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From the Youth Revolt to The Restoration of the Outmoded (Or, as Robert Graves said, “Goodbye to all that”)

If any credit can be given to the theory of the pendulum applied to politics, which would imply that human societies continually oscillate between conservatism and liberalism,¹ it would have to be accepted that the twentieth century witnessed swings of this type. Thus, the crazy, “roaring” 1920s, called the “Jazz Age,” characterized, at least according to the topic addressed, by their hedonism and abandon, produced by economic bonanza, would be followed by the dark 1930s, devastated by the Great Depression and the rise of totalitarianisms.

According to this logic, the 1960s would have been a predictable reaction to the preceding decade. The 1950s were a time of marked economic growth, but also a period of political and social conservatism. The Cold War and its paranoia imposed ferocious anti-communism,

while conformism, the Protestant ethic, and priggishness created an asphyxiating climate of repression, taboos, and censorship in customs, at least in the United States.

To the contrary, the 1960s were distinguished by the frontal rejection of the materialism of consumer society, interest in the environment, and non-violent anarchism. These positions coincided in a youth revolt and a counter-culture, whose most notable legacies were the miniskirt; the universalization of the use of pants by both sexes; hippies; the end of reverence among generations; the decline in patriarchal authority and the establishment—a term so dear to the hearts of that generation’s counter-culture—; the use of foul language and plebian clothing (blue jeans, until then associated with the working class); the universalization of rock as the pop music of the young; free love and sexual liberation fostered by the generalized use of contraceptives; and experimentation with

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recreational use of drugs for achieving a new state of consciousness.

Paradoxically, this was the wealthiest generation ever, the beneficiaries of the post-war capitalist boom. The French called this phase “Les trente glorieuses” (The Thirty Glorious [years]);² the British called it “The Golden Years,” when, according to Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, “You never had it so good.”³ It was this generation that would head the revolt against that boom and its corresponding materialism.

If the 1960s was an earth-shaking decade, in more than one sense, 1968 marked its zenith. It was a year that, despite its radical inventiveness, with the perspective gained by the half century since then, seems remote and alien.

To start, we should mention many countries that no longer exist: Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, North Vietnam. This confers on that era an almost legendary air. It also seems no small thing that our time, characterized by unashamed racism and unbridled conservatism, is the perfect reverse image of all of that, or that many of the most prominent figures that today populate the so called “alt right” come, precisely, from that generation and are exactly what they fought against a half century ago.

1968 opened with the January election of Slovak Alexander Dubček as leader of the Czech Communist Party. He would head the attempted socialist democratization in a country where Stalinism had achieved its most violent extremes. On the other side of the world, Vietcong guerrillas and the People’s Army of North Vietnam were beginning the Tet Offensive, which would put the U.S. forces stationed in South Vietnam in check.

The prodigious iconography of that very photogenic year offered one of its first fruits with the harsh image of a Vietcong being executed by a South Vietnamese police chief, a crude testimony of a ferocious war. Even before the era of Internet, this moment, frozen in time by U.S. photographer Eddie Adams, would go “viral,” earning him the Pulitzer Prize for that year.⁴

That same month, Highway Patrol officers perpetrated the Orangeburg massacre on the South Carolina State College campus when they fired on a civil rights demonstration against segregation, mainly made up of African-Americans, killing 3 and injuring 27. This shows the terrible reality that community was facing.

In March, security forces violently suppressed a series of student protests in Poland. The repression of dissi-

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dence and a virulent anti-Zionist campaign—soon to be unmasked as open anti-Semitism on the part of the Ministry of the Interior, with the support of top leader Władysław Gomułka—would end in the massive emigration of most of the few Polish Jews remaining in the country after the Holocaust.⁵

Of all the youth revolts that shook the world in 1968, the one that stands out most is that of Paris in May. This is perhaps because it was the one that seemed to come closest to its aim, none other than bringing down General Charles de Gaulle in what was certainly a challenge to established power.

What began as students being ticked off about a ban on access to the girls’ dorms on university campuses would end up as one of the greatest upheavals in French society since the Commune of 1871. The movement’s slogans, a veritable explosion of idealism and imagination, reflected its festive, playful character: “Under the paving stones, the beach!”; “Be realistic: ask the impossible”; “Forbidden to forbid”; “Freedom, Equality, Sexuality.”⁶

On March 18, an extreme left, clandestine student commando crossed the Seine to the Right Bank in Paris with small explosive charges to blow up the offices of the Chase Manhattan Bank, the Bank of America, and Trans World Airlines to protest the war in Vietnam. The next night was American Express’s turn. The occupation of the University of Nanterre followed.

By May 6, the students had taken the initiative. Conventional French politicians, even those on the left, had no idea what was happening. The protests increased as the demonstrators raised barricades in the streets of the Latin Quarter.

On May 13, one million demonstrators paraded through the streets of Paris shouting, “We are a tiny group!” waving red and black flags. The movement seemed to have won by gaining the support of the intellectuals for their cause (Jean-Paul Sartre, Alain Touraine, Jean-Luc Goddard, Simone de Beauvoir, among others), and, more importantly, the backing of unions that joined in, declaring a national strike involving nine million workers.

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The students took over the Sorbonne and turned it into a self-organized commune, while workers' control began to be implemented in factories, transportation, and communications. There was a true vacuum of power, aggravated by President De Gaulle's absence when he traveled to Germany and threatened to bring home French troops stationed there to put down the revolt.

Nevertheless, by the end of the month, the uprising evaporated as swiftly and dizzily as it had begun: the Georges Pompidou government conceded an emergency wage hike, putting an end to the general strike; De Gaulle managed to bring together half a million demonstrators, ranging from old Petain supporters to the Gaullist left, all united against the "communist threat," in a counter-march along the Champs Elysées.⁷

On the other side of the world in the People's Republic of China, another student revolt was fueling up against the "bourgeois" and the "counter-revolutionary traitors." In contrast with the Parisian outcry, this disturbance was incited from the heights of power by Mao Zedong himself, so admired by the French students, in an unvoiced attempt to take over the Chinese Communist Party.

In Czechoslovakia, Dubček carried out a series of liberal reforms. Without questioning his country's belonging to the Soviet bloc or refuting the socialist model of state control of the economy, they aimed at implementing a non-totalitarian form of socialism by legalizing parties and unions, promoting freedom of speech, the press, and association, as well as the right to strike. This project, dedicated to democratizing the state and party internal structures, was called the Prague Spring and was enthusiastically supported by a large part of the Czech population.

The attempt known as "socialism in freedom" or "communism with a human face" would be crushed by the invasion of Czechoslovakia by 250 000 soldiers, 6 500 tanks, and 800 planes by the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies. The only exception was Nicolae Ceausescu's Rumania, which roundly refused to be part of the invasion.⁸

Dubček and five other members of the Communist Party Presidium were detained by the Soviet occupation

forces and taken to Moscow where they were "persuaded to come to their senses."⁹ When he was finally allowed to return to Prague, Dubček was demoted to being a forest ranger in the woodland province of Bratislava.

If pacifism was one of the outstanding features of the 1960s youth movement, political violence would be another. One of the distinctive marks of 1968 was assassination. Cleric and leader of the civil rights movement Martin Luther King was assassinated in a motel in Memphis, Tennessee by escaped convict James Earl Ray on April 4. This was one day after making his last speech, "I've Been to the Mountaintop," which would become his famous political epitaph, and two days after a district judge had issued a restraining order to prevent King from heading a huge demonstration there.

Only two months later, on June 6, Democratic presidential hopeful Robert Kennedy was also assassinated. The brother of President John F. Kennedy, assassinated five years earlier, was cut down by Christian Jordanian immigrant Sirhan Sirhan in the Los Angeles Ambassador Hotel.

Both crimes, never completely solved, eliminated civil rights champions who opposed segregation in the United States. Fifty years later, this cause continues to be current, despite the passing of the Civil Rights Act, presented by President Lyndon B. Johnson.

The assassination of King sparked a series of civil disturbances, known as the Holy Week Uprising, in Baltimore, Chicago, Kansas City, and Washington, D.C. that continued for four days and raked up a death toll of 12. This was the biggest wave of civil unrest in the United States since the Civil War.¹⁰

The spread of the euphoria of the youth reached all the corners of the planet, even places as unimaginable and diverse as the Soviet Union, South Africa, or Yugoslavia. On August 25, a group of demonstrators came together in Moscow's Red Square to protest against the invasion of Czechoslovakia. They carried signs reading "For your freedom and ours," but were violently dispersed by KGB intelligence agents, earning their organizers Pavel Litvinov and Larisa Bogoraz long prison terms.¹¹

That same month, almost 600 students and academics occupied the University of Cape Town campus for nine days in protest over the firing of anthropologist and senior lecturer Archie Mafeje, in accordance with the odious apartheid laws. In one sense, the movement was a failure: Mafeje was not restored to the post and never re-

ceived the university's recognition in his lifetime. He died, bitterly disappointed, in his exile at Cambridge University. However, on another level, it can be said to have been a success, since it marked the beginning of the civil disobedience that put an end to that country's institutionalized racial segregation.

The echoes of the international youth revolt also reached Latin America, particularly Mexico, where a fight between two rival high schools rapidly became a considerable student movement. The reaction of the administration of President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz was, from the start, clumsy and intolerant, accusing the movement of obeying the orders of foreign ideologies.

Very rapidly, that rigidity would become violent. Only 10 days before the inauguration of the nineteenth Olympic Games, the massacre of Tlatelolco would take place. A student demonstration in Mexico City's Three Cultures Plaza was violently repressed, concluding in a bloodbath in which an indeterminate number of people lost their lives.¹² The causes and consequences of this episode have never been completely clarified and are still awaiting a historic, dispassionate, unbiased version. Just as happened with a large part of that year's protests, the main beneficiaries of the economic miracle, in this case Mexico's stabilizing development, rose up against it. The massacre would mark the beginning of the end of the regime that emerged from the Mexican Revolution.

The year of emancipation and freedom *par excellence* ended, paradoxically, with the election of veteran politician Richard M. Nixon, a representative of the most conservative wing of the Republican Party, as the United States' thirty-seventh president, and the defeat of Democratic hopeful Hubert Humphrey. Taking into account his close ties to Senator Joseph McCarthy's rabid anti-communism, Nixon seemed to roll back the United States to its darkest hour of 1950s conservatism; he emerged victorious in an election in which he benefitted from the profound popular dissatisfaction with the War in Vietnam and the sharp differences inside the Democratic Party.¹³

While Nixon easily won the Electoral College vote, with 301 of the 538 total votes, the popular vote was much closer: his 31 783 783 votes (43.1 percent) vs. 31 271 839 (42.7 percent) for Humphrey. Ominously, the ultraconservative, racist governor of Alabama, George Wallace, would garner almost 10 million votes (13.5 percent) as an independent. This indicates the size of the tendencies among

an important segment of U.S. society in favor of returning to the past.

In short, the winds of freedom would blow away dizzyingly, just as they had arrived. The next three years would see remnants of the rebellion, such as the Woodstock Festival in summer 1969. However, the break-up of the Beatles only a few months later and the premature, tragic deaths of Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and Jim Morrison seemed to augur a return to more priggish times. As John Lennon would say in his December 1970 song God, "The dream is over." **MM**

Notes

- 1 Arthur M. Schlesinger, "Tides of National Politics," *Yale Review* no. 9, December 1939, pp. 217-230.
- 2 Jean Fourastié, *Les Trente Glorieuses, ou la révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975* (Paris: Fayard, 2014).
- 3 Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (London: Hachette, 2015).
- 4 "Saigon Execution," in "The Most Influential Images of All Time," *Time Magazine*, <http://100photos.time.com/photos/eddie-adams-saigon-execution>.
- 5 Estimates put Jewish emigration from Poland between 1968 and 1970 at about 25 000; most of them had been secularized for a long time before that. This left a population of only about 5 000 Polish Jews remaining in the country. Dariusz Stola, "Anti-Zionism as a Multi-Purpose Policy: The Anti-Zionist Campaign in Poland, 1967-1968," in Jeffrey Herf, *Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism in Historical Perspective: Convergence and Divergence* (London: Routledge, 2013).
- 6 Julien Besançon, *Los muros tienen la palabra. Mayo de 68* (Mexico City: Extemporáneos, 1970).
- 7 Patrick Seale and Maureen McConville, *French Revolution 1968* (London: Penguin, 1968).
- 8 Dennis Deletant, "'Taunting the Bear': Romania and the Warsaw Pact, 1963-89," in *Cold War History* vol. 7, no. 4, 2007, pp. 495-507, DOI: 10.1080/14682740701621796.
- 9 Günter Bischof, Stefan Karner, and Peter Ruggenthaler, *The Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968* (New York: Lexington Books, 2011), pp. 169-171.
- 10 Ben W. Gilbert and the *Washington Post* staff, *Ten Blocks from the White House: Anatomy of the Washington Riots of 1968* (Washington, D.C.: Praeger, 1968).
- 11 Carole Fink, Philipp Gassert, and Detlef Junker, eds., 1968, *The World Transformed* (Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 449.
- 12 The official figures presented by the Mexican press of the time spoke of 28 dead. British sports reporter John Rodda (1930-2009), sent to cover the Olympics, talked about between 350 and 400 victims. The reporter's 2009 obituary published by his newspaper, *The Guardian*, said that his report, "bordering on the hallucinatory," was the only firsthand report to appear in a British newspaper. This figure was seen as truthful for many years. "Olympic Games to go ahead in spite of Mexican rioting," *The Guardian* (Manchester), October 4, 1968.
- 13 Michael A. Cohen, *American Maelstrom: The 1968 Election and the Politics of Division* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).