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Social Positionality and The Vietnam War

The “long” 1960s is a relatively straightforward way to describe one the most influential and fascinating periods in U.S. history. The use of the word “long” is meant to highlight the fact that the social period we so often refer to as the 1960s, realistically began before January 1, 1960 and ended after December 31, 1969. It was a time of insecurity and anxiety for many, as well as one of liberation and expression for others. From the Vietnam War, to the hippie movement, to the incredible number of notable figures who were assassinated in such a short period of time, the long 1960s is without a doubt, a period full of captivating topics to be explored. This paper seeks to take, arguably the most influential event of the time, the Vietnam War, and develop an understanding of how different groups of people experienced the Vietnam War and its draft. Through close reading, it will become apparent that one’s positionality within U.S. society at the time of the Vietnam War directly affected the ways in which individuals experienced the conflict, as well as influencing the ways in which they could, and did, oppose it.

In the initial stages of the research process, trying to come up with ideas for potential topics and questions, my first method in researching was to call my parents, who lived through the 1960s, and have them tell me what aspects of that time they found to be the most striking. They both talked about a period in which a sense of uncertainty and fear was present in the minds of many. This was due in large part to the multiple assassinations of high-profile individuals in a relatively short period of time, combined with the Vietnam and Cold Wars. From this discussion, I became interested in looking at how specific assassinations, specifically that of Robert Kennedy, affected the anti-Vietnam War movement and the politics surrounding the war. However, as I reflected further on the personal connections I had to the long 1960s, I thought of my draft-dodging uncle and wondered what drove him to protest the war and eventually try to leave the country. In the end, I realized that I am truly interested in the anti-Vietnam War movement itself and how different groups of people reacted to the war and the draft. More specifically, this paper aims to exhibit how the differing social positionalities of different groups of people affected their experiences with, and responses to the war and draft.

In thinking about the Vietnam War, one of the reasons it is so engrained into the minds of Americans, whether they lived through it or not, is because of the unique nature of the conflict. A key, contributing factor to this impressionability was the draft. Living a life wherein the United States has not needed to implement a military draft of any kind, the idea of being drafted is nothing more than a story or a hypothetical for draft-eligible individuals in today’s day and age. While the majority of troops in Vietnam were volunteers, being drafted was still a harsh reality for many 18-26 year old men at that time. (U.S. Selective Service System, n.d.) Although the American public was in favor of the war for many years, there was always a sizeable population opposed to the war, especially when it came to the draft. As is the case in today’s society, a large portion of those who participated in protests and various anti-war movements were of college age. This should not come as a surprise, considering the fact that the target group for the draft and those protesting it were one in the same.

Although college aged students were the ones primarily responsible for protests and anti-war movements, it is important to note that they were not the only group involved. Despite the fact that the target group for military service was college aged men, that certainly did not mean that all of those affected were college students. Many college students organized and participated in the anti-war and anti-draft movements, but most if not all of them were eligible for draft deferments and would not have actually had to go fight in Vietnam. Although minority groups, predominately African Americans, were present in images of anti-Vietnam protests, those images are almost entirely made up of white individuals, 18-26 years old. This seemingly dominant trend is one that fostered an interest in the topic of this research project. Seeing and hearing about the many movements on college campuses and viewing images of predominately white protestors has led to the question of how different groups, other than those in the mainstream opposition, experienced the Vietnam War and the draft.

The principal method used for this research was to collect a number of primary sources to provide a glimpse into the true feelings and actions of individuals involved in the anti-Vietnam War movement during the long 1960s. In addition to primary sources, this project will also use secondary sources focused on the Vietnam War and draft opposition. Combining both primary and secondary sources around the same topic allows for a full analysis of the different experiences of the multiple groups of people who participated in the opposition. In addition to looking into the experiences themselves, having access to primary source documents also creates the possibility for a further analysis into the *why* surrounding the differences in experience among various groups.

Reflecting upon the sources and methods used, since the Vietnam War was such an impactful and well-recorded event, there is a fair amount of primary source material available and easily accessible online. A method used heavily throughout this project was to seek out relatively small newspapers printed by groups that were opposed to the war and/or the draft. An emphasis was placed on finding smaller publications as opposed to large, national papers such as *The New York Times* or *Chicago Tribune*. This was done in hopes of discovering more accurate and personal experiences of groups or individuals that may have been lost in a larger newspaper. In searching for such sources, there were three main classifications that the publications fell under. The three categories include university/student publications, GI newspapers, and periodicals related to the civil rights movement and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Additionally, other primary source materials included handouts or newsletters from the same coalitions previously mentioned. Naturally, the three groups that produced the publications are the same groups that this project will be focusing on in order to highlight the different experiences people had in relation to the Vietnam War.

To begin the discussion of existing sources examining the various forms of anti-Vietnam War actions, it is useful to look into a secondary source prior to delving into the primary source material. It seems as though the majority of the discourse surrounding anti-Vietnam War activities has revolved around individuals known as “draft dodgers.” As the name implies, draft dodgers were individuals who were drafted, decided not to serve, and often fled the country to avoid service. While most of history focuses on these individuals, there was another group of people opposed to the Vietnam War, known as draft resisters, who chose to make their position known through action. Despite their differing tactics, the distinction between the two groups within the public eye and past literature was nonexistent. Since both groups were breaking draft laws, they were both considered to be un-American draft dodgers.

Within Michael S. Foley’s *Confronting the War Machine: Draft Resistance During The Vietnam War*, the book highlights the inequality of the draft deferment system, and presents readers with a glimpse into the minds of draft resisters. As Foley states, “At its heart, draft resistance turned on this question: What could a man do when his country expected him to participate in a system of conscription that sent some of his fellow citizens to fight in a war he regarded as immoral and illegal yet protected him?” (Foley, 2003, pp. 12) Through his text, Foley tries to answer the question of who these individuals were that openly defied the draft and welcomed prosecution and incarceration. Specifically, Foley looks back at history to understand a group that was otherwise misunderstood as cowards who thought themselves too good to fight in the war. Foley argues that these draft resisters were actually a key and effective force in the anti-Vietnam movement. He believes that these individuals, similar to those involved in the Freedom Summer of 1964, were key to spreading the influence and popularity of the movement, moving it from the fringes of American society to the mainstream of politics. Foley specifically discusses how the majority of these draft resisters were young, middle class, suburban, liberal men who recognized the discriminatory nature of the draft acting against working class and minority men.

Similar to the volunteers in Doug McAdam’s *Freedom Summer* seeing themselves as capable of accomplishing anything they set their minds to, the participants in Foley’s book were considered “children of the American dream” and came from comfortable homes (Foley, 2003, pp. 122). Citing a 1997 survey of former resisters and activists in the Boston area, Foley found that almost half of all resisters’ fathers graduated from college, 37 percent went to graduate school, and 22 percent had doctoral or professional degrees. Additionally, 40 percent of resisters’ mothers had graduated college and 15 percent had advanced degrees. As a result of their parents’ successes, almost 80 percent of draft resisters considered themselves a part of the middle-class, upper-middle class or upper class. Being in this kind of social position allowed these young men to attend prestigious universities such as Harvard, Boston University and Yale, wherein they were presented with the environment and means necessary to become politically active. Three-quarters of draft resisters had a history of prior activism, with more than half being involved in community or campus peace and civil rights organizations (Foley, 2003, pp. 124).

As is highlighted by Foley, one of the primary motivations behind these men engaging in draft resistance was their ability to recognize their own positionality and privilege within society, and having a desire to do something about the inequality faced by their peers. Many of these already politically active young men were fully aware of how they were being protected by an unfair draft system, and felt guilty about it.

“As working-class and minority men died each day in rice paddies and jungles on the other side of the world, they breathed in the aroma of the drying leaves then blanketing the grounds of their picturesque New England campuses.” (Foley, 2003, pp. 126)

Through looking at this group of young men in 1960s Boston, Foley shows how their reactions to the Vietnam War and the draft were directly shaped by their social positionality and access to draft deferments. In the eyes of these individuals, knowing that they were able to experience such privilege was enough to motivate them to put that privilege at risk, and try to use their voices to speak up for those who could not speak for themselves.

*Confronting the War Machine* was one of the first sources utilized for this project, and through Foley’s explanation of why certain individuals decided to take part in the anti-Vietnam War movement, the focus of the project was inspired to continue down the path of understanding the experiences of different groups of people. Expanding from Foley’s text, the project ultimately focused in on three groups of people that were active in anti-Vietnam War movements. The three groups are college students (predominately white middle class individuals), soldiers, and African Americans. The first group to be analyzed ties in well with Foley’s discussion on college-aged resisters, and focuses on the most dominant players in the anti-war movement: white, middle-class students. Contrary to Foley’s study in Boston, the main source from which this project gathered its primary source material on student activists focused on students from the West coast, specifically Washington. The *Antiwar and Radical History Project- Pacific Northwest* is loaded with a plethora of scanned documents from the 1960s and 1970s pertaining to topics such as student activism and draft resistance. Many of the documents used for this project were either newsletters or publications made by individuals who were present and active within the anti-war movements. While there are a number of subjects and events covered by the project, the student strike at the University of Washington in May of 1970 was chosen as the primary unit of analysis for looking into the experiences of college students.

Motivated by the continued escalation of the war, and the killings of five Kent State students, students at the University of Washington decided to make their voices heard through a strike. “Why we strike,” is a one page, typed and hand written document that was distributed around the university campus. The body of the document was typed and at the bottom of the page, the authors, the U.W. Daily office, wrote their contact information with the message “Join Us! End the War in S.E. Asia. End Political Repression. Convert War Economy to Useful Production.” (U.W. Daily, 1970) The document itself informs readers that a campus-wide coalition of University of Washington students were striking to oppose the expansion of the war and government repression in the U.S., such as the Kent State killings and attacks on the Black Panther Party. However, the majority of the document notes that as students, these individuals recognized that they were not in the best position to impart actual social change. In another document titled “The Strike Continues,” students echo the same message, stating, “We realize, however, that students alone cannot end the War nor fight repression successfully. Our movement needs the active participation of broader layers of the community if we intend to win” (University of Washington Strike Coalition, 1970). In their attempt to attract the support of the working people of Seattle, the students connected the Vietnam War and its negative effects to the inflationary recession occurring at the time, saying the war had accelerated the decline in the quality of life in America. At the end of the document, the authors listed six things that the reader could do to help their cause, primarily focusing on the individual talking to friends and co-workers to expand the reach of the strike and the voice of the students.

The final piece of primary source material pertaining to student activism, from the *Antiwar and Radical History Project*, is the University of Washington Third World Coalition’s “Third World Statement.” The authors expressed their support for other student anti-war movements before delving into a scathing commentary on the exploitative nature of Western imperialism. The most striking point within the document was a section in which the authors talk about the “oppressed peoples of the world” fighting heroically against exploitation. They go on to say that one should attempt to differentiate between violence of the exploiter and violence of the exploited, clearly referring to the U.S. offensive in Vietnam, eventually saying that the Vietnamese people were winning new victories every day. (Third World Coalition, 1970) The primary point of the document was to express to readers how important it was for U.S. citizens to strive for peace and bring the needless Vietnam War to an end. The authors conclude by calling on citizens to “...proclaim through their actions that they are humans sensitive to needs and sufferings of other humans. Only then can the world come closer and live an integrated life with freedom and peace” (Third World Coalition, 1970).

Through these three pieces of literature produced by University of Washington students, readers can begin to form an understanding of how one’s positionality as a student may have affected the ways in which anti-Vietnam War movements were experienced. Primarily, by being a student at that time, individuals were able to go on strike because they were not in a social position that would have led to them going to war. As was discussed in Michael Foley’s text, if you were enrolled at a university, chances were good that your parents were somewhere in the middle-class, already putting these individuals on a life tract that would most likely not have led to the military. Additionally, by being students, these individuals had time to go on strike, as well as not having a job that they may have lost by striking. Another way in which the individuals’ lives as students helped to shape their actions can be seen through the printed material and the way it was presented within the “Third World Statement.” In the document, the authors are clearly educated individuals, considering the language they use and their discussion being focused around ideas on Western imperialism. As students, these individuals were educated and in a position to form political commentary regarding the Vietnam War that others may not have had the knowledge to do so. Despite these positive results of being students, the individuals also faced negative consequences such as their inability to impart real change through their actions. As students, it was relatively simple for them to organize and strike, but because of that same positionality, it was difficult to make their voices actually do anything concrete, aside from just being heard. Through analyzing the primary source documents and noting how focused the students were on spreading their message to the greater society and the working people of Seattle, it is clear that they were trying to use their place as student activists to act as the spark for some larger social change.

Although students were some of the most active people within the anti-Vietnam War movement, another key group to analyze is soldiers in the U.S. army, also known as GIs. In searching for the recorded experiences of GIs involved in anti-Vietnam movements, the primary source used was one of many newspapers written throughout the 1960s called, *Counterpoint, Vol. 2, No. 14.* The paper was published by the GI- Civilian Alliance for Peace (GI-CAP) on August 7, 1969 and is filled with a number of different articles and postings about resistance related events. Specifically, there are two pages from the paper that especially speak to the GI experience within the anti-Vietnam War movement.

The first of these notable points is found on page six of the paper, and is titled “A Parable.” The story is about Farmer Jones and his talking dog, Duke, on his big chicken farm. The other character in the story is Sylvester the fox who would take one or two chickens a week from Farmer Jones. Although it was not that big of a deal, the farmer was annoyed by the principle of the matter, and told Duke to go find the fox, saying that he would give him “a real gold star for his doghouse” if he told him where he was. Eventually Sylvester and Duke find and talk to one another, and Sylvester asks Duke why he is doing Farmer Jones’ dirty work. Sylvester says, “And this bit about a gold star. Is a gold star really worth more to you than your self respect?” He eventually encourages Duke to stand up and think for himself. (*Counterpoint*, 1969, pp. 6)

This short tale provides a fascinating look into one of the ways in which GIs expressed their feelings towards the Vietnam War. It is clear that the story has a much deeper meaning, and that Farmer Jones is the U.S. military command or government, Duke is a solider, and Sylvester represents the Vietnamese. Through the characters in the story, readers can see how GIs felt as though they were being used to do the dirty work of the United States, and in the process, were committing acts that threatened their safety and sense of self-respect. The gold star metaphor is also interesting because it speaks to the motivation behind the soldiers’ actions in Vietnam, and essentially relegates their violent, life-changing actions to the pursuit of a medal or some other form of recognition. The ending to the story is also key, in that by having Sylvester encourage Duke to stand up for himself, the authors of the story and *Counterpoint* are also encouraging their fellow soldiers and readers to think for themselves and question if they are fighting for their own reasons, or just being used by their country. Through their positionality as soldiers, these men were motivated to act and display their opposition to the war because they had experienced it first hand. They knew the risks and viewed the U.S. government as simply using them as bodies to fight a war that they really had no stake in.

The second valuable piece from the August 7, 1969 issue of *Counterpoint* can be found on the last page of the paper and is titled “A Counterpoint Challenge.” The authors end their issue by speaking more about a theme that was present throughout: the feelings of being tricked by their own government. As the authors say,

“Nixon wants to fool the antiwar movement, to destroy it if possible, and so his is trying to lull us again, to make us think that the war is almost over and we might as well give up on it. But we know that Nixon is lying to us – and it is our job to expose those lies to the American people…” (*Counterpoint*, 1969, pp. 8)

In response to these feelings of being lied to, the writers of *Counterpoint* sought to conduct a poll to find out how soldiers truly felt about the Vietnam War, and challenged the military to allow it. “We dare the army to test is repeated claims that only a few soldiers oppose the war. We dare the army to let the men who have to fight this war express their opinions about it to the public” (*Counterpoint*, 1969, pp. 8). These men felt as though the very people that they were going overseas and risking their lives for were tricking them. As soldiers, they knew that the military’s view of only a few soldiers being opposed to the war was simply incorrect. Given their positionality, they were able to have a unique insight into the true feelings of GIs about the war. As soldiers and activists, these men knew that they had to try to bring this truth to light and make their fellow soldiers’ voices heard.

The final group of people that this project has researched in regards to their experiences with the Vietnam War and the draft is the African American community. As is the case with all social topics, it is important to take an intersectional approach when looking at something like the experience of the Vietnam War within the African American community. Throughout history, African Americans have been segregated, ignored and disproportionality punished throughout American society. It should come as no surprise then, that the same treatment translated to the Vietnam War and resulted in disproportionate rates of black men being drafted and assigned to combat units. In Gerald Goodwin’s 2017 *New York Times* piece entitled “Black and White in Vietnam,” he highlights the statistics to prove this disproportionate treatment.

“African-Americans represented approximately 11 percent of the civilian population. Yet in 1967, they represented 16.3 percent of all draftees and 23 percent of all combat troops in Vietnam. In 1965, African-Americans accounted for nearly 25 percent of all combat deaths in Vietnam.” (Goodwin, 2017)

While there were undoubtedly individuals within the black community who were opposed to the Vietnam War throughout the conflict, the African American community as a whole was not truly united in their opposition until January 6, 1966. On that date, SNCC made their voice heard and released “Statement By The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee On The War In Vietnam.” The statement was sparked by the murder of Vietnam Navy veteran and SNCC worker, Sammy Younge on January 3, 1966 after he tried to use a white-only bathroom. (SNCC Digital Gateway, n.d) Prior to his death, SNCC had not yet released a statement on the Vietnam War, primarily because they did not think they would be able to help, but they knew that their cause would be hurt if they did try. In other words, they did not want to sacrifice Black-organizing power for anti-war protesting. However, once one of their own members, who was also a Vietnam veteran, was killed as a direct result of racism, SNCC knew they had to take a public stance on the war. Three days later, SNCC released their statement in which they criticized the U.S. government for their hypocrisy in sending thousands of black men to fight and die for “democracy” in Vietnam, when that democracy did not exist for those same men or their families back home. "We are in sympathy with, and support, the men in this country who are unwilling to respond to a military draft which would compel them to contribute their lives to United States aggression in Vietnam in the name of the “freedom” we find so false in this country” (Statement by SNCC on the War in Vietnam, 1966). SNCC went further to discuss how they viewed the murder of Samuel Younge in Alabama to be virtually the same thing as the murder of peasants in Vietnam, and that they placed the blame directly on the U.S government. They believed that both Younge and the Vietnamese died while trying to protect their rights that were supposedly guaranteed by law.

Through using the sociological imagination and taking the social context of the time into account when looking at the SNCC statement on the Vietnam War, it is clear that African Americans could not separate the conflict in Vietnam from the one around civil rights that they faced at home. As a result, their experiences with opposing the war was directly connected to their living life as black individuals in a racist, American society. The same government that was sending their sons and brothers to die in Vietnam was doing nothing to prevent their being mistreated and murdered at home. By that logic, the majority of the African American population had no reason to support a war that would only help a system that sought to continue depriving them of freedoms and equal citizenship.

Throughout the long 1960s it would have been difficult to find a U.S. citizen who did not feel as though the Vietnam War impacted their life. While the experience may have been more extreme for some than others, almost every group and community in the country felt some effects of the war. This research project has developed a conversation surrounding the ways in which different peoples’ positionality within society led to, and affected the ways in which they experienced the Vietnam War and the concurrent anti-war movements.

The project first looked at student activists on college campuses and identified that due to their predominately white, middle class identities, students were naturally in a position to be able to strike. Through not being at risk of going to war, having the time and not having to worry about loosing their job, students were in a virtually perfect position to oppose the war. However, due to this beneficial positionality, students were also limited in terms of the reach of their movement and voices, resulting in their reaching out to their communities for support. The second group, GIs, was analyzed in the context that their anti-war actions were motivated by their experiencing war first hand. These men knew the risks that their government was making them face, and believed that the same individuals simply viewed them as bodies to fight in a war. Because these men were soldiers themselves, they had unique insights into the true feelings of other GIs in regards to the war. Through their actions, they sought to bring those truths to light and make their fellow soldiers’ voices heard. Finally, the project’s last group to be examined was the African American community. More so than the other two groups, the African American experience with the Vietnam War was affected by the intersecting forms of oppression that the black community faced at home. As SNCC was able to highlight in their 1966 statement, the fight for civil rights and the disproportionate number of black men being sent to Vietnam were inseparable. As a result, their position on the war was one that revolved around believing that black individuals should not have to die for a country that would not even keep them safe at home. Using these three groups of people, this research project has shown that one’s positionality within U.S. society at the time of the Vietnam War directly affected the ways in which individuals experienced the conflict, as well as influenced how they could, and did, oppose it.

Looking to future studies on the topic of resistance to the Vietnam War and draft, it would be interesting to look into whether certain groups were more effective than others in their opposition. For example, determining whether groups that focused more on political or policy-based resistance were more or less effective in their efforts than those who utilized community and civilian movements. Additionally, a similar point for further study could revolve around specific tactics used by different groups to make their voices heard, aside from the common strategies such as draft dodging or draft resistance. All in all, in addition to this project’s contributions to the conversation on opposition to the Vietnam War, there is still much more to be studied. If one is able to effectively utilize the sociological imagination, they should have no problem continuing to analyze the incredibly formative event that was the Vietnam War.

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