Family Circle: The Boudins and the Aristocracy of the Left
By Susan Braudy
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Reviewed by Diane Ravitch

While reviewing several American history textbooks, I was taken aback by the descriptions of the late 1960s. It is of course somewhat startling to see the events of one’s own lifetime described as “history,” but it is even more surprising to read admiring, uncritical accounts of the radical movements of that era. The texts now in use in American high schools never suggest that there was an antidemocratic, violent impulse at work in the most radical groups. In the conventional narrative of the era, even the “hippies” are portrayed as the vanguard of positive social change, without questioning whether a society can function when its potential leaders are “turning on and dropping out.”

This mythologizing of the Sixties is not good history. The consequences of that era continue to be felt in our schools, particularly in the disintegration of adult authority and in the fear of setting limits on students’ “rights.” Gerald Grant’s superb The World We Created at Hamilton High chronicles the dramatic and corrosive changes in the American high school that can be traced to the Sixties. Other excellent books—such as Todd Gitlin’s The Sixties, Hugh Pearson’s The Shadow of the Panther, and Thomas Powers’s Diana: The Making of a Terrorist—tell the story of that era without sugaring over the deeds of the radical youth who wanted to impose a social revolution.

Yet a full, accurate representation of these events is missing from the most widely used textbooks. A History of the United States, a fine textbook written by the late Daniel Boorstin and Brooks Mather Kelley, was in fact criticized in professional journals for its less-than-admiring treatment of the Sixties revolutionaries. Their textbook is now out of print, in part because of its allegedly old-fashioned telling of American history.

Boudin was one of the most famous members of her generation, but her name does not appear in any of the most widely used history textbooks. The reason is obvious: Her direct involvement in bombings and murder gives the lie to the textbooks’ fawning portrayal of her generation.

Boudin grew up in a leftist milieu, surrounded by luminaries of radicalism. Her father, attorney Leonard Boudin, represented prominent radicals, including accused spy Judith Coplon, Fidel Castro, and Paul Robeson; Boudin’s law partner represented Alger Hiss. Kathy’s uncle, I. F. Stone, was a celebrated left-wing journalist. Her mother was a poet and self-described “parlor revolutionary.” Much was made in Kathy’s family of the fact that she was born on May 19, the same birthday as Malcolm X and Ho Chi Minh. The “family circle” included many famous artists, writers, and academics.

Kathy attended the parent-run progressive Downtown Community School in lower Manhattan, founded by her father and Margaret Mead; parental meetings were rocked by fights between Trotskyites and Stalinists, Stalinists and liberals. At her private progressive high school, classmates included future revolutionary Angela Davis and Michael Meeropol, son of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.

At Bryn Mawr, the elite women’s college, Kathy created a student-run dorm to escape the dress code and parietal rules. She radicalized some fellow students, led civil-rights protests, and demanded higher wages for the dormitories’ black maids (the college administration responded by phasing out the maid system, which eliminated the maids’ jobs). She spent her senior year in Russia, where her leftist political views deepened.

The young Sixties revolutionaries had nothing but contempt for ordinary working people.
Heightened Radicalism

After graduation in 1965, Kathy entered a life of protest activities and community organizing among the poor. She spent time in Newark, where Tom Hayden of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was trying to forge an “interracial movement of poor people and students in northern cities.” She joined a similar project in Cleveland, where she organized welfare mothers. At the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago, Kathy and fellow SDS radicals planned violent clashes with the police and telephoned bomb threats to hotels. Kathy’s father had to bail them out of jail. Kathy and other radicals formed the Weathermen, a group devoted to violent revolution. In his biography of Diana Oughton, Thomas Powers wrote that she and Kathy wanted to be “this country’s executioners.”

Boudin and her fellow well-educated, upper-middle-class revolutionaries had numerous ridiculous ideas. One that they put into practice was called “smash monogamy,” which meant that no one should have an exclusive relationship with anyone and everyone should sleep with everyone. They engaged in intensive sessions of criticism and self-criticism to ward off counterrevolutionary deviations. They admired violence, especially when committed by those like the Black Panthers and Charles Manson, who were willing to kill for their beliefs, no matter how bizarre.

Then came the fateful day in 1970 when Kathy was staying in a luxurious townhouse in Greenwich Village with four friends. One busied himself in the basement, assembling a powerful bomb packed with hundreds of roofing nails so as to inflict maximum damage. Possible sites for detonation included a department store, an army base, or the Columbia University campus. But the bombmaker erred; the bomb exploded, killing him and two other revolutionaries. Only Kathy and the daughter of the townhouse owner escaped.

Kathy went underground for the next decade, advancing her cause with an occasional bombing, living in the actor Jon Voight’s houseboat, finding shelter in safe houses wherever she went. In one ludicrous scene, Kathy andBernadine Dohrn set a bomb in the ladies room of the U.S. Capitol, on behalf of the revolution. Kathy, her biographer says, found this clandestine existence “exciting.” While underground, Kathy and her group managed prison breaks for Timothy Leary, the Harvard psychology professor famous for experimenting with LSD, and for Joanne Chesimard, a black radical who had participated in the murder of police officers in New Jersey.

A full, accurate representation of the Sixties is missing from widely used textbooks.

This fugitive lifestyle ended in 1981 when Kathy left her 14-month-old baby with a sitter and said she would return that afternoon. She and the child’s father, fellow revolutionary David Gilbert, had agreed to drive the getaway van for a group of heavily armed bank robbers who planned to rob a Brinks truck. (The robbers claimed to be black revolutionaries but actually used proceeds from their heists to buy drugs.) They drove to a suburban shopping mall north of New York City. While Kathy and David waited in a rented U-Haul truck, the “revolutionaries” cornered the Brinks truck and gunned down its guards, killing one of them and snatching canvas bags of money. The gang drove to the getaway van and piled into the back; the plan was that police would be looking for black robbers, not a middle-aged white couple driving a U-Haul van.

But the police did stop Kathy and David at a roadblock. Kathy got out and told the police to put down their guns. Foolishly, they did. The robbers hiding in the back of the van sprang out firing; two police officers were killed. Kathy was captured and convicted and eventually spent 20 years in prison for her role in the Brinks robbery and murders (she was released in 2003). David Gilbert got a life sentence.

One reads this book with a sense of disbelief that men and women who led such privileged lives could have been so stupid and hateful, could have thought themselves revolutionaries acting on behalf of “the people” when they had nothing but contempt for ordinary working people. Encountering their petulance, their hatred of democratic institutions, and their isolation from reality, one can only imagine the terror they would have inflicted if given the opportunity.

Surely these are lessons that our own children should study when learning about the 1960s.

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