

2009

h-diplo

H-Diplo Article REVIEWS

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/>

No. 217

Published on 24 March 2009

H-Diplo Article Review Managing Editor: Diane N. Labrosse

H-Diplo Article Review General Editor and Web Editor: George Fujii

Sabrina Fuchs-Abrams. "Women on War: Mary McCarthy, Susan Sontag, and Diana Trilling Debate the Vietnam War." *Women's Studies* 37 (2008): 987-1007. DOI: 10.1080/00497870802414496. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00497870802414496> .

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/Kieran-Fuchs-Abrams.pdf>

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The popular memory of anti-Vietnam activism rarely emphasizes images of well-known intellectuals crafting essays for major publications. However, Sabrina Fuchs-Abrams demonstrates in her thoughtful essay "Women on War: Mary McCarthy, Susan Sontag, and Diana Trilling Debate the Vietnam War" that such work provided fertile ground for contentious debate regarding both why and how the Vietnam War should be opposed and how intellectuals should participate in such opposition. Blending cultural and intellectual history and analyzing the production of historical discourses that have obvious contemporary resonance, this article prompts reflection on the anti-war movement's complexities and the public intellectual's potential to promote social change.

Fuchs-Abrams's analysis, while focused on opposition to Vietnam, more broadly interrogates competing theories of public intellectualism. She examines the competing articulations of anti-war sentiment among these three women by identifying McCarthy and Sontag with the New Left, which opposed the war on moral grounds and "sought immediate withdrawal from Vietnam," and positing Trilling as a representative of the "Liberal Intellectuals," who "expressed skepticism of the absolutist, ideological tendency of certain anti-war protestors and called, instead, for a more pragmatic approach to ending the war" [988; 1001]. Fuchs-Abrams contextualizes these positions within three competing theories of public intellectualism, contrasting Julien Benda's and Edward Shils's argument for the intellectual as a "truth seeker" whose obligation to pass moral judgments transcends political considerations with Edward Said's notion of an intellectual "engaged in political action by speaking on behalf of marginalized groups against established power structures" and Andrew Ross' and Bruce Robbins's concept "of the engaged intellectual who is at once a disinterested seeker of truth and a politically

engaged moral guide” [991-92].¹ Fuchs-Abrams identifies McCarthy and Sontag with the first of these and associates Trilling with the last. As the article progresses, she implicitly asserts that that latter position holds the most promise, and while this claim is provocative, it also creates ample space for substantive debate.

Reading closely McCarthy and Sontag’s essays from their respective trips to Vietnam, Fuchs-Abrams argues that both women valorize North Vietnam and condemn the United States, and she insightfully demonstrates how these celebrations primarily enabled critiques of American culture in general as much as of the war in Vietnam in particular [1000]. She emphasizes that each woman contrasted North Vietnam and the United States on moral terms, showing that McCarthy lamented the impact of American commercialization on Saigon and idealizes Hanoi as pre-modern and pre-industrial while Sontag celebrated North Vietnamese culture as “simple, ethical, [and] community oriented” and providing a model from which “Americans can benefit” [993; 999]. This contrast defines the basis for their opposition to the war; both women “denounce what they consider to be the encroachment of a corrupt, modern, industrial society on a pastoral and ethical folk culture” [988]. These beliefs, Fuchs-Abrams shows, led necessarily to the position that both the war and efforts to negotiate a solution to it were entirely indefensible: “According to McCarthy, those who oppose the war should not identify themselves with the government by offering solutions. . . . The role of the intellectual . . . should be to act as moral arbiter . . . not as a political negotiator” [994]. Such a claim places McCarthy squarely within the first intellectual tradition that Fuchs-Abrams described.

However, in her strongest work in the essay, Fuchs-Abrams usefully critiques both the dichotomies that each has articulated and the conclusions that follow from them. Closely analyzing each author’s evaluation of the language used by the North Vietnamese and United States government, she compellingly argues that their praise for North Vietnam relied upon their failure to analyze that country’s rhetoric with the rigor that they apply to that of the United States: McCarthy “seems to overlook the anti-capitalist, anti-democratic message behind the clichés of the North Vietnamese” and employs a “double standard” in her analysis of American and North Vietnamese rhetoric, while Sontag “chooses to ignore” the propagandistic capacity of North Vietnamese language in celebrating its “moral certainty” (995; 997-98). Moreover, she highlights each woman’s ambivalence about the sacrifice of her own subjectivity that socialism would require [996-97]. Fuchs-Abrams argues that this ambivalence, in concert with McCarthy’s and Sontag’s incomplete analyses, calls into question their subsequent claims about the United States and the war in Vietnam. Her conclusion that “by indicting American capitalist culture

¹ Fuchs-Abrams draws from the following texts in her discussion of these varied intellectual traditions: Julien Benda, *The Treason of Intellectuals*, Trans. Richard Aldington (New York, Norton, 1969); Edward Shils, *The Intellectuals and the Powers and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972); Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectuals* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994); Bruce Robbins, *Secular Vocations: Intellectuals, Professionalism, Culture* (London: Verso, 1993); and Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989) [1007].

and holding to a false ideal of libertarian or decentralized socialism, McCarthy threatens to destroy the very freedom that has enabled her to speak and be heard,” seems something of an overstatement [996]. However, her questioning whether “Sontag’s wholesale indictment of American culture and idealization of Vietnamese culture [is] intellectually responsible” emerge logically from her claims and are worthy of discussion [1000].

Diana Trilling, along with many who represented the “typical liberal response to the leftist critique of the Vietnam War,” shares these concerns, critiquing McCarthy’s insufficient criticism of the North Vietnamese, her failure to consider the moral implications of the violence to which Vietnamese anti-communists would likely be subjected if the United States withdrew its support, and condemning moral opposition to the war as insufficient in a culture that largely accepted that knowledge as already self-evident [1000-01; 994]. Trilling eschews McCarthy’s and Sontag’s idealistic positing of alternative social orders and instead calls for more realistic approaches that “look at conditions as they actually are” [1003]. More significantly, she critiques McCarthy’s vision of the intellectual’s role, arguing, as Fuchs-Abrams shows, that “one cannot separate the moral from the political in determining the intellectual’s course of action” [1001]. Maintaining that the intellectual’s withdrawal from the political process prohibits political progress, Trilling thus exemplifies not only a different position regarding the war in Vietnam but also a different philosophy of intellectualism, one that “reasserts the responsibility of the intellectual to act as moral arbiter in the interest of social reform” [1005].

Fuchs-Abrams convincingly reveals the intersections between these three women’s anti-war positions and broader debates regarding intellectualism, and her thoughtful analysis will certainly provoke debate. However, there are a few areas in which the article might inhibit such discussion. Foremost is Fuchs-Abrams’ apparent sympathy with Trilling. She maintains that “Trilling . . . rightly identifies a radical, utopian tendency in McCarthy’s anti-war protests, one that neglects the responsibility of the intellectual to work toward the moral betterment of society as it is, not as she imagines it should be” and that McCarthy and Sontag “ignore the responsibility of the intellectual to reform existing society” [1003; 1005]. Certainly, as she has shown, this is one role that an intellectual can play, and she has convincingly demonstrated that McCarthy’s and Sontag’s idealism rests on an unstable foundation. However, asserting in her own voice that this is “the responsibility” of the intellectual seems to posit a conclusion that could truncate the debate that she wishes to provoke. Further, while the article makes evident the shortcomings of McCarthy’s argument, the extent to which McCarthy “retreats into a theoretical ideal” and disavows political engagement might benefit from further discussion [1002]. McCarthy writes that beyond fomenting moral opposition to the war, the intellectual must “turn it, whenever possible, into the language of action” [994]. This comment seems to identify McCarthy not as solely a moralist but rather as “at once a disinterested seeker of truth and a politically engaged moral guide,” the same category in which Fuchs-Abrams places Trilling [992]. Exploring this comment raises the question of

what, exactly, constitutes political engagement; while for Trilling it is “propos[ing] and even direct[ing] the positive operations of government,” surely there are other avenues of meaningful political activism [1002]. Are not pointing to alternative models of society – even problematic or “unattainable” ones – and creating “the language of action” also significant, politically engaged ways of promoting social change, or does political engagement necessarily involve working within existing power structures, particularly those of the state [1002]? Clarifying this point would, I think, ultimately strengthen the author’s claims. Finally, a longer critique of Trilling, whose writings receive a shorter treatment than McCarthy’s and Sontag’s, would be welcome. More analysis of Trilling’s commentary on the Vietnam War, in addition to discussion of her critiques of the anti-war left and particularly McCarthy, would provide greater context and fruitful ground for analysis, and it would certainly further the article’s useful recuperation of Trilling’s writings.

One final, perhaps picayune quibble concerns style. In a few places, Fuchs-Abrams’ language seems repetitive, as when she employs almost exactly the same clause within a three-paragraph proximity in her analysis of Sontag’s work, first writing that “In the second half of her report, Sontag seeks to rid herself of her Western bias and to examine the Vietnamese from their own point of view” and then explaining that “In the second half of her report on Vietnam, Sontag offers a retrospective view of her experience in which she seeks to rid herself of her Western bias and examine the North Vietnamese from their own point of view”[997; 998]. Such repetition, while not overly problematic, does somewhat inhibit the readability of Fuchs-Abrams’ otherwise well-constructed argument.

But these concerns are relatively minor. Sabrina Fuchs-Abrams has usefully shown that disputes over Vietnam were part of a larger debate about how intellectuals could encourage social change, and her conclusions are insightful and provocative. Her work contributes to an increasing body of scholarship that illuminates the intersections between the war and other cultural and political debates. It will encourage students who may tend to view the anti-war movement as monolithic to develop a nuanced view of the competing ideologies and prescriptions held by the various facets of the opposition. Perhaps most importantly, her analysis has obvious contemporary relevance, and it encourages contemplation about whether and to what extent intellectual work can effectively intersect with political activism in the current moment.

David Kieran is a Ph.D. candidate in the American Studies Department at The George Washington University. His research interests include contemporary US culture, cultural memory, and foreign policy. He recently defended his dissertation, “Sundered by a Memory: The Legacy of the Vietnam War and the Cultural Memory of Trauma in American Culture, 1975-Present.”

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— *Commissioned for H-Diplo by Edwin Martini, Western Michigan University*