James Gang. The Thursday Night Group, a female consciousness raising group, emerged in response to feelings of exclusion from key conversations and a lack of recognition for their contributions to the antiwar movement. Schneider described how women involved in the Ann Arbor draft resistance began "posing some of the same kinds of questions… about how the women were seen." These women that felt alienated from the male dominated groups of the New Left remained active in their antiwar efforts, but also began to build the feminist liberation movement in Ann Arbor.

The Jesse James Gang emerged as a militant faction within SDS before eventually splintering into its own organization, led by Bill Ayers, a subject in this study. In my interview with B. Ayers, he explained that the group "took the side of militant action," contrasting SDS members whom he described as "armchair Marxists." This disagreement over the necessity of direct action not only created a divide between these groups but ultimately contributed to the collapse of the organization as a whole.

SDS Fallout

The pressures of the period and growing frustration with the Vietnam War led some members to feel that conversation alone was insufficient. These internal disagreements over the organization's vision and purpose ultimately fractured the group. Upon reflection, many subjects expressed disappointment in their own rigidity. According to B. Ayers, debates focused on "how much action should we do? Should we engage in national demonstrations or local organizing?" With time and distance, he recognized that these approaches did not need to be viewed in opposition. R. Meeropol echoed this sentiment, noting that the group "agreed on 95% of stuff" and, despite "tactical disagreements," they shared the same goal of ending the Vietnam War. In our interview, he recognized that collaboration would have been more effective than "arguing with each other about how to go about doing it."

Impactful Demonstrations

Regardless of group affiliation, every subject in this study was profoundly shaped by the demonstrations they participated in during their time at the University of Michigan. Students engaged in civil rights activism and "solidarity work with SNCC" (Magidoff), anti-Vietnam War demonstrations and "participating when Michigan invented the teach-in" (Rapp), "turn in your draft cards" demonstrations that resulted in lasting consequences for some activists (R. Ayers), and consciousness-raising groups that advanced feminist liberation. The 1960s were a period of immense political and social turmoil in the United States, but also a time where young people felt responsible for the damage in society and motivated to do something about it. Participation in demonstrations and direct challenges to authority became, for many, an almost expected response. Rapp recalled receiving "the call from SNCC to go South" and help "bring publicity"

to what became “the Selma Montgomery march.” Although she “barely understood what [she] was doing,” she joined her peers and traveled to Montgomery, helping draw national media attention to the event (Rapp). Subjects also described the supporting roles they played in the anti-Vietnam War movement. Bluestone recalled being among “students out on the Diag” protesting amid fears that “the United States was going to invade Cuba.” Opportunities for activism appeared easily accessible; demonstrations seemed to be everywhere.

As significant as the political engagement itself was the sense of community these experiences fostered. “I didn't really know anyone before I went … But there were a couple hundred people picketing the Woolworths and immediately I met people there who were like-minded” (Flacks). This demonstration, specifically referenced by multiple subjects, proved transformative for both the political significance of the moment and the relationships it facilitated. Through my interviews, I observed how finding a community of people who shared the subjects’ perspectives became a powerful motivator for continued participation. These demonstrations did more than build community or express opposition; they created a feedback loop in which students’ awareness of injustice fueled their participation, and that participation, in turn, heightened their recognition of the inequities they hoped to change.

A Generational Tale

Subjects described their activist experiences as widely shared among their peers, suggesting a generational atmosphere in which change felt urgent and inevitable, especially at the University of Michigan. However, not all students were equally concerned or willing to fully commit themselves to activism. Flacks recalled believing the United States was “on the verge of nuclear war,” yet when he went up from his basement, everyone else “was going around as if

nothing terrible was happening." Similarly, subjects recounted the difficult choices they faced in response to the national draft, as they attempted to balance personal beliefs with civic obligations. Bluestone described how he prepared a statement declaring his opposition to the Vietnam War while affirming that, if drafted, he would serve and resist the war from within. He expressed both a "love [for] America" and a firm belief that "this war is wrong." When faced with the same decision, R. Ayers described weighing his options to "either go in or go to jail or go to Canada" and ultimately choosing to flee the country rather than act in opposition to his political perspectives.

These accounts reveal that, while the 1960s are often framed as a period of generational change, these experiences were not universal. The individuals in this study demonstrated an unusually deep sense of responsibility, prioritizing their pursuit of social change over personal wellbeing or success. For them, success was not defined by individual achievement, but by knowing that they had done everything they could to ensure the world did not fall apart.

I recognize that my small sample is not representative of the entire generation, which limits the analysis I can make about the story of this generation. However, my research demonstrates an incredible uniqueness to the experiences of this group of people that was socialized to care more about society than themselves. Yet, the experiences described in this chapter highlight that identity formation is shaped not only by the individual socialization in Chapter Three, but also by the powerful influence of the place itself in reinforcing these identities.

Conclusion

Each of the nineteen subjects' stories intersects through a shared experience in Ann Arbor. While their experiences do not necessarily overlap, they recount similar academic experiences, group memberships, participation in impactful demonstrations, and encounters with like-minded individuals through the same channels. In our conversations, subjects emphasized how formative their time in Ann Arbor was for the paths they later pursued; it was clear that the significance of the place itself was widely recognized by the participants.

The university's reputation drew students to Ann Arbor, while the college town culture encouraged curiosity and amplified marginalized voices, creating vital opportunities for organizations like SDS to emerge and thrive. These individuals could have found community at demonstrations anywhere, but their stories suggest that like-minded students were drawn to Ann Arbor for a reason. My initial research focuses on how childhood experiences primed students for activism on campus; however, my conversations pointed to something more. It is not only the prior socialization but also the power of place that reinforced subjects' beliefs and nurtured their courage to pursue change. Chapter Five explores the professional trajectories and lifelong activist experiences of these subjects, tracing how their time in Ann Arbor continued to influence their work and commitments beyond the University of Michigan.

Chapter Five: An Entire Life That Follows

Introduction

The element that brought these subjects together in my study was their shared experience at the University of Michigan. The previous two chapters explore how childhood experiences and socialization shaped this on-campus experience and influenced my analysis of their campus participation. However, this focus is limited to the first twenty-something years of their lives, leaving a full lifetime of experiences that follows. This chapter examines the professional trajectories of these student activists, which they understand to have been heavily shaped by their time at U-M. First, I describe a range of career paths connected to education, highlighting a shift in this generation's perception of learning institutions. Next, I present the subjects' motivations after graduation and their pursuit of good over their desire for professional success. Then, I explore the concept of the "lifetime activist," showing how their life's work remained intertwined with social action. Finally, I examine the evolution of their approaches to activism, as well as the influence of aging on this study, before leading into the final conceptual chapter.

The on-campus experiences of my subjects reveal shared patterns, though they vary in their levels of engagement in activism and in their group affiliations. However, all of the individuals I interviewed were deeply immersed in student activism during their time in Ann Arbor. Given this shared foundation, I expected to see greater similarity in their subsequent life trajectories and career paths through a following toward a particular profession or field. However, my conversations about their lives after the University of Michigan revealed that there is not a singular or prescribed path for a lifelong activist. Instead, I found that the activist experience described in Chapter Four, coupled with the processes of socialization presented in

Chapter Three, work in tandem to cultivate a value system and heightened social awareness that these individuals carry into a wide range of their fields of interest.

Education-Related Work

Research

The most prominent trend in subjects' experiences after U-M was their involvement in some form of education-related work. For many, this took the shape of pursuing graduate study in their liberal arts fields or conducting research that extended the questions they first encountered during their time in Ann Arbor. Rapp's continued work in anthropology was driven by her "tremendous interest in all the theoretical questions that circle around kinship and family." Similarly, Levine built on his undergraduate interest in history by pursuing a Ph.D. with the goal of becoming a labor historian, and now writes "about labor history from a Marxist point of view." Flacks also followed an academic path, earning a Ph.D. in social psychology that aligned with his interest in "how people become politically aware and how they relate to the political system, and to authority in general." In contrast, Schneider's professional trajectory in academia differed. While her academic career was not a direct continuation of her studies in Ann Arbor, her campus experiences shaped the questions she would go on to explore. She joked that "becoming an academic feminist was not necessarily what I started out to be, but [I] found myself in a situation in which I was going to be one." I believe my interviewees are correct in attributing their later interests to their time at U-M. Their experiences prior to Ann Arbor fostered a general inclination to question the world, which was reinforced through activism, but the specific subject matter that shaped their life's work was directly influenced by their academic experiences at Michigan.

Teaching

In addition to continuing in academia as students and researchers, many of my subjects described extensive experience in teaching. Some first encountered this role as teaching assistants during their time at Michigan as a way to "get funded," and discovered how much they enjoyed the work (Schneider). For others, teaching functioned as a transitional position after graduation, allowing them to reflect on their next steps. Cassady recalled, "I wanted to teach, and I did teach for three years and then I switched and went back and got my Master of Social Work" (Cassady). R. Meeropol similarly described taking "a job teaching anthropology at a local college part time" while determining his long-term direction. Several participants ultimately returned to teaching later in life, after careers in other fields. R. Ayers, for instance, described earning his Ph.D. at age 64 and being "hired at the University of San Francisco in teacher education" before recently retiring. The prominence of teaching across these professional trajectories reflects subjects' consistent commitment to promoting societal change. For individuals whose goals centered on creating social change, I can see how teaching offered a smaller scale, yet deeply impactful way to create positive influence. While their activism in Ann Arbor often aimed at large-scale transformation, their later engagement in education suggests a shift toward understanding that change can also be enacted on a more localized level. This evolution in how influence is understood and pursued aligns with the broader argument of how these subjects' perspectives evolved throughout their lives, which I describe in Chapter Six.

Education as an Institution

A number of individuals spent their entire careers in academia also engaging in administrative work. Bluestone described his role in establishing the School of Public Policy at

the University of Massachusetts, as well as his leadership in research, the economics department, and his tenure as Dean. The subjects' widespread commitment to the educational sphere throughout the rest of their lives after graduating from U-M underscores the importance they place on schools' educational environment. R. Ayers captured this perspective, describing schools as "sites of contention and sites of creativity … places of roiling, kind of identity formation and debate." The connections the subjects retained to education reflects their understanding that meaningful change can be achieved through institutions rather than by dismantling them.

Through careers in education, these subjects chose paths that allowed them to continue questioning the world, researching systems of injustice, studying human behavior, and passing this knowledge to future generations. This commitment to education also reflects their desire to resist conventional models of adulthood, a central theme of the 1960s student movement. As B. Ayers explains, his continued engagement with students is "one of the ways [he] stay[s] alive," adding that teaching ensures you are "never without inspiration from young people who are seeing the world anew." This highlights a shift in perspective. While these subjects once saw themselves at the center of a "world on fire," they recognize that their most compelling influence stemmed from the power of emerging voices, those not yet set in their ways. This realization reshaped my own understanding of the subjects' activist experiences and lives that followed. I began this thesis seeking to understand how formative moments shape young people and endure over time. It is clear that social change is not carried by a single generation, but continually renewed. Education systems sustain this process by fostering new perspectives, as each generation confronts its own "world on fire." Young people hold particular influence because their responses to the world are not yet fixed.

The Real World

Motivations

None of the participants in my study left the University of Michigan to enter the workforce in the same way as their predecessors or many of their peers. The turbulence of the 1960s awakened them to the realities of the world around them, shaping how they approached life after graduation. In our interviews, many described their immediate work as a means of making a living rather than as the start to a conventional career. They took jobs to pay bills, not to pursue professional advancement. This stood out given the expectation that graduates of a respected institution like the University of Michigan would follow a traditional path toward professional success. While these individuals held the same credentials as their peers, they did not share those same ambitions. Many rejected this model of complicit adulthood, instead committing to the ongoing pursuit of political and social change. "In my 20s, all I was doing was political work. I had jobs painting houses and stuff, but that was my identity" (R. Ayers). I observed that the "liberal," "do-gooder," "idealistic," and "revolutionary" mindset of the student activist did not end in Ann Arbor. Outside of education, their life paths remained guided by the same values of nonconformity, empathy, and curiosity that shaped their earlier experiences.

Two-Fold

Regardless of the professional paths they pursued after graduation, it was clear that the lives of these subjects remained "two-fold," continuously intertwined with the social issues they found most important. Flacks used this term in our conversation, explaining that while he was "becoming a new professor at the University of Chicago," he remained active in his political world through SDS and new networks in Chicago. "That really helped save me … If I had to just

try to figure out my life within academia, I would have possibly been much more frustrated" (Flacks). Across interviews, this duality appeared consistently. Regardless of profession, careers and activism overlapped, each motivating and reinforcing the other. As Wald noted, some assume "you can't be very productive academically… and also be politically active," but in his experience, "they feed off each other… and have enriched each other" (Wald). This sense of mutual reinforcement was echoed throughout my conversations.

Empathy

The awareness of injustice these activists developed in adolescence shaped their life paths in different directions, yet each trajectory was grounded in a shared commitment to empathy. At key crossroads, they consistently considered how their actions could create positive change. E. Meeropol explained that her career "grew out of [her] work around contraception and abortion," continuing on her work from the feminist liberation movement. Similarly, Parrent's attentiveness to women's struggles led her film career to focus on issues like sexual harassment, "I couldn't bring it into every kind of work or every kind of story that I did, but whenever I could, that's what I would do" (Parrent). Cassady also credited her activism with motivating her to become a social worker and engage in "direct resistance" (Cassady). Across these conversations, subjects emphasized that their work served a larger purpose. Regardless of their professional paths, a sense of social responsibility remained central. Beyond their careers, each of these subjects also continued to engage in activism through community organizing, local government, and protest.

The Lifetime Activist

When discussing the activities of lifelong activists with the subjects of my study, it became clear that once these individuals became activists, they remained so. Although times have changed since the 1960s, and the political and social issues once central have been fought, resolved, ignored, and transformed, many subjects described how they have "always tried to keep [a] hand in something" (Magidoff). During my conversations, I reflected on how, while the issues themselves change, these individuals' desire for progress, the drive to seek out and fight for improvement, remains constant. Subjects described participating in a wide range of social issues and demonstrations over the past six decades: food stamp programs, LGBTQ rights, anti-Iraq War protests, pro-choice and abortion rights initiatives, concerns about Central America, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and South Africa, the Women's March after Clinton's 2016 loss, anti-Trump activism, union organizing, protests against the war in Palestine, and opposition to U.S. immigration enforcement (R. Ayers, Bluestone, Cassady, Levine, Wald).

These examples span decades and a wide range of issues, reinforcing the commitment of these activists, as they felt compelled to engage with causes that mattered to them. Schneider articulated this phenomenon best, "Some were engaged around antiviolence work. Some were engaged in reproduction. Some were learning self defense. Some were really paying attention to health," but regardless there was discussion all the time asking, "Is this the work we should be doing? What kind of work should we do?" (Schneider). The issues that these subjects prioritized over time changed, but they remained consistent in asking, "What more can I do?" A lifetime of activism also suggests that they believed in the power of collective action; if they had felt that these efforts were ineffective, they would not have continued to participate in this way.

Reframing Approach

While I observed that my subjects' active participation persisted throughout their lives, the approaches they employed in pursuit of change adapted over time. Their experiences, reflections, and maturation shaped how they adjusted their efforts toward social change, which is a focus of Chapter Six. I found it notable that these subjects, often seen as trailblazers of their generation, shared that they now see meaningful and effective change occurring at the local level. Subjects described their involvement in efforts "around fairness, equity, and justice in schools" (B. Ayers), or as active members of city council "establishing rent control" (Flacks). This reinforces that subjects' continued investment in schools reflects a belief that change is most effective on a smaller scale. Flacks affirmed this, explaining that the best way he "could be politically engaged was on a community rather than a national level" (D. Flacks).

Impact of Age

The subjects of my study are alumni who attended the University of Michigan during the 1960s. In conducting this research, I spoke with the 70- to 90-year-old versions of these former student activists, creating a unique opportunity to examine the full arc of their lives. The distance from this time period, combined with the ability to draw on decades of experience, is a valuable contribution to this study. These reflections on their earlier experiences and how their perspectives have changed are explored further in Chapter Six. However, it is important to note that an implication of their older ages is that their ability to pursue social change is now limited. Many participants expressed gratitude for a lifetime of active engagement, with disappointment in the limitations they now face in participating (Cassady). Their reflections are shaped by this stage of life, with a limited capacity to remain physically active in the causes that matter to them.

As I present in Chapter One, many of my questions asked subjects to reflect on how their different life experiences influenced one another. In many ways, talking to this generation in their current stage of life allows them to fully articulate the arc of their experiences. I also note in Chapter One that asking questions to an older demographic raises questions about the accuracy of memory. However, the background research I conducted and the structure of my interviews helped corroborate participants' accounts. At times, the knowledge I possess over the subject matter even helped my interviewees recall and piece together their own narratives.

Conclusion

This thesis thus far has focused on the development leading up to, and the experience of, activism at the University of Michigan. Understanding this foundation is central to the study; however, this chapter shifts to another key focus – everything that followed. It examines how the U-M experience, alongside earlier influences, shaped participants' lifetime trajectories, particularly through their professional paths. While my subjects place a large weight on the impact of their time in Ann Arbor, this chapter argues that their paths were shaped by a combination of childhood experiences and college. Socialization fostered a consistent curiosity and attentiveness to the world, while U-M more clearly defined the specific issues and areas of inquiry that guided their life's work. Even as they remained engaged with other causes, their majors or focused disciplines molded a "primary" focus for many subjects. Chapter Six, the final conceptual chapter of this work, describes the subjects' reflections on their lives as activists, including how their perspectives have evolved, what they might have done differently in their youth, and their current relationship to the institution that shaped them.

Chapter Six: Reflections of a Lifetime Activist

Introduction

In my interviews, I asked respondents to reflect on their lives, organizing their experiences into three defining periods—childhood, U-M, and the rest of their lives. However, capturing this full arc would be incomplete without also asking what they know now that might have altered their perspectives at the time. Chapter Six centers on these retrospective insights, as subjects identify the experiences they now understand as most defining through a lens of hindsight. In this chapter, I examine their perspectives on participation in the 1960s student movements, including the failures and naivete they now associate with that period, while incorporating my own interpretations of their accounts. I then explore their understanding of themselves as "lifetime activists," including the role they attribute to U-M, how their approaches have evolved, and how shifting priorities have reshaped their motivations. Finally, I consider how they characterize their relationship with the University of Michigan, balancing admiration with disappointment, before using these insights to make my own broader claims about the present, leading into the final chapter of this thesis.

Reflections on Participation

Failure

Throughout my interviews, subjects consistently described a deep desire to create meaningful impact in the world around them. As young people, they came to see that the institutions they had been conditioned to respect no longer represented their interests. Rather than follow paths paved out by previous generations, they resisted expectations that felt fundamentally misaligned with their values. They recognized injustice as something modeled

from the top and refused to accept it. Yet many of these same individuals, who actively challenged powerful institutions in pursuit of a more just society, express their belief that they could have done more. Several recalled believing they were "going to be changing society," only to later confront feelings of disappointment in their perceived shortcomings (Magidoff). R. Ayers reflected that he "often apologize[s] to the young people that we didn't really accomplish what we thought we were trying to do." However, attributing the limited scope of societal change to their own personal failure misrepresents the broader institutional constraints they faced. The impact of these movements should not be determined by their inability to produce lasting societal transformation. Rather, the movement's significance lies in the way it mobilized a generation and reshaped the government's relationship with the public. As B. Ayers described in his interview, "there was no right thing to do," arguing that he had no reason to regret committing himself wholeheartedly into the movement. From a broader perspective, even a highly mobilized generation does not possess the power to dismantle established institutions or force rapid, large-scale social transformation.

Naivete

The disillusionment many subjects described in their interviews stemmed from their expectation that the movement's momentum would continue to build, culminating in a broader revolution. They anticipated "a struggle for power in the streets" or even "a breakdown and apocalypse" reshaping society (Flacks). Rapp echoed this sentiment, recalling a more "utopian version of what could be," in which new power structures would emerge "outside the institutions" (Rapp). However, in retrospect, the peak of the New Left mobilization largely coincided with the subjects' time in Ann Arbor. Many now acknowledge the naivete of their

earlier expectations of the movement. Change did occur, but primarily through institutional channels rather than revolutionary disruption. As Flacks explained, meaningful societal transformation emerged through "counter-institution building, counter culture, intellectual activity, [and] cultural activity." While this gradual, institution-based change may have produced more enduring outcomes than a sudden revolution, these reflections reveal the intensity of the historical moment in the 1960s. Feldman emphasized how important it is for people now to recognize "how much the world was on our side for change," prompting a thoughtful consideration of just how urgent and intolerable the existing conditions must have been for revolution in the streets to seem not only possible, but necessary.

Responsibility

One of the most compelling elements of this research is that the lives and experiences of these subjects are shaped not by any single factor, but by the convergence of multiple influences: their upbringing, the pressures of the historical moment, and the distinct culture of Ann Arbor. Together, these forces produced a generation of individuals who were aware of injustice and felt responsible for addressing it. While I introduce this idea of overlapping influences in earlier chapters, it was also a theme reflected upon by the subjects themselves. For example, Flacks recalled his sense that he "had a destiny to play in changing the world" (Flacks). Haber echoed this conviction, recounting how he declined the role of president of U-M student government, explaining, "my job is to change the world" (Haber). At first glance, these statements appear naïve or even self-righteous, suggesting an inflated sense of individual impact. However, Rapp offers a more nuanced interpretation, one that aligns with my own analysis. She emphasized that their "middle-class education" provided them with the "resources to not be in the factories or

armies," affording them a degree of privilege that also carried a sense of responsibility. In this view, the activists' belief in their capacity to effect change was not simply arrogance, but a response to the opportunities and obligations they perceived for themselves (Rapp).

This expectation of changing the world also reflects a broader, near-universal experience of youth: the tendency to see oneself as the center of the world. This feeling coupled with newfound independence and intellectual autonomy, as a university student, was critical in shaping these subjects' value systems and redefining their sense of purpose, which ultimately guided the trajectories of their lives. To this effect, B. Ayers recalled a line from Paul Potter that stayed with him: "Find a way to live your life so that it does not make a mockery of your values." This principle became a guiding force in his life, motivating him to align his actions with his beliefs about how the world should be, regardless of the costs that would follow these actions throughout his life.

Reflections on Activist Evolution

Attribution to U-M

The 1960s were integral in socializing this group to recognize injustice and institutional shortcomings in the world around them. Each subject remained committed to creating change beyond that specific time period, carrying those lessons and experiences forward throughout their lives. Many attributed this lifelong engagement to their experiences at the University of Michigan. Cassady described her four years in Ann Arbor as "the most impactful thing," adding that she had no doubt it "determined everything after." Similarly, Parrent explained that her time at U-M taught her to "speak up when something is wrong," shaping her attentiveness to injustice in the years that followed. R. Ayers reflected on how his university experience cultivated the

issue areas that became his life's passions, focusing on "both international anti-imperialism and racism in the U.S.," which remained his "north star" throughout his life. In my conversation with Rapp, I observed a different perspective on how her time at U-M shaped her career as an activist. While she emphasized that she was deeply shaped by her experiences at Michigan, she also pointed to the broader reality that people "are all shaped by our youthful, formative experiences," echoing my research on childhood socialization. Rapp affirmed the importance of these early influences, but added that after them "there's another 50 years." This perspective aligns with my analysis. While the experiences that followed were undoubtedly influenced by time at Michigan, and those experiences themselves were shaped by the subjects' earlier lives, there is still so much life beyond these formative periods. The lives of these subjects were opened up and transformed during their time at Michigan, but they did not stop there—they continued to evolve.

Shifting Approach

The reflections described in these conversations thus far help illuminate how participants attribute their activist experience at U-M as formative, providing greater understanding of why they remained motivated throughout their lives to continue demonstrating against injustices they perceived in the world around them. However, it was also interesting to hear how the actual methods of demonstration changed over time. Each person remained an activist, but for many, the approach they used to stay engaged shifted. Focusing on this transformation revealed particularly insightful conversations, prompting participants to reflect on how their perceptions of government structure and politics have changed since their time in Ann Arbor. Many subjects shared that their younger selves "thought everything was pretty black and white" during their time at Michigan (E. Meeropol). Reflecting back, E. Meeropol noted that she now sees the world

"with many more nuances and complications." Parrent echoed this, explaining that as you grow up, you perceive the world differently than you did when you were young, and must "become more realistic about how hard it is to make change." These changing perceptions of the world and political systems also shaped how subjects were motivated to act in pursuit of the issue areas they remain passionate about.

Many interviewees emphasized the importance of staying committed to their principles, while recognizing that "how you get from here to there [became] anything but apparent" (Rapp). As these activists came to see the world as more nuanced than they had in their youth, respondents stressed the importance of "never becom[ing] too committed to some particular government or organization" (Wald), as well as their willingness "to support candidates who aren't perfect" (Parrent). Bluestone similarly reflected that in order to effect change, one must be involved: "You can't be on the outside. You have to be on the inside." B. Ayers and R. Meeropol described shifts in how they approached communication and engagement with others. R. Meeropol explained, "You don't change people's minds by hitting them over the head," but rather by "working with [people] where they're at." B. Ayers echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the importance of "listening with the possibility of being changed [and] speaking with the possibility of being heard." As I listened to these subjects reflect on how they continued to learn from their experiences, I observed their continuous efforts to revise their codes of conduct over time. This again underscores the importance of understanding these individuals within the context of their full life stories. As "circumstances change, experiences change," and their behaviors evolved alongside their environments (Magidoff).

New Priorities

As I described in the previous chapter, I found that each subject in this study who claimed to have "once been" a student activist continued to engage in social justice throughout their lives. However, as I expected, their priorities and motivations shifted with age and life changes, particularly as they took on roles as parents. R. Ayers reflects on this transition, describing the difficulty of balancing the desire to "make the world better for [your children] in their next year" with the recognition that "you don't want to be so active that your kids are home alone and eating cereal out of the box." Many echoed this tension between identity and impact. For college students, a defining feature of this period is a sense of independence and perceived control over one's own destiny. It is one of the few times in life when people exist primarily as individuals. It is therefore no coincidence that student activism and attentiveness to injustice often emerge during these years of relative independence and limited responsibility. However, as activists age, their priorities shift, and they are often no longer able to minimize the demands of their own lives in pursuit of a broader vision of change.

Illusion of Time

Another element of being a college student is the perceived abundance of time. In my own experience, even as a senior, I still feel so young—inspired by the sense that my life is just beginning. This feeling reinforces an inability to imagine life long-term, especially amid the immediacy of these moments. R. Ayers echoes this sentiment, recalling that "when we were younger, we never thought we'd live to be 30." However, I hesitate to generalize this experience to all college students, as my research does not support that conclusion. Participants consistently emphasized that there was something distinct about their experience at the University of

Michigan, particularly "the intensity of [that] historical moment" (Feldman). Students on campus today continue to describe a similar distinctiveness, often referring to the "Michigan difference" as an explanation for what draws people to this place. Despite complicated relationships with their alma mater, many respondents still recall their time at U-M with deep fondness.

Reflections on the University of Michigan

Affection for U-M

The Michigan experience during this period was unique, positioned at the center of the student movement. It was one of the few campuses known for the young ideas, intellectual curiosity, and open discussion that flourished during the 1960s. The rarity of this atmosphere is part of what many alumni "very fondly" remember, often attributing their time in Ann Arbor to shaping the course of their lives (Lehrer). B. Ayers described his experience at U-M as "a time of awakening," an education "outside the parameters of what [he] knew." Similarly, Schneider emphasized a lasting fondness for the university, crediting it with shaping her "socialization into both academia and politics." Beyond intellectual influence, subjects also expressed "nostalgia for the culture of that place and city" (R. Ayers). As Flacks put it, "if I couldn't stay in Santa Barbara, the only other place I'd want to be was Ann Arbor." In each interview, I asked how the university responded to student activism at the time, when these individuals were testing institutional limits through demonstrations and free speech on the Diag. Today, "Michigan claims to be prideful about that history," a stance many subjects viewed as inauthentic given the lack of administrative support at the time (Flacks). Still, respondents' accounts suggest the university's response was relatively restrained. While some described targeting the president's house or moments when administrators and peers condoned demonstrations, far more recalled faculty

support—professors who aligned with SDS, rewarded activism with course credit, and fostered strong community networks. Although the university itself was not overtly supportive of 1960s demonstrations, these conversations suggest it also did not actively disrupt or police students' nonviolent expression.

Michigan remains one of the leading public universities in the country, retaining a reputation for intellectual curiosity, student autonomy, and a "liberal atmosphere with good, but not totally elitist students" (Wald). Widely regarded as a quintessential college experience, the University of Michigan balances rigorous academics and research with competitive athletics, all within a unique and welcoming college town. These elements help sustain alumni connections to the university, as many fondly recall this formative period in their lives. Subjects described maintaining these ties through financial contributions, multigenerational family connections, and continued engagement as "fanatically loyal" athletic supporters, cheering "Go Blue" at every opportunity (Cassady).

Critiques of U-M

Admiration and school pride are balanced by a recognition of institutional shortcomings and a desire for the university to do better. Across my interviews, subjects described their relationships with U-M as multifaceted, emphasizing that a "university is many things," as are our relationships with it (Mutnick). While there is pride in their time on campus, sustained through sports and familial ties, this is balanced with disappointment in how the university has responded to injustice and adversity. Levine expressed anger at "the way [the university] treated the Gaza encampments," while E. Meeropol voiced frustration with the university "knuckling over to the DEI stuff." These critiques reflect a broader sense of betrayal tied to the university's

liberal identity, but they also exist within a deeply polarized political climate. Institutions as large as the University of Michigan are likely to face backlash regardless of the positions they take, revealing the constraints of the current moment. R. Meeropol reflected: “Any institution that gets that big and that powerful begins to undermine the institution's integrity.” Recognizing the difficulty of navigating this environment, I must remain hopeful that Michigan, and similar institutions, are able to remain aligned with their stated values and integrity, even in the midst of a chaotic world.

Conclusion

As described throughout this chapter, the political perspectives of these subjects have remained largely consistent over time, shaped by their experiences as activists and the value systems and awareness of injustice they developed in the 1960s. Their relationship with the University of Michigan reflects these same themes. At the same time, aging, evolving social justice issues, and lived experience have shifted how many of these individuals engage with the causes they continue to care about.

In Chapter Seven, the final section of this thesis, I summarize the findings presented throughout this study, drawing on themes of childhood socialization, experiences at U-M, and the trajectories that followed. Then I consider the implications of these findings on understanding society today, acknowledge the limitations of my research, and make suggestions for future studies on this topic.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

This thesis has examined how the political identity and engagement of young activists is shaped by their experiences. I have analyzed this process through interviews with University of Michigan students who participated in 1960s social movements; these interviews explored their lives before, during, and after their time at Michigan. Below I summarize my findings, discuss their implications for future work, identify some limitations of this research, and chart a research agenda for the future exploration of this topic.

In Chapter One, I hypothesize that the partisanship and political engagement my subjects demonstrate at the University of Michigan will remain consistent throughout their lives, as this active participation occurs during a formative period. Based on my nineteen interviews with former student activists in the 1960s, subjects remained liberal and politically engaged since leaving Ann Arbor. However, the ways in which they participate in politics and their expectations of institutional change have evolved. While many subjects identify their time at Michigan as the greatest influence on their political identity, I observe that childhood socialization was the more significant factor. Their experiences at U-M reinforced these behaviors and awareness, as Ann Arbor offered a uniquely accepting environment and a vibrant culture of student activism. Yet, the political consciousness they developed prior to college suggests that many would have been politically engaged as progressives regardless of the university they attended or the influence of student activist experiences. While Michigan played an important role in shaping and amplifying their beliefs, I do not conclude that its influence was as dominant as the subjects themselves perceive.

Chapter Three describes the opening of each of my interviews in which I asked subjects to reflect on their childhood households, their families' political views, and the moments they

believe shaped their political consciousness. I found that the political identities of many of my subjects were influenced by their progressive parents and middle-class upbringings. By the time these students arrived at the University of Michigan, many were already politically active, or at least attentive to social issues in their environments.

Chapter Four presents the subjects' experiences as students at the University of Michigan. I found that many participants were liberal arts students and described their work in the Diag with demonstrations as more impactful to their learning than their formal coursework. This chapter describes the student activist groups in which the subjects participated in and the demonstrations that were most impactful during their time on campus.

Chapter Five outlines the professional trajectories and continued pursuit of political action that followed the subjects' time in Ann Arbor. I found that many of the social issues they became passionate about at U-M shaped the focus of their careers and guided their continued activism throughout their lives, with many also remaining involved in academia at some point in their careers.

Chapter Six portrays the subjects' reflections on these three influential periods of their lives, considering how each phase influenced the next. I found that many activists now perceive their earlier approaches to activism and their intent to change the world as naive, and they have since reframed their strategies for enacting positive change. Many subjects regard their time at the University of Michigan as integral to shaping the political identities they continue to hold, but their connection to the institution is now mostly limited to sports.

This topic is important to continue studying because it highlights the impact of early political consciousness and activity on long-term engagement, which is an area not widely examined in political science. Understanding the intersection of political events and human

behavior demonstrates how experiences shape core elements of our identities. How does awareness of the world around us influence our perspectives later in life? It is also worth considering how periods of social and political unrest affect identity formation: Do chaotic times make us more attuned to the needs of others than to our own? These questions are fascinating to me, but, as I discuss below, limitations in my research did not allow me to fully address them.

The research presented in this thesis is speculative. Establishing contact with potential respondents proved to be a challenging part of my process, so I relied on resources that provided me with interview subjects but narrowed the diversity of my sample in the process. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that my sample represents all of University of Michigan student activists from the 1960s. Additionally, as I describe in Chapter One, individuals willing to be interviewed are rarely representative of the broader population, and the Bentley archives are more to activist leadership cadres rather than the full spectrum of participants. Snowball sampling was another essential way to recruit a sufficient number of willing participants; however, it introduces potential bias, as many subjects were connected to others in the research pool. This resulted in limited variation in the political backgrounds and in a way I did not anticipate, the childhoods of my subjects. Additionally, each interview I conducted required many hours of time, per participant, for preparation, administration, transcription, and analysis making it infeasible to interview a larger number of individuals. My choice to interview many activists also meant I did not interview non-activist students, and this prevented me from confidently making causal inference about the possible effects of college-based activism on later political engagement.

Given these limitations and my demonstrated contributions, I believe future research on this topic would benefit from drawing on a more diverse sample of subjects with varied familial backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, and religious observances. I also believe this study would

be strengthened by including students from the same academic environment who were not involved in activism to serve as a control group. This would enhance my analysis in Chapter Four by providing a clearer understanding of how the University of Michigan, as an institution, politically influenced students regardless of their participation in student activism. Similarly, the research could be extended to the University of California, Berkeley, and Columbia University to distinguish influences specific to the activist experience in Ann Arbor from other prominent institutions in the New Left movement during this period. Additional research at other American universities not closely linked to the New Left would allow for comparison and shed light on how progressive academic environments shaped students differently than other institutions in the 1960s.

The constant stream of headlines and information today often suggests that we are living through the most unprecedented period of political polarization. When I raised this topic with participants, many agreed. Yet, in immersing myself in the political environment of the 1960s, I am reminded that that era, too, felt unprecedented. The civil rights movement fought for long-denied equality, public trust in government eroded, and young people were compelled to fight in a war they did not understand, for a country they increasingly questioned. If the term had been in common use, that moment would likely have been described as unprecedented, too. During their time in Ann Arbor, many of these activists believed there would be a revolution. Some were disappointed that the revolution never came; instead, institutions adapted to demands for social change, and many became more effective at ignoring such demands.

In reflecting on the impact of this era on a generation, it becomes possible to see how the long-term effects of living in a world perceived to be on the brink of revolution might be positive. If history offers any guidance, such moments of chaos can instill, at a young age, a

heightened sense of empathy and awareness of injustices that extend beyond one's own existence. These conditions encourage individuals to look outward, at times prioritizing the needs of others and society over themselves. Considered in this way, in the words of Bill Ayers, a "world on fire" can serve as a powerful reminder of what matters—kindness, empathy, and collective well-being. In today's world, where idealism is no longer consistently reflected in our institutions, it becomes our responsibility to sustain it through the values we cultivate as people and pass on to the future generations.

There is no part of me that wants to continue to see a "world on fire." The current polarization and diminishing ability for thoughtful dialogue threaten the power and sustainability of democracy. However, my research suggests a possibility of cautious optimism: When young people learn to recognize harmful patterns in the world around them, they may feel compelled to challenge and change them. While today's political climate is troubling, it also signals the possibility of transformation. As Rick Ayers observed, "the Empire is falling," and, as the student movements of the 1960s suggest, meaningful progress often requires existing structures to break down before something more equitable can emerge.

Bibliography

Ayers, William. 2001. *Fugitive Days: A Memoir*. Beacon Press.

Bartels, Larry M., and Katherine J. Cramer. 2026. *The Politics of Social Change: From the Sixties to the Present Through the Eyes of a Generation*. University of Chicago Press.

Cramer, Katherine J., and Larry M. Bartels. 2019. "The Lessons of Vietnam: Social Identity, the Vietnam War, and Contemporary Political Divides." Paper presented at the Annual Meetings of the Midwest Political Science Association.

Cutler, Neal E., and Vern L. Bengston. 1974. "Age and Political Alienation: Maturation, Generation and Period Effects." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 415(1): 160-75.

Dylan, Bob. 1964. "The Times They Are A-Changin'." On *The Times They Are A-Changin* (Columbia Records).

Earl, Jennifer. 2004. "The Cultural Consequences of Social Movements." In David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*: 508-30. Blackwell.

Flacks, Richard. 1967. "The Liberated Generation: An Exploration of the Roots of Student Protest." *Journal of Social Issues* 23(3): 52-75.

Flacks, Richard, and Nelson Lichtenstein. 2015. *The Port Huron Statement: Sources and Legacies of the New Left's Founding Manifesto*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Gerring, John. 2017. *Case Study Research*, second ed. Cambridge University Press.

Gerring, John. 2012. "Mere Description." *British Journal of Political Science* 42(4): 721-46.

Gitlin, Todd. 2013. *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*. Random House.

Healy, Andrew, and Neil Malhotra. 2013. "Childhood Socialization and Political Attitudes: Evidence from a Natural Experiment." *Journal of Politics* 75(4): 1023-37.

Hoge, Dean, and Teresa Ankney. 1982. "Occupations and Attitudes of Former Student Activists 10 Years Later." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 11(5): 355-71.

Jennings, M. Kent, Laura Stoker, and Jake Bowers. 2009. "Politics Across Generations: Family Transmission Reexamined." *Journal of Politics* 71(3): 782-99.

Johnson, Tim, and Christopher T. Dawes. 2016. "Do Parents' Life Experiences Affect the Political and Civic Participation of Their Children? The Case of Draft-Induced Military Service." *Political Behavior* 38(4): 793-816.

Kapiszewski, Diana, Lauren M. MacLean, and Benjamin L. Read. 2015. *Field Research in Political Science: Practices and Principles*, first ed. Cambridge University Press.

Kasdan, Lawrence, dir. 1983. *The Big Chill*. Columbia Pictures, Sony Pictures Releasing Canada. 1 hour 45 minutes.

McAdam, Doug. 1988. *Freedom Summer*. New York: Oxford University Press.

McFarland, Daniel A., and Reuben J. Thomas. 2006. "Bowling Young: How Youth Voluntary Associations Influence Adult Political Participation." *American Sociological Review* 71(3): 401-25.

Meeropol, Robert. 2003. *An Execution in the Family: One Son's Journey*, first ed. St. Martin's Press.

Miller, Jim. 1987. *"Democracy Is in the Streets": From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago*. Simon and Schuster.

Mosley, Layna, ed. 2013. *Interview Research in Political Science*. Cornell University Press.

Rapoport, Roger. 1965. "Protest, Learning Heckling Spark Viet Rally." *The Michigan Daily* (Ann Arbor, Michigan), March 26.

Valentino, Nicholas A., and David O. Sears. 1998. "Event-Driven Political Communication and the Preadult Socialization of Partisanship." *Political Behavior* 20(2): 127-54.

Useem, Michael. 1972. "Ideological and Interpersonal Change in the Radical Protest Movement." *Social Problems* 19(4): 451-69.

Wells, Tom. 1994. *The War Within: America's Battle Over Vietnam*. University of California Press.

Whalen, Jack, and Richard Flacks. 1989. *Beyond the Barricades: The Sixties Generation Grows Up*. Temple University Press.

Appendix

Richard (Rick) Ayers grew up in a privileged and White suburb of Chicago and described his father as a "progressive businessman." He arrived at the University of Michigan in the fall of 1965 and became active in anti-Vietnam War demonstrations. During his junior year, he participated in a draft card demonstration that resulted in his abrupt departure from U-M to escape the draft and move to Canada. Ayers is Professor Emeritus at the University of San Francisco.

William (Bill) Ayers, older brother of Rick Ayers, also experienced a privileged upbringing in the suburbs of Chicago, where his father was a company CEO. He majored in American Studies at the University of Michigan and was a vocal leader in the Jesse James Gang, eventually co-founding the Weather Underground. Ayers is an author and retired professor at the University of Chicago.

Barry Bluestone grew up in a progressive family in an integrated neighborhood in Detroit. He earned his B.A., master's degree, and Ph.D. all from the Department of Economics at the University of Michigan. During his undergraduate years, Bluestone described himself as highly active in SDS and student government. He went on to have a long and successful career in academia, serving as a founding dean, director, and Professor Emeritus at Northeastern University.

Jane Cassidy grew up in a lower-middle-class suburb of Detroit. She studied English and was highly active in the civil rights movement during her time in Ann Arbor. Shortly after graduating, Cassidy entered the field of social work, which allowed her to continue pursuing her passion for direct action throughout her career.

Richard Feldman grew up surrounded by his extended family in an Italian-Jewish neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. He graduated from U-M early in 1970 with an independent study degree in intellectual political philosophy, but spent most of his time and energy on campus organizing the anti-Vietnam War movement. Feldman has continued his career in activism, specifically focused on worker's rights in Detroit.

Richard Flacks is a "red diaper baby" from New York City. He arrived at the University of Michigan in 1957 to pursue his Ph.D. in social psychology and became a founding member of Students for Democratic Society (SDS). Flacks is an influential author and Professor Emeritus of Sociology at University of California Santa Barbara.

Alan Haber grew up on the edge of Ann Arbor to first-generation Jewish immigrant parents. He enrolled at the University of Michigan in 1954 and was an influential leader and founder of Students for Democratic Society (SDS). Haber has remained politically active and committed to changing the world, and continues to reside in the Ann Arbor community.

Jill Hamberg was born in New York City and spent most of her childhood in Sunnyside, Queens. She earned a B.A. from the University of Michigan, where she was a member of SDS and engaged in the movement's administrative work. Hamberg continued her education, earning a Master of City Planning (MCP) from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a Ph.D. in Urban Planning from Columbia University.

Sharon Jeffrey Lehrer, originally from Detroit, was instilled with values of political action by her mother, who worked for the United Auto Workers (UAW) and was highly active in the Democratic Party. At the University of Michigan, Lehrer studied political science, sociology, and psychology and was a founding member of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). She has continued to devote her life to political organizing.

Bruce Levine was born in Brooklyn and raised in a town of Long Island that was open to the ideas of liberal politics. He attended the University of Michigan in 1967, earning his B.A. in history, engaging in anti-Vietam War activism with Students for Democratic Society (SDS), and serving as an editor of *The Michigan Daily*. Levine is Professor Emeritus at the University of Illinois.

Richard (Dickie) Magidoff grew up in New York City in a lower-middle-class Jewish neighborhood, describing his parents as "avid New Dealers." He graduated in 1965 with a B.A. in Russian studies and a master's degree in history from the University of Michigan, where he was involved with Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Magidoff now helps run a community radio show in Round Mountain, California, that aims to feature great music and "inject a little bit of truth into a crazy political environment."

Ellen Meeropol grew up in Washington, D.C., in a secular Jewish family, with parents she described as "Stevenson liberals." She followed her then-boyfriend, Robert Meeropol, to the University of Michigan in 1968 to complete her art degree, where she became involved in Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and was integral to the creation of the women's liberation movement in Ann Arbor. Meeropol's work on contraception and abortion within the feminist movement motivated her to become a nurse practitioner. She is also a fiction writer.

Robert Meeropol, husband of Ellen Meeropol and son of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, was raised by his adoptive parents in an "Old Left" middle-class household, which influenced the formation of his political views. He arrived at the University of Michigan in 1967, where he earned his B.A. and master's degree in anthropology and became an active member of VOICE, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) political party. Meeropol has had a career centered on advocacy, most notably founding the Rosenberg Fund for Children, which provides support for the educational and emotional needs of children whose activist parents have been targeted.

Deborah Mutnick, a "red diaper baby" from Plainfield, New Jersey, was raised by parents who were radicalized during their time at the University of Michigan in the late 1930s and early 1940s. She arrived on campus as a junior in 1973, earned her B.A. in English, and became involved in the Young Socialist Alliance (YSA). Mutnick is a widely respected writer and former Director of Writing at the Brooklyn campus of Long Island University.

Joanne Parrent grew up in Royal Oak, Michigan, in a Catholic working-class family. She studied American Culture at the University of Michigan and became active in Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) before shifting her efforts to developing the women's liberation movement in Ann Arbor. Parrent has continued her work in pursuit of gender equality by helping to develop the first feminist credit union in Detroit, co-founding the feminist magazine *Chrysalis*, and bringing women's issues and the visibility of female struggles into her writing and directing throughout her film career.

Rayna Rapp grew up on Long Island and arrived at the University of Michigan in 1964 "pre-programmed for political activism" through the conversations she shared with her progressive parents. She earned her undergraduate, master's, and Ph.D. degrees in anthropology at the University of Michigan and was active in the civil rights and antiwar movements, playing a central role in building the feminist liberation movement during her time in graduate school. Rapp continued her career with extensive anthropological research on family and kinship and went on to become Professor Emerita of Anthropology at New York University (NYU).

Jeanette (Jenny) Roper grew up in New York as a first-generation American, born to German immigrant parents. She arrived at the University of Michigan as a junior in 1962, drawn to the political environment that Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was fostering in Ann Arbor. Most of Roper's career has been centered on work at the state and local government levels, "trying to make [government] as compassionate as it could be."

Beth Schneider grew up in a Jewish-Italian, working-class neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York, with first-generation European parents. She earned her master's degree in sociology from the University of Michigan and played an integral role in building the feminist liberation movement in Ann Arbor. Schneider retired from the University of California, Santa Barbara in 2020 after a trailblazing career, primarily focused her research on sexuality and gender studies, political and social movements, and health.

Alan Wald grew up in a liberal, Jewish, progressive Democratic family. He was actively engaged in student activism during his undergraduate and graduate studies at Antioch College and the University of California, Berkeley, working with University of Michigan student activists on national Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) projects, though he did not arrive in Ann Arbor until 1975 as an assistant professor. Wald retired after a long and successful career in academia at the University of Michigan, where he is Professor Emeritus and served as Director of American Culture.