

**Lauter, Paul (2020), *Our Sixties: An Activist's History*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 287 pp.**

Released in October 2020, *Our Sixties: An Activist's History* is Paul Lauter's new book, a fine piece of social history masterfully woven into a very moving, honest, and personal memoir. In carefully conceived

13 chapters tracing the various phases of the activist's history, the book combines history, politics, pedagogy, and theory. Beautifully written, it offers solid information and sound, sharp commentary on the

events that marked the revolutionary era of the 1960s in the United States (US). The author's deep knowledge of American culture together with a bright sense of humor and a shrewd, witty tone, makes it a pleasure to read. Indeed, *Our Sixties* should be required reading for those who want to understand the civil rights movements in the US in the 1960s and the connected struggles against inequality, discrimination, segregation, oppression, racism, poverty, sexism – and war. As the author points out in the first chapter, though the word was never mentioned at the time (and is still largely scary today in the US), these were clearly *socialist* movements.

With a Yale PhD in his luggage (1958) and before he went on to pursue a brilliant career in academia, Lauter was a passionate activist for social justice. He traveled all over the country, helping develop peace education programs, teaching in the 1964 Mississippi freedom schools, heading the first community school (in Washington, D.C.), supporting draft opposition, resisting the war in Vietnam, and co-founding the Feminist Press. *Our Sixties* suggests that following the “success” in 2016 of Trump's self-serving “revolution” – act-now-for-America-first – the US urgently needs a 60's style progressive reinvention. The stunning cover of *Our Sixties* reproduces the well-known Warren K. Leffler's photograph of the civil rights march on Washington, D.C., on August 28, 1963. The event, also known as March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, brought together 250,000 Americans. At the march, Martin Luther King, Jr., the final speaker, delivered his historic “I Have a Dream” speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial.

It was the perfect finale for an event intended to denounce racism, segregation and discrimination and to champion for the civic and economic rights of African Americans.

I see this cover image as the perfect reflection of Lauter's lifelong devotion to inclusive, democratic ideals and principles. He has recently stated that he “first encountered Black Lives Matter in 1964 in Mississippi”. How could that be if Black Lives Matter didn't start until 2013? “As an organization”, Lauter corrects, and he continues, “the issues addressed in the BLM movement have energized and unsettled black communities for decades”.<sup>2</sup> In the 1960s, when it was dangerous to try to help African Americans to get registered to vote – you could actually get killed, and many did – Paul Lauter was there. He went as a teacher only to find himself learning from his underprivileged Black and Latino and Latina students about American injustice.

By 1969, as the author tells us in chapter nine, after more than a decade of activism and political interventionist writing (listed at the end of Selected Bibliography, on pages 266-267), he decided to go back to academia. “I was weary”, he confesses. And he needed a regular income to support his children (p. 154). But perhaps the more conservative turn after Nixon's election the previous year helped as well. The title of chapter nine couldn't be more fitting: “A New University?”. The question mark testifies to Lauter's modesty. From the 1980s on, particularly after he joined Trinity College, Hartford, in 1988, he led an effort to revolutionize higher education in the humanities and social sciences.

<sup>2</sup> See Lauter, Paul (n.d.), “Black Lives Mattered in 1964 in Mississippi, too. I Was There”, *Northjersey.com*. Accessed on 11.11.2020, at <https://eu.northjersey.com/story/opinion/2020/10/15/black-lives-mattered-1964-mississippi-too-opinion/3643572001/>.

With a team of colleagues from around the country and overseas, he worked to expand the canon making English and American Studies theory, research, and pedagogy change completely. Even if not without controversy, English and American literature and culture syllabi in university departments could not but change as well.

In the meantime, as *Our Sixties* makes clear, Lauter was writing, co-writing, editing, and co-editing some of the most important and influential books in the field. The one having most impact still today is arguably *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* (1994), showing not only that Black writers matter, but that working class writers, indigenous writers, female writers, and all *other* writers also matter. After the *Heath Anthology*, students and teachers of American literature no longer had an excuse not to read and study and teach even Hawthorne's "damn'd mob of scribbling women". The neat, exclusive syllabus of American renaissance and other prominent white male authors, with the occasional token Emily Dickinson, Ralph Ellison or Tony Morrison, could no longer be the only one. Decolonized American studies had come of age. Major contributions to the same effect were Lauter's writings during the 1990s. *Canons and Contexts* came out in 1991, *From Walden Pond to Jurassic Park*, in 2001. In 1994-1995, Paul Lauter served as president of the American Studies Association. In that capacity he traveled the world (including a visit to the University of Coimbra, in Portugal, in

1995), delivering lectures and conducting seminars on the new American studies, and regularly participating in European Association for American Studies conferences, while back home the so-called "new Americanists" were furthering the same cause and exciting major controversy in the field.<sup>3</sup>

In March 2020 Lauter was scheduled to come back to Portugal to be the Americanist keynote speaker at the conference of the Portuguese Association of Anglo-American Studies, to take place in Aveiro. He had also graciously agreed to visit several Portuguese universities and research centers, including the Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra, to speak about central issues of *Our Sixties*, then forthcoming. The COVID-19 pandemic completely ruined this project.

A distinguished, prize-winning scholar of English and American Studies, Paul Lauter is currently Allan K. and Gwendolyn Miles Smith Professor of Literature, Emeritus, at Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut. A fine scholar, a committed teacher, and a concerned educator, Lauter never stopped being an activist. Once at Trinity, he set up an archive on the struggles of the American sixties and "began to work on this book, *Our Sixties*" (p. 217). The book makes things easier for whoever wants to know more about American culture and the ruthless affairs of the world in general, in order better to question them.

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<sup>3</sup> See Pease, Donald E. (1990), "New Americanists: Revisionist Interventions in the Canon", *Boundary 2*, 17(1), 1-37; and cf. the scathing critique of Crews, Frederick (1988), "Whose American Renaissance?", *New York Review of Books*, 35(16), 68-69.