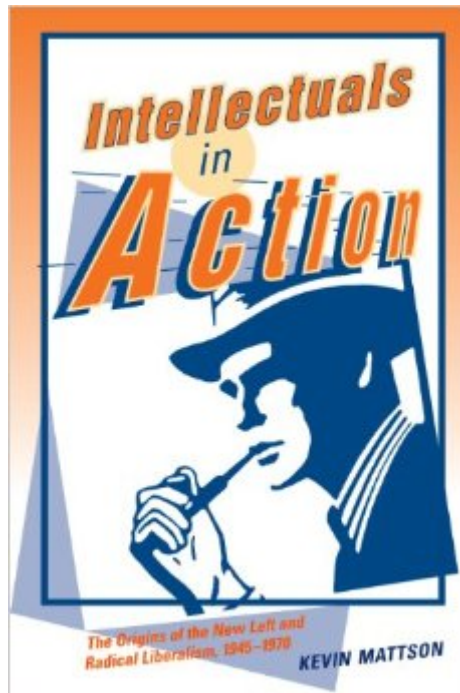


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Intellectuals In Action: The Origins Of The New Left And Radical Liberalism, 1945-1970



Synopsis

Born in 1966—a generation removed from the counterculture—Kevin Mattson came of political age in the conservative Reagan era. In an effort to understand contemporary political ambivalence and the plight of radicalism today, Mattson looks back to the ideas that informed the protest social movements and activism of the 1960s. To accomplish its historical reconstruction, the book combines traditional intellectual biography—including thorough archival research—with social history to examine a group of intellectuals whose thinking was crucial in the formulation of New Left political theory. These include C. Wright Mills—the popular radical sociologist; Paul Goodman—a practicing Gestalt therapist and anarcho-pacifist; William Appleman Williams—the historian and famed critic of "American empire"; Arnold Kaufman—a "radical liberal" who deeply influenced the thinking of the SDS. The book discusses not only their ideas—but also their practices—from writing pamphlets and arranging television debates to forming left-leaning think tanks and organizing teach-ins protesting the Vietnam War. Mattson argues that it is this political engagement balanced with a commitment to truth-telling that is lacking in our own age of postmodern acquiescence. Challenging the standard interpretation of the New Left as inherently in conflict with liberalism, Mattson depicts their relationship as more complicated—pointing to possibilities for a radical liberalism today. Intellectual and social historians—as well as general readers either fascinated by the 1960s protest movements or actively seeking an alternative to our contemporary political malaise—will embrace Mattson's book and its promise to shed new light on a time period known for both its intriguing conflicts and its enduring consequences.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Intellectuals in Action is a history of the New Left movement like no other. Rather than a blow-by-blow, Mattson examines the evolution of ideas that moved the New Left by exploring the lives and writings of several intellectuals in the movement - one per chapter. (Sociologist C. Wright Mills, social critic Paul Goodman, historian William Appleman Williams, philosopher Arnold Kauffman, and the journalist academics behind Studies on the Left and New University magazines.) What is Kauffman trying to find out? What is he doing with this history that other histories don't do? First, he is paying careful attention to how the New Left expanded on and drifted away from the Old Left, and particularly how each author handled the tension between liberalism (wanting to keep what is good in the liberal tradition) and progressivism (wanting to expand beyond the liberalism that left them frustrated). Second, he examines how each intellectual saw the role of intellectuals - themselves included - in the New Left; how much, for instance, should intellectuals be neutral scholars and how much should their scholarship be motivated by, or even be, activism? I found this book extremely interesting. Particularly, I enjoyed the author's very neutral but passionate portrayal of all the intellectuals involved here. For instance, while the author clearly admires all the figures he writes about, he is quick to point out some of their blind spots and tensions in their work, such as some of the uneasy tensions between the appeal to traditional American liberal values and appeal to progressive radicalism.

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