

Archive That, Comrade!

Left Legacies and the Counter Culture of Remembrance

Phil Cohen

The book explores issues of archival theory and practice that arise for any project aspiring to provide an open access platform for political dialogue and democratic debate. It is informed by the author's experience of writing a memoir about his involvement in the London "underground" scene of the 1960s, the London street commune movement, and the occupation of 144 Piccadilly, an event that hit the world's headlines for ten days in July 1969.

After a brief introduction that sets the contemporary scene of "archive fever," the book considers the political legacy of 1960s counterculture for what it reveals about the process of commemoration. The argument then opens out to discuss the notion of historical legacy and its role in "the dialectic of generations." How far can the archive serve as a platform for dialogue and debate between different generations of activists in a culture that fetishizes the evanescent present, practices a profound amnesia about its counterfactual past, and forecloses the sociological imagination of an alternative future? The following section looks at the emergence of a complex apparatus of public fame and celebrity around the spectacle of dissidence and considers how far the Left has subverted or merely mirrored the dominant forms of reputation making and public recognition. Can the Left establish its own autonomous model of commemoration?

The final section takes up the challenge of outlining a model for the democratic archive as a revisionary project, creating a resource for building collective capacity to sustain struggles of long duration amongst groups on the front lines of resistance to globalization. A postscript examines how archival strategies of the alt-right have intervened at this juncture to elaborate a politics of false memory.

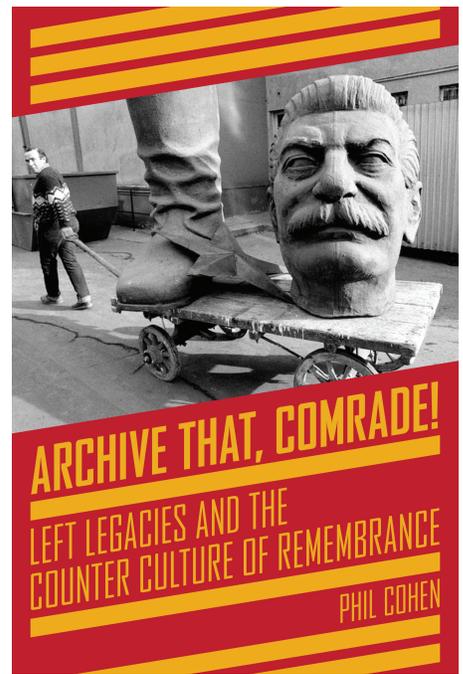
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phil Cohen played a key role in the London counterculture scene of the 1960s. As "Dr John" he was the public face of the London street commune movement and the occupation of 144 Piccadilly, an event that briefly hit the world's headlines in July 1969. He subsequently became an urban ethnographer, and for the past forty years he has been involved with working-class communities in East London documenting the impact of structural and demographic change on their livelihoods, lifestyles, and life stories. Currently he is research director of LivingMaps, a network of activists, artists, and academics developing a creative and critical approach to social mapping. He is also a professor emeritus at the University of East London and a research fellow of the Young Foundation.

ACCOLADES

"Has the Left got a past? And if so, is that past best forgotten? Who was it who said, 'Let the dead bury their dead?' Phil Cohen's book is a searing meditation on the politics of memory, written by someone for whom 'the '60s' are still alive—and therefore horrible, unfinished, unforgivable, tremendous, undead. His book brings back to life the William Faulkner cliché. The past for Cohen is neither dead nor alive. It's not even past, more's the pity."

—TJ Clark, author of *The Sight of Death*



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