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Linda Sargent Wood. *A More Perfect Union: Holistic Worldviews and the Transformation of American Culture after World War II*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2010.

Amid growing hostilities, threats of annihilation, and nuclear armament programs that characterized the American Cold War era, Linda Sargent Wood argues that the equally powerful worldview of holism reemerged with a new tenacity in the post-World War II period. For Wood, this cultural perspective holds that “reality can only be understood as a whole” (pg. vii) and that emphasizing the themes of “unity, interdependencies and integration” (pg. vii) in relation to all living things became a dominant moral framework for significant subsections of American culture, so much so that by the 1960s and 1970s holistic approaches had become fully integrated into many of the era’s most striking and significant social movements. Arguing for the persistence of culture in an era of uncertainty, Wood contends that holistic adherents, in disseminating their beliefs and knowledge via broad cultural networks and grassroots activities, created practical systems for grappling with the moral and social upheavals of the latter half of the twentieth century.

Wood traces the ubiquity of the holistic mindset through the writings and works of five key figures: biologist and nature writer Rachel Carson; architect and futurist R. Buckminster Fuller; social reformer and civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr.; Jesuit evolutionist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow. Wood argues that each figure worked within the ethical and moral imperatives that the holistic message offered. The holistic sensibility strove to unite the disparate—that just as the mind, body, and soul needed to be viewed as distinct parts of a cumulative whole, man’s relationship to nature, community, and the sacred realm could not be viewed as stand-alone entities. Rather, the writers and thinkers that Wood profiles embodied a commitment to understanding the human place in the world as one strand of an interconnected web of being. Ranging from Carson’s call for society to acknowledge man’s interconnectedness to the natural ecosystem, to Martin Luther King Jr.’s anticipation for a “symphony of brotherhood” to Maslow’s dreams of self-actualized people living in just, utopian societies, Wood’s eclectic mix of prominent twentieth

century figures convincingly demonstrates the pervasiveness of holistic sensibilities.

Ultimately, Wood describes her figures as part of a movement to dispel the fragmentation and conflict of the Cold War. Not content to be mere cogs in the destructive mechanism of military buildup, the intellectual figures she describes offered an ethical framework for American society “built on models of cooperation rather than conflict” on “communal visions that focused on interdependence, linkages, mutual support, integration, and whole systems.” (pg.6) In doing so, Wood complicates the prevailing sense of unease and uncertainty emanating from the massive push toward scientific progress at the end of World War II. Wood delves deep into this sense of doubt with her study, moving beyond well-known public fears about nuclear Holocausts and communistic takeovers to explore how this anxiety permeated the very fabric of American culture. Health, community, systems of living, the place of man in society—these became the dominant questions for Cold War intellectuals. But rather than calling for a broad condemnation of scientific achievement, Wood demonstrates how holistic thinkers sought to integrate scientific progress into their own conceptions of world improvement. Attempting to reconcile the scientific with the spiritual, holists attempted to construct pragmatic solutions centered on the intertwined connections between various modes of intellectual thought.

For Wood, this growing distrust of scientific achievement was felt most poignantly by those incubated in Cold War rhetoric—the baby boomers. In what is perhaps her strongest and most intriguing chapter, Wood concludes her analysis with a detailed discussion of the Esalen Institute, a selective, scenic community on California’s coastline that operated as a retreat for the holistically inclined and provided spiritual, emotional, and physical nourishment for the unfulfilled. According to Wood, what set Esalen apart from other counterculture retreats was the institution’s commitment to the holistic combination of Eastern and Western thought. By synthesizing Eastern and Western beliefs, Esalen contributed to the transformation of spiritual philosophies during the second half of the twentieth century and, for Wood at least, offers ample evidence for religion’s continuing presence in an age of scientific advancement. Arguing for the cultural importance of religious formation, Wood contends that Esalen operated as a “spiritual borderland” and

became “an experimental hothouse for germinating a variety of religious hybrids,” ultimately leading to the rejuvenation of religious thought and spirituality in modern American life. (pg. 171)

One of the many strengths of Wood’s argument is her comprehensive treatment of the term “holism.” Careful to never characterize holism as a new or revolutionary mode of thought, Wood accurately and generously traces the historical roots of the term, carefully addressing how the concept waxed and waned over the decades of American history. Never treating holism as a fundamentally new development in American culture, Wood instead argues for the pervasiveness of the concept, convincingly demonstrating how the perspective developed a new sense of urgency and poignancy for the post World War II generation. A discussion of contemporary critiques to the holistic mindset would have sharpened Wood’s overall argument, and provided a stronger framework for discussing how holism grew and evolved over the course of the 1960s and 1970s. Additionally, focusing on the movement’s strong appeal for the educated and better off sectors of American society diminishes Wood’s assessment of holism as an integrated intellectual framework. For a movement with a history of mass appeal, the voices of ordinary adherents are noticeably lacking. However, these are but minor issues in an overall compelling and highly readable work of history. In illuminating the theoretical underpinnings of the long 1960s era, Wood provides an excellent contribution to present understandings of how late twentieth century convictions fundamentally emerged to shape our modern world.

Sarah Promnitz