

1968 AND THE AMERICAN SIXTIES

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More than a century ago, Antonio Gramsci lamented how, in their veneration for chronology, historians had advanced the (in his view, highly misleading) notion that particular years were “like mountains that humanity vaulted over, suddenly finding itself in a new world, coming into a new life” (1916). The Italian Marxist would, then, doubtless be disappointed by the recent glut of books about years (or ‘the x that changed the world’ books, in the words of the American critic, Louis Menand). During the past decade alone, there have been tomes on, among others, 1492, 1536, 1789, 1816, 1820, 1848, 1913, 1946, 1956, 1959, 1963, 1979, 1989 and 1995. The fiftieth anniversary of the events of 1968, meanwhile, saw the publication of edited collections, special editions of scholarly journals, reminiscences and reflections, and op-eds, essays, and features in various newspapers and magazines (Menand 2015).¹

As the author of a narrative history of 1956, and a contributor to a recent collection of essays on 1968, I am—at least in Gramsci’s view—part of the problem. But, as I have previously noted, whether we like it or not, 1968 would seem destined:

to be forever cast in popular imagination as a ‘magical year’ of rebellion and revolution; an extraordinary twelve months in which students and activists took to the streets of West Berlin, Chicago, Mexico City, Paris, Prague, and other cities, occupied buildings, denounced imperialism, called for freedom and equality, and dared to dream that a new and better world was possible (2018, 227).

But for scholars of the American 1960s (and, it might be added, for many former activists), 1968 has always seemed a rather curious year to single out for celebration. After all, the litany of disasters and setbacks that American progressives and their allies encountered during those tumultuous twelve months remains sobering—and scarcely believable—a half-century later. Among other things, the year witnessed: the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy; serious racial uprisings in more than one hundred cities (including Baltimore, Chicago, Detroit, Kansas City, Newark, New York, Pittsburgh, and Washington, D.C.) that left dozens dead, whole neighborhoods in ruins, and \$100 million in property damage; the implosion of the Democratic Party amid implacable divisions over the seemingly never-ending war in Vietnam; the dismal failure of the SCLC’s Poor People’s Campaign, whose ‘Resurrection City’ in Washington, DC was soon beset by rain, mud, ill-discipline, crime and plummeting morale; and the strong showing of the former

¹ See, for instance, Halliwell and Witham (2018), *European Journal of American Studies* (2019), *AHR* (2018), Fortin and Astor (2018), “50 Years Later, it Feels Familiar: How America Fractured in 1968,” *New York Times*, 15 January 2018; “That Was the Year That Was: Tariq Ali talks to David Edgar,” *London Review of Books* 40, no. 10 (24 May 2018).

Alabama governor, and notorious segregationist, George C. Wallace in that year's presidential election (his rambunctious campaign helped him to secure 13.5 percent of the popular vote, and five states, in what was the best performance by a third party candidate since 1924). The White House, of course, was ultimately captured by Richard Nixon. Stealing some of Wallace's best lines, he had run on a "law and order" ticket and an appeal to what would subsequently be labelled the "silent majority," those whom he described as "the forgotten Americans—the non-shouters; the non-demonstrators," "good people," "decent people" who "work, and they save, and they pay their taxes, and they care" (Nixon 1968). Those, in other words, who were quite unlike the long-haired protesters in Chicago's Grant Park, who had taunted Mayor Daley's police with cries of "pigs eat shit, pigs eat shit" (Kusch 2008, 63).

In fact, the urban riots, Democratic infighting, and countercultural and political excess of the New Left continued to serve American conservatives well, long after the tear gas of Chicago had cleared, and the posters of Ho Chi Minh and Chairman Mao had faded from view. The GOP, after all, won five out of the next six presidential elections—in part by running against everything that the 1960s supposedly stood for. In 1980, in a moment fraught with symbolism, Ronald Reagan—who, as governor of California had famously faced down Free Speech activists at Berkeley—won the White House as his GOP took control of the Senate for the first time in a quarter of a century.

The entrenched notion of 1968 as marking the apogee of the 1960s is, it should be stressed, also at odds with the orthodox historiographical interpretation of the era: the so-called declension thesis. According to this "rise and fall" narrative, the early idealism of the civil rights movement and the student New Left, which centered on the creation of a truly inter-racial and participatory democracy, to be achieved via nonviolent protests and prefigurative politics, eventually gave way to the politics of rage. Embittered by the escalating war in Vietnam and bitterly disillusioned with what was viewed as the complicity of liberals in maintaining a corrupt and racist "system," the early cries of "we shall overcome," and peaceful occupations in favor of free speech and an end to restrictive *in loco parentis* regulations, were replaced by chants of "burn baby, burn," campus bombings, and open support for Ho Chi Minh, Mao Zedong, and other "Third World" revolutionaries. The chaos of 1968, in this framing at least, belonged very much to the "bad" rather than the "good" 1960s (Gitlin 1987).

Over the past decade or two, a determined and talented battalion of historians have expended a good deal of energy in complicating, challenging, and ultimately dismantling this declension narrative. They have achieved this by, among other things, contesting the long-held dichotomy between "civil rights" and "Black Power;" excavating the 1960s at the local level—especially in the South and the so-called "heartland" states, where things often played out rather differently, and to a different pace and timescale, than they did in New York, Madison or Berkeley; and extending our focus into the 1970s—where the explosion

of feminist organizing, LGBT activism, welfare rights campaigning, environmental crusading, and other progressive causes, belied the notion that the social activism and political idealism of the 1960s had given way to introspection and political apathy during the so-called “Me Decade” (Hall 2012, 5-23).

Scholars have also turned their gaze back to the 1950s, which were once regarded as little more than a political and social backwater: the “dullest and dreariest decade” in all of American history, as the Bancroft Prize-winning historian, Eric Goldman had it (Goldman 1960). Exploding, once and for all, the myth of a 1950s consensus, this new historiography has unearthed, and brought to deserved prominence, the origins of the post-war civil rights struggle and the white supremacist movement that mobilized to strangle it at birth, the student movement and wider New Left, and the growing spirit of generational and cultural rebellion. Whisper it, but one might even dare to venture that 1956 might be considered a more significant moment in post-war history than 1968 (Hall 2016).

Perhaps the most exciting historiographical development, though, has been driven by the ‘transnational turn,’ which has produced a wealth of scholarship on the “global sixties.” Long seen as a year of worldwide, rather than simply national, protest—and with a keen, contemporaneous sense of a wider generational revolt—1968 has, unsurprisingly, attracted renewed scholarly interest. The emergence of what might be termed a “global 1968” was given a major boost by the *American Historical Review*, which ran a special forum on “The International 1968” across two issues back in the spring of 2009 (the featured essays discussed such topics as the rise and fall of the international counterculture, student activism in Japan, gender and the “1968 generation,” and the relationship between youth travel and the development of a “politicized European identity” among the ’68ers) (Jobs 2009, 376).² Indeed, the recent enthusiasm for global history (and, specifically, the global 1960s) means that it has become rather anachronistic to even speak of a specifically “American” 1968.³

The 1968 that historians are wrestling with as we prepare to enter the third decade of the twenty-first century is, in fact, a world away from the (by now) rather hackneyed tale that begins with idealistic young students supposedly shaving off their beards, and trudging through the frozen snows of New Hampshire in support of Gene McCarthy, and which ends in the heat, despair and violence of Chicago (a narrative in which, it is worth emphasizing, the primary actors—whether disillusioned liberals, white New Leftists, anti-war students, or Yippies—are mostly men). In a recent essay for the *AHR*, which elected to mark the half-centenary of 1968 with a series of short scholarly reflections, Judy Tzu-Chun Wu focused on the rise of “Third Worldism” in the United States—where, in the spring of 1968, the Third World Liberation Front (which later laid the foundation for the Black Studies movement) led major protests at San Francisco State University, as well as on the emergence and

² *AHR* (2009).

³ On the global sixties see, for instance, Jian et al. (2018).

subsequent flourishing of women-of-color feminism. Moving beyond the traditional focus on the protests at the Miss America Pageant, in September 1968, and the wider activism of white, middle-class women, Wu reminds us that women of color “played a central role in advocating for women’s equality in the labor movement” and “offered profound critiques of reproductive politics to expand the agenda beyond access to birth control to include forced sterilization and the right of poor and racialized women to become mothers” (Wu 2018). Donna Murch, meanwhile, argued for the signal importance of 1968 in the “history of racialized mass incarceration,” and she traced a line between the government’s crack-down in the face of urban riots and Nixon’s pivot to “law and order,” and the “tough on crime” policies that would have such a devastating impact on the black community over subsequent decades (March 2018). Alongside these U.S. focused pieces were essays on when (or, indeed, whether) China had experienced a 1968; the significance of 1968 (and, specifically, the events of May) for young people in Palestine, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon; the student uprising in Poland (to which the regime of Władysław Gomułka responded by unleashing an “antisemitic *Kulturkampf*” that saw thousands of Jews flee the country); and experiences of 1968 in Canada, Europe (including Czechoslovakia, Germany, Italy, and Northern Ireland), Mexico, and on the African continent—where, by the end of the decade, a series of counter-revolutions had doomed the utopian dreams that accompanied the end of empire, and severely narrowed the boundaries of what was now considered politically possible (AHR 2018). Meanwhile *The Routledge Handbook of the Global 1960s*, published a couple of months earlier, interrogated the idea of 1968 as a post-colonial phenomenon, and explored in some detail how 1968 (as a year, an idea, and a collective experience) unfolded in Ethiopia, Senegal, and Iran (Jian et al. 2018). This is 1968, then, but not as you knew it—and all the more exhilarating for it.

Back in the summer of 1968, Hannah Arendt wrote that “children in the next century will learn about the year 1968 the way we learned about the year 1848” (Arendt 1968, 681). Her prediction might well continue to hold true in the decades to come. But—at least if recent historiographical developments are anything to go by—students will be learning about a starkly different year than the one that their predecessors were confronted with as the twentieth century came to an end. And that, surely, is something to celebrate?

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