

1968: The Year of Dangerous Living

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Introduction

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“The Year of Dangerous Living” was written for the twentieth anniversary of 1968. The “68ers” were still young in 1988, in the prime of their lives, and memories were fresh. There was an explosion of protests against campus racism, gay-bashing, and increasing corporatization of universities (including union-busting). These baby-boomers, then hitting the big 4-0, were nostalgic. There was a sense that despite a Republican president, the moment was ripe for new efforts that required a serious appraisal of past campaigns.

This year, at the fiftieth anniversary, the “68ers” are on Medicare, those who are still alive, and what was still news thirty years ago is now history. Again we have a Republican president. We still have campus (and society-wide) racism, perhaps even more virulent than back then. The corporatization of the university is virtually complete. Instead of one war against which we were able (well, more or less) to unite, there are many wars. A nation-wide, large-scale peace movement to oppose U.S. imperialism, in vivid contrast to 1968, does not exist.

There has been dramatic growth in political activity in reaction to the Trump regime’s efforts to return the nation to the 1920s. That growth has taken many forms: Black Lives Matter is the main component of the continuing civil rights movement. #MeToo spearheads feminism at the moment. Democratic Socialists of America’s growth among young people has been impressive. However, DSA’s day-to-day activities, scattered among a dozen different reform issues, are but a shadow of the sixties’ New Left that promised to create an entirely new world. Other issues have drawn the attention of millions: Medicare for all; gun control; gender rights in their many dimensions; the eternal issues of inequality, poverty and the oppression of people of color here and abroad; and many more, each issue evoking intense emotions and demanding priority attention. Which issues directly challenge capitalism and which are achievable reforms within the existing system? Does it even matter? This is a discussion that has barely begun.

The largest political phenomenon that has developed in reaction to Trump, however, has been on the electoral front, led by an upsurge of women entering politics, often for the first time, mostly within the confines of the Democratic Party. The last paragraph of this 1988 essay poses questions that haunt us once again: Will all this energy be squandered, will those reforms be diluted? Or can these campaigns be widened into a broader struggle against a rising tide of ethno-nationalism and proto-fascism and for social transformation?

In 1968 many on the left seriously believed that revolution was around the corner. Not only some revolutionaries, but even many guardians of order were surprised when, at the end of the American

War in Southeast Asia, it all seemed to fizzle out. But that dismal view overlooked the complexity of history. The student New Left, the civil rights and the feminist movements had placed on the political agenda issues that would see advances and retreats, victories and backlashes over the years ever since. Organizations on the left would come and go, split and merge. The structure of the economy would generate many changes in working conditions and these changes would be reflected in the continuing decline of some sectors of the labor movement while others would rise, as we see today in the field of public education.

It is a myth that the veterans of the sixties sold out and just faded away to suburbia and plush jobs in the academy or on Wall Street. Many civil rights veterans, both Black and white, continued the campaign for equal rights and protections, a good number from hard-won electoral positions. Veterans of the student movement in the academy in fact succeeded to a considerable degree in their war on hegemonic ideologies that served the status quo. Many, perhaps most, sixties veterans, then joined the workforce as teachers, social workers, journalists, union organizers. One sees in today's activists the influence of their own parents and even grandparents. And their children, in turn, are visible on the frontlines, wearing pussy hats and singing the old songs: "We Shall Overcome!"

The 1960s have been discovered. Within the past year more than a dozen trade books on the sixties have been published, five on the year 1968 alone.¹ Nearly that many films are either in production or already on screen. College courses on the decade are proliferating, and crowded. Reunions of 1960s veterans, from Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) to Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and from Columbia strikers to alternative newspaper staffers, are being held.

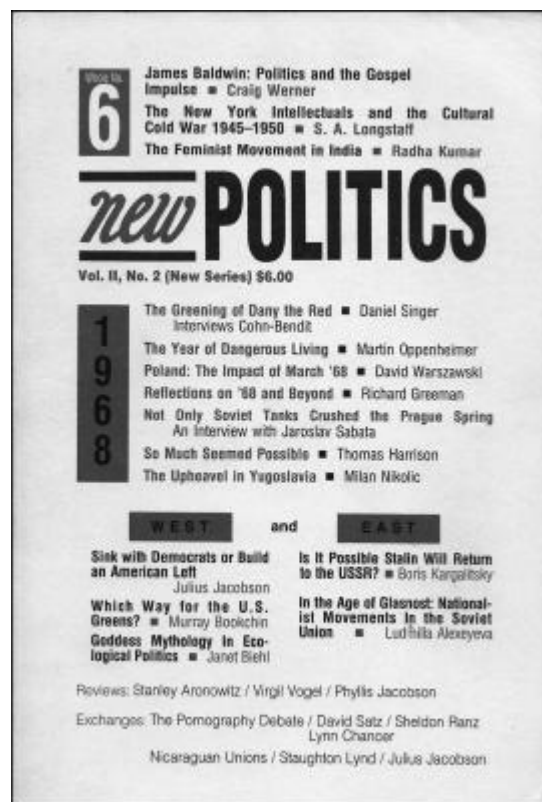
This explosion of interest has many sources: a curiosity among some students now involved in the birthpangs of a new New Left; a frontlash against campus racism, gay-bashing, and administrative conservatism (including union-busting); the nostalgia of the baby-boomers, now hitting the big 4-0; the sense that despite a Bush victory (or perhaps because of it), the moment is ripe for new efforts that require serious appraisals of past campaigns.

Journalistic retrospectives have underlined the sentimental, the sensational, the violent—and the sellouts by movement "stars." The less sensational, longer-term positive political and cultural effects, mostly due to the mundane day-to-day work of rank-and-filers outside the camera's eye, are lost to public view. If we define the New Left very broadly to include all the radicals of the baby-boomer generation outside the old sects, both black and white, then James Miller's verdict seems just: "For all its failings, the New Left briefly affected the whole tone of political life in America, raising fundamental questions about the nature and limits of democracy in a modern industrial society."² It redefined the political map, moved political culture onto new battlegrounds where the contests still rage today: racism, sexism, the environment, and (closer to traditional socialist concerns) participation (including its corollary, the questioning of authority).

The prevailing wisdom is that the movements of the sixties wound down after 1968 or thereabouts, and ultimately failed. This one-sided interpretation can easily be exploited to rationalize inaction or indeed reaction. Yes, the New Left failed as a revolutionary enterprise. As Hal Draper wrote, paraphrasing Rosa Luxemburg, in the pages of this journal (Vol. IV # 3, Summer 1965), "it is inevitable that all generations of radicals will fail—except the last, of course, which is not yet."

Not only some revolutionaries but even many guardians of order were surprised that the revolution failed to arrive on schedule. Instead, revolutionary organizations (self-defined or defined by others) were almost completely crushed in the years 1967-1972. But that misses a lot. Most immediately, the

war did end, although the contribution of the peace movement will probably be debated for a long time. Other movements grew in numbers and political significance, placing on the political agenda a range of issues which otherwise would not even be in contest today. The women's movement perhaps raised more of them than any other (among them: rights to and on the job, reproductive rights, family violence, and even adoption law). The political struggle today over AIDS policy would not exist had it not been for the gay and lesbian movements of the late sixties. The intellectual guerrilla war against hegemonic ideologies serving the status quo continues today within academic disciplines. Its troops are mainly SDS grads. Campus labor unionism, one of the few flourishing fields of progressive activity today, would be unthinkable without the feminist movement (an essential component of clerical organizing) and its faculty counterparts (mainly male, frequently ex-New Left).



Another legacy of the sixties movements is the considerable number of Americans currently involved in grassroots activities ranging from the environment to anti-interventionism, the Sanctuary movement, civil liberties, human rights (East and West), housing the homeless, health issues, schools, and just plain local clean government. The '68ers, as they have been labelled by some historians, do not deserve the obituaries written for them by cynics and turncoats.

The year 1968 has become a symbol for the entire decade of sixties activism in the various debates about the successes and failures of the New Left. These debates focus particularly on the anti-war movement (in an attempt to rewrite history and thereby sustain a super Cold War interventionist foreign policy) and the student movement (in an allied attempt by educational conservatives to maintain their entente cordiale with the corporate world). Many movement activists believed that the worldwide convulsions they were witnessing, and participating in, marked the beginning of the end of capitalism (and perhaps of Moscow's version of Communism as well). It was the 1812 of the New Left: Napoleon cutting down monarchy after monarchy to the very gates of Tsarism. And then the great retreat. As Kasiacas tells us, "At first, the highest circles of power could do little but watch with horror. ... As subsequent events made clear, however, the enemies of the New Left were

far from defeated. ... Counter-revolutionary violence became prevalent in 1968. ... The hopes of the New Left were dashed against the hard rocks of reality.”³

But 1968 is a distorted stand-in for the sixties. High tides help in understanding the motion of the ocean, but are not synonymous with it. Therefore 1968 should be approached as a symptom rather than as a symbol. The events of that year radicalized hundreds of thousands throughout the world, even though their forces were frequently defeated and their organizations left in shambles. The cruel resistance of the status quo was itself part of the radicalization process. Romanticizing those heady times, however, can be as dangerous as an overly defeatist interpretation for those seeking guidance to future strategies.

The year opened in late January with what has been interpreted by many on the left as a great defeat for the American military: the South Vietnamese National Liberation Front’s (NLF’s) Tet Offensive, lasting from January 29 to March 31, in which Saigon was penetrated and more than 3,000 American soldiers died. It became clear to the U.S. command that the NLF had not been exhausted and that a continuation of the war would be extremely costly in both troops and funds. More troops would have to be sent and/or aerial bombardment stepped up. The political costs were no less high. Witness that President Johnson felt compelled, in the face of a rising tide of anti-war sentiment and Eugene McCarthy’s unexpected strength in the New Hampshire Democratic primary, to announce that he would not stand for re-election.

By the end of 1968 the U.S had dropped more munitions on Vietnam in the course of that war than it had dropped in all of World War II. After Tet “the full force of U.S. power was launched against the defenseless population of South Vietnam,” Chomsky and Herman assert.⁴ Bombardment, including of the North, continued for four more years. Vietnam has not yet recovered. The fiscal, political, and military costs of the war led eventually to its phasing out and conclusion during Nixon’s second term, but that was more years later than all of either World War I or II.

The impression that Tet was a victory for the NLF (and indirectly for the U.S. peace movement because it demonstrated that the war could not be won on the ground) is oversimplified at best. Many in the U.S. military (and millions of Americans at home) reacted by calling for the application of still greater force, believing that unlimited firepower was bound to bring victory and that it was only the political cowardice of politicians at home that stood in the way. That attitude is still with us. It takes the form of a need to rationalize the loss of the war, project it onto someone else, and avenge the nation’s honor in some other place on the globe.

By the end of 1967, according to Todd Gitlin, nearly a half-million American troops were in Vietnam; 15,000 of them had been killed, 60 percent in the single year of 1967.⁵ On November 30, 1967, Eugene McCarthy declared his candidacy for the Democratic presidential nomination on what amounted to an anti-war platform. This seemed to be the political culmination of the rapid growth of the anti-war movement, which had shown its strength in ever-larger demonstrations and mobilizations, the best-known at the Pentagon that October. New third parties such as California’s Peace and Freedom Party also played a role in moving some Democratic candidates in a doveish direction.

Yet 1967 had also provided significant clues to the continuing strength and repressive potential of the power structure. Some of its weight would be felt by the anti-war movement, as with the indictments of such peace activists as Benjamin Spock and a number of draft resisters. More decisively, the government soon made it abundantly clear that radical black protest, whether in the form of urban riots or armed self-defense, would not be tolerated.

By 1967 systematic police repression had clearly become the order of the day. Riots in urban ghettos across America, began in 1964 (Harlem) continued in 1965 (Watts) and grew each year afterward. As the riots spread, local, state, and national governments responded with overwhelming force. In the Newark riot of July 12-17, 1967, the National Guard was called out; 23 people were killed.

The Black Panther Party, which had gone national in 1964, staged its march onto the floor of the California State Legislature, guns in hand, in May, 1967; Bobby Seale, a Panther founder, and five others were sentenced to six months in prison. "For the next four years," Dick Cluster tells us, "one or both of the party's founders was in prison at all times."⁶ The FBI engaged in a national campaign to disrupt the party by every conceivable means. (It also engaged in a campaign of harassing Martin Luther King Jr.) From March 1968 to December 1969, 19 Panthers or fellow-travelers were killed. In April 1968, Panther Bobby Hutton was shot by Oakland police as he was surrendering with his hands in the air. In perhaps the best-known of these incidents, the Chicago police killed Panthers Fred Hampton (asleep and apparently drugged at the time) and Mark Clark during a raid on December 4, 1969. Seale was constantly on trial: as part of the famous "Chicago Eight" in 1969, and as late as 1970 as one of the "New Haven 14," charged with the murder of an alleged police informer. The civil rights movement had by this time discovered that urban issues such as poverty, jobs, housing, education, and police brutality were not as amenable to nonviolent tactics as the integration of lunch counters or even the right to register to vote. Moreover, its urban constituency of working-class and "underclass" blacks, especially youth, was more sympathetic to the rhetoric of black nationalism and even violence than to the language of reconciliation and prayer. Martin Luther King Jr.'s attempt to revive that movement by infusing it with a more radical content came to an abrupt end with his assassination on April 4, 1968.

In instantaneous response, riots broke out in 138 cities. About 60,000 soldiers were called out to suppress them. As Jerome H. Skolnick put it, "Never before in this country [had] such a massive military response been mounted against racial disorder."⁷

Although the Panthers were able to continue to recruit despite increasing repression, managing to organize chapters in 45 cities by 1969, police violence, surveillance, and infiltration began to take their toll. Eldridge Cleaver split the Party and left for Algeria in 1971, and shortly thereafter an apparently chastened Huey P. Newton (who had spent three years in prison) called for less revolution and more emphasis on local service programs.

Yet it was students, not militant minorities or radical workers, who made 1968 famous. "From Peking to Prague and Paris to Berkeley," Katsiaficas tells us, "students sparked the movements which marked 1968, and ... it was their international practice ... which made the New Left a global movement."⁸ *Le Monde* reported student protest activities (ranging in their targets from simple solidarity with students in another country to university reform, to "external" matters such as the Vietnam War, military dictatorship, repression of strikes, and/or police brutality) in some 50 countries between April 1 and June 30 alone.

The "causes" of this spontaneous international uprising are still being debated, but some seem clear enough: the gathering of large numbers of students on huge campuses as the universities expanded; the increasingly central role of universities in the "global system of production" (research, the production of a technically trained labor force, and the indoctrination of young people with the values of class-oppressive cultures), and the friction between the rhetoric of critical thinking and the reality of ideologies of domination. These factors were part of the underpinning, a necessary if not sufficient condition for protest.

But specific grievances were required to trigger particular movements in different countries, and the contagion factor, promoted by modern media, contributed heavily as a subculture of youth protest swept from country to country.

The specifics varied widely. Antiquated university practices and outdated facilities, combined with conservative if not reactionary faculties, suddenly confronted the requirements of rapid modernization and integration into advanced capitalism. The creaking remnants of feudalism, as in West Germany or Italy, suddenly had to deal with twin enemies: modernization and rationalization, and masses of students. When rationalization then arrived in authoritarian clothing, explosions were inevitable.

In West Germany many on the left, especially students, felt that the Social-Democratic party had degenerated into a stodgy, bureaucratic handmaiden of the German "economic miracle." Superimposed on this was the educational establishment's selective amnesia about the war, and the continuing presence on many campuses, well into the sixties, of professors who had served the Nazis. It wasn't difficult for a German student in the late sixties to be utterly revolted by the entire culture, including the other gray bureaucrats East of the "iron curtain."

By 1967 the German new left was well-entrenched in West Germany's rapidly expanding university system. In June 1967, a student was shot to death by police in West Berlin during a demonstration against the Shah of Iran. Thousands poured into the streets. By that time the Easter Marches for disarmament had been going on for some years in Britain and West Germany. On March 11, 1968, just days after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, Rudi Dutschke, a leader of the German SDS, was shot down by a loner apparently under the sway of anti-radical hysteria fostered by the gutter press. (Dutschke would die several years later of complications caused by the bullet.) Large demonstrations, including occupations of university facilities, took place with some unions' support. However, the mass movement phase quickly passed. The West German legislature enacted a series of repressive laws and sections of the student left responded by going underground.

The German radicals' sense that their movement was part of a world historical moment (with Paris but an overnight train ride away) certainly helped it to grow, but also contributed to an illusion that the state was more vulnerable, the revolutionary moment nearer at hand, than was really the case. The stage was set for self-defeating romantic adventurism (an adventurism aided and abetted, perhaps more in Germany than elsewhere, by police agents).

Italian events closely paralleled those in West Germany. University reform and student power were the central issues, but later on the student movement also addressed itself to working-class issues. Encouraged by the general strike in France, Italian new leftists hoped the revolt would spread to workers in Italy. Indeed, there was a massive wave of strikes in the fall of 1969, but as in France, the official leadership of the left negotiated settlements with capital that served to cool the situation.

In Czechoslovakia, students acted as important auxiliaries in a much broader movement of reform and independence from Stalinism. However, the mass movement that arose in response to the reforms instituted by the new party leadership under Dubcek in early 1968 fell victim to massive repression from outside, as Soviet troops invaded the country on August 20. There was resistance, and even as late as November students struck the university system. Nevertheless, despite an accord with workers organizations, the movement could not overcome arrests and other forms of repression backed by the "temporary" stationing of Soviet troops in the country.

Of all the events of '68 abroad, the May events in France were perhaps the most spectacular and, as many see it, came closest to revolution. In less than a month, what began as protests around student issues had spread from campus to workplace, as militant workers seized control of their factories.

Even some municipal governments were taken over. At one point in late May, half the labor force was on strike.

What might be termed the multiple crises of a modern capitalist state were uniquely joined in France: the legacy of protest against colonial wars in Algeria and Indo-China meant that there were large numbers of experienced activists. The continuation of the Vietnam War by France's NATO ally, the United States, contributed a stark reminder that the colonial issue was not yet settled. The French educational system was more antiquated (both in its facilities and attitudes) than perhaps any other in the industrialized world.

The idea of socialism, and indeed revolution, enjoyed much more support among French workers than among those of most other Western European countries well into the sixties. What is more, by 1968 French workers were under severe economic pressure. Their white-collar working-class colleagues, especially in the technical-professional stratum, were more attuned to the radical notion of workers' control and self-management than in other countries.⁹ The slender fuse lit by the students led, therefore, to a far greater explosion than anyone had anticipated.

The French establishment reacted by seeking to buy off the workers, holding the threat of force in reserve. De Gaulle was apparently prepared to move in the military should other measures fail. Instead, huge wage increases and other benefits were offered. When workers turned them down, the French Communist Party and its union federation, the CGT, went into action to cool off and coopt the movement. By June the students had been isolated from the workers. The revolutionary moment had passed.

In the United States, mass protest against the increasingly brutal war grew rapidly in the fall of 1967 and throughout most of '68. There were bloody police attacks on a series of anti-draft demonstrations in October 1967, in Oakland. Student unrest, demonstrations, and strikes were not only aimed at the war; there were protests, frequently culminating in building takeovers, on a range of other issues. At Columbia the motivation was complicity with the war machine plus expansion into and destruction of surrounding neighborhoods. At San Francisco State and Cornell it was demands raised by black students. At the University of Connecticut it was recruitment by Dow Chemical. Repression, sometimes bloody, became the order of the day, with the April 23-30 Columbia University strike foreshadowing the violence at the Democratic Party convention the following August. This period may indeed have been the "high-water mark of SDS and the student left," as Irwin Unger argues,¹⁰ but the fact is that the immediate goals of both the white student New Left and the black student movement were defeated.

Outside the university as well, activists in the anti-war and anti-racist movements suffered intense repression. Even when the media depicted police brutality in full force (as in Chicago), the general public remained hostile to "hippie draft-dodgers" and condoned police actions. The strategy of direct confrontation adopted by the New Left to the virtual exclusion of other tactics antagonized many Americans. Seemingly endless and expensive trials and appeals drained the movement of resources, despite the frequent acquittals and reversals of convictions. A movement is inevitably equated with its most violent component by the mainstream media, and quickly isolated in the absence of wider support for "extremist" tactics. A significant portion of the SDS leadership had by now succumbed to the myth that repression was a symptom of the imminent collapse of the system. They wrote off the public as pitifully brainwashed and considered the working class hopelessly bourgeoisified. Some saw themselves as the agents of Third World revolution, operating within the belly of the beast. These notions further isolated SDS and paved the way to a futile underground existence.

There were, of course, other factions within SDS and other New Left organizations, several of which gave at least lip service to a "student-worker alliance." Within the New University Conference (NUC), a quasi-SDS graduate society consisting mainly of academics, there was a "Sleeping Giant Caucus," which was quite clear on the need for outreach to working-class constituencies. However, most of this "workerist" attitude was more rhetoric than reality, and even when it represented an attempt at a serious reappraisal of strategy, it was too little and too late. NUC, founded in March 1968, voted itself out of existence in June 1972 and turned over its records to the Wisconsin Historical Society.

The strategy of repression, well-established by 1967, continued to wreak havoc on militants during 1968-1970. The hot summer following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. resulted in some 50 deaths, 11 of them (including three policemen) in a shootout in Cleveland, Ohio. On April 6, Bobby Hutton was killed after a gun battle with Oakland police, and Eldridge Cleaver and other top Panthers arrested. In September, Oakland police shot up the offices of the Black Panther Party, apparently in retaliation for what they thought was an overly mild sentence for Huey P. Newton, convicted on manslaughter charges (even that was later overturned). This event was part of the background to the San Francisco State strike, which ended with 453 arrests on January 23, 1969, making college president S.I. Hayakawa's day, and reputation.

In April 1969, Berkeley students, hippies, and assorted hangers-on seized a building lot that had been leveled by the University of California, and declared it to be a "People's Park." On May 15, police sealed the area off, fenced it in, and when a large crowd advanced to retake the park, opened fire with shotguns. That night, Governor Reagan sent in the National Guard. Later the Guard dropped teargas from the air onto a campus rally. The fence remained for some time.

The generally accepted diagnosis of the SDS convention in Chicago that June was "implosion." The organization could not survive the factionalism that had by that time developed; to say the convention was acrimonious is an understatement. The "Stalinist" faction (Maoists led by the Progressive Labor Party) was expelled in a bureaucratic fashion often associated with Stalinism. Then the expellers left the floor, creating a situation in which, technically, the expelled continued to be the official SDS! SDS collapsed as a national organization soon thereafter. Its most famous surviving faction developed into the Weather Underground.

Paradoxically, May 1970 marked the peak of the student movement almost a year after SDS had disappeared from the scene. U.S. troops invaded Cambodia on April 30. In the first week of May, 30 ROTC buildings were burned or bombed and many others occupied. Besides the four students killed at Kent State by Guardsmen and two more at Jackson State by police a week later, nearly a hundred were killed in other incidents, and almost 2,000 were arrested in that period. Washington DC came to a standstill the weekend of May 9, as more than 100,000 people demonstrated, a number of them violently. By the end of May, Katsiaficas reports, more than 900 colleges and universities were or had been on strike.

Although students and anti-war activists received sporadic support from some unions during this period, the kind of outreach to the working class that took place in France and Italy was lacking in the United States. Many trade union leaders even at that late date supported U.S. foreign policy, including the war, and collaborated with the CIA. Much of the student movement therefore thought it futile to attempt an alliance with unions. Although there were exceptions (outreach to anti-war GI's was one of them), the student anti-war movement, despite its strength in May 1970, failed to connect with wider constituencies that might have enabled it to move beyond the particular events of that moment. After that, to use Gitlin's expression, it was "fadeout" for the student movement and

for the more radical sectors of other movements as well.

Yet, as Gitlin also reminds us, anti-war sentiment was on the rise, and “initiative passed into new hands.” GI protest ranging from filing as conscientious objectors to “fragging” officers in Vietnam, conventional lobbying of Washington, the McGovern campaign, and ultimately the defection of significant sectors of the establishment that became convinced that the war had become too great a burden all contributed to ending the war. Undoubtedly, the New Left played a significant role in forcing the U.S. to withdraw from Vietnam. But by the time the war ended, the left was in disarray as an organized force and there was little cause for cheer over the prospects for radicalizing and restructuring society.

Could the collapse of SDS and the subsequent fadeout of other radical elements have been avoided? Could their isolation have been overcome? In the United States of the late sixties and early seventies, probably not.

Clearly a major problem plaguing SDS and other New Left groups was an antagonism to the serious study of history and theory. Such concerns, it was felt, would only interfere with everyday “revolutionary” action and were associated with the presumed sectarianism and alleged inactivity of the old left. This anti-theoretical posturing only served to blind many New Leftists to the realities of post-revolutionary dictatorial societies such as Cuba and North Vietnam and to iconize such authoritarian figures as Che Guevara, Ho Chi Minh, and Mao. Given this theoretical near-vacuum, factional victories within New Left organizations usually went to those with the most powerful revolutionary rhetoric. It became next to impossible to maintain a critical stance, much less point out certain embarrassing historical facts. The problem of rhetorical excesses was exacerbated by the guilt-mongering of some blacks making it difficult for “white-skin-privileged” New Left students to deny any demand, no matter how unrealistic and self-defeating, without risking the charge of racism.

The admiration of authoritarian societies and personalities by vocal segments of the New Left, their frequent rhetorical excesses, precluded the possibility of the New Left as a whole from successfully reaching out to the working class, an indispensable component in any struggle for basic revolutionary change. It injected an unhealthy elitist element into the movement. It was not only *épater les bourgeois* but *épater* all those, including workers—the victims of capitalism—who did not share their super-revolutionism.

The other horn of the dilemma was that with few exceptions the leadership of the labor movement as well as most of the rank and file (at least the white part of it) supported the war until quite late, and much of what passed for social democracy in the United States was far more eager to connect to labor bureaucrats than to relate to students. Even more-independent elements of the old left managed to erect political, psychological, and generational barriers to communication with most of the student left, especially SDS, as Maurice Isserman demonstrates.¹¹ The antagonism between the old and New Left fed itself; only a handful of old leftists (mostly independent socialists) had both the intelligence and the style to be able to talk to a few (usually older) New Leftists.

So the New Left, biased against careful reflection to begin with, had almost nowhere to turn for theoretical guidance even if they had been open to it. The handful of independent old leftists who tried to bridge this chasm could not prevent SDS’ 1969 fiasco, and were incapable of diverting Custerist elements into more fruitful political avenues, assuming they had been clearly available. Although in the bleak months and years following the collapse of SDS an occasional glimpse of hope could be found (as in the mass demonstrations of 1970 and again in 1972), the white New Left, as

well as radical blacks such as the Panthers, confronted a crisis stemming from mounting repression and their own internal disarray. As a result, many leftists simply lapsed into apathy, moving either into cultural “revolt” (music, drugs) or conventional careers, a retreat from commitment popularized and trivialized by such films as “The Big Chill” and “The Return of the Secaucus Seven.”

Even more self-destructive was the road to the underground, an adventurist policy necessarily restricted to tiny numbers. How many Americans were ready to face a sentence at Attica where 43 people, including guards, were killed in 1971?

Most activists opted for the politics of reform and moderation. In a capitalist society flexible enough to permit reforms when pressured, yet strong enough to repress “extremism,” the gradualist approach appeared to them to be the most effective one. But there is a thin line between reform and cooption, and between reforms that seriously challenge the structure of society and those designed to stabilize the system. While the three major movements of the sixties, the anti-war movement, the women’s movement, and the black movement, had radical wings, none was a revolutionary movement. To speak of betrayal as some do, therefore misses the point.

By the time the Saigon regime collapsed in April 1975, the steam had gone out of the anti-war movement. Nixon and Kissinger’s diplomatic dealings seemed to make mass demonstrations irrelevant, and the Weather Underground superfluous.

“All the lessons of Chicago are bad,” Carl Oglesby, a former SDS president was quoted as saying.¹² Were all the lessons of 1968 bad? Focusing on the headline events, as we have seen, misses much of the essence of the movements of the sixties, including the impact of participation on the consciousness of hundreds of thousands of people. There is, as we glean from current reminiscences, the pride of having participated in history: Those days gave meaning to life. There is, more importantly, the profound awareness that individuals can make a difference, something the New Left called “empowerment.” That is an important component of today’s campaigns, whether they involve organizing shelters for battered women, closing nuclear plants, publishing radical journals, sheltering Salvadorian refugees, or fighting plant closings.

The tragedy of the New Left was that, confronted by massive political repression, it came to the conclusion that it was witnessing the system’s last gasp and engaged in a kind of romantic revolutionism that isolated it. The glory of the New Left was that it raised the possibility of a humanist revolution in an era when revolution in the “post-industrial” world had presumably been ruled out by material well-being and the cooption of every rebellious symbol. Socialists knew full well that “the end of ideology” was a myth, but it took the student New Left to shatter the myth in practice.

Not all the survivors of those glorious and tragic days have simply gone on to lead yuppie lives. Tens of thousands are active on behalf of worthwhile reforms. Insofar as they connect these reforms to the electoral structure of the Democratic Party their energy will be squandered and the reforms diluted, a lesson made more explicit than ever by the 1988 presidential campaign. The problem remains that we lack a nationwide party of the left to widen the campaigns for social amelioration into a broader struggle for social transformation. Without such a party, we are doomed to live out our political lives chipping away at this or that social ill, but incapable of altering the basic nature of this system.

Footnotes

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2. Miller, *Democracy Is in the Streets*, 320.
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