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The year that changed everything: 1968

by *David Gress*

Nineteen-sixty eight was the pivotal year of the postwar era. Before 1968, American power in the world was confidently deployed and greatly respected, if not admired. After 1968, America started down the long slope of self-inflicted decadence which even Ronald Reagan's rhetoric was unable to reverse. Before 1968, Americans, with few exceptions, saw their country moving forward on a broad avenue of social and economic progress toward general affluence and equal opportunity. After 1968, Americans of the political elite began believing in group rights and equality of result. More important, before 1968 Americans believed in containing the Soviet Union and its allies—the forces known by the now-quaint term “world Communism.” So seriously did they take this struggle that, for example, they built fallout shelters and maintained a system of air defense of the continental United States. After 1968, Americans in significant numbers came to distrust their own polity and culture to such a degree that they could no longer conceive of any external enemy as dangerous or evil as the enemy within. As a consequence, they abandoned the struggle with “world Communism,” which had come to be seen as merely an illusion fostered by the very same domestic

enemy. Americans, always uneasy with the vast power their country possessed, began establishing barrier after barrier to the exercise of that power, as though it were the greatest source of evil in the world.

The effects of 1968 do not stop there, however. They extend to the intellectual and academic agenda, which was reforged in the 1960s to create the culture of leftist orthodoxy which today, at the end of the 1980s, pervades the American artistic, intellectual, academic, and journalistic scene.

The agents of this reforging have labeled themselves and their ideology as liberal rather than leftist. As a result, both Americans and foreign observers of American political culture labor under the peculiar illusion that there is no left wing to speak of in this country. So, for example, in a recent talk at Stanford University, Alexander Cockburn, the British-born radical writer and journalist, denounced the American media as incorrigibly reactionary accomplices in American imperialism and worldwide oppression. As it happens, serious studies have been done on the political opinions of American journalists, which show, for instance, that they vote overwhelmingly for Democratic candidates, that over half of them admire Fidel Castro and Daniel Ortega, that they believe that black poverty is due to white oppression, and that they regard the United States and the Soviet Union as morally equivalent. Cockburn's assertions, in fact, might well be regarded as libelous by Tom Brokaw and Dan Rather—two figures he singled out for excoriation as lackeys of American power.

Nevertheless, when the Cockburns of this world go on to point out that there is no vital socialist party in the United States, they are right. What we have instead is an amalgam of neo-Marxist and New Leftist ideas about

America and the world. These ideas, although long discarded by serious socialists in Europe, are given new currency by the addition of feminism, environmentalism, and the embarrassing Russophilia of the Gorbachev era. The true measure of the victory of 1968 is that, twenty years later, the victors have succeeded in “Americanizing” a vulgar leftism. Thus, for example, discriminatory “affirmative action” is now regarded by business and government as being in the best tradition of American constitutional democracy.

In short, a shift has taken place in the power to confer meaning, and the corollary power to define agendas and control argument. I am thinking specifically of the radical change in the meaning of important terms like “education,” “justice,” and “freedom.” Above all, I am thinking of the radical change in the meaning of modernity itself, of what it means to be modern. Before 1968 to be modern was to be for tolerance, freedom of thought and speech, the colorblind extension of civil rights, and individual autonomy. For the victors of 1968, however, to be modern was to oppose constitutional democracy, the institutions of rational authority, and the social system of advanced capitalism on the grounds that they were antagonistic to the struggle for freedom, pleasure, social justice, and transcendence. Before 1968, supporters of Western modernity understood that the struggle for autonomy exists in a necessary tension with the institutions of society. After 1968, they repudiated these institutions or set out to destroy them from within.

Nowhere has the transformation of cultural attitudes been more vivid than in the academy, where a virtual civil war has broken out between the old-fashioned modernists and their radical enemies. This civil war broke out as the radicals of 1968 began what their more honest German contemporaries

called “the long march through the institutions.” It was their good fortune that they managed to start that march into academic and cultural employment during the final years of the great expansion of higher education. No sooner were they inside than the economic crises of the 1970s, and critical demographic shifts in the society as a whole, put an end to that expansion. But by that time the generation of 1968, now itself middle-aged, had won the main battle of the academic agenda, and it faced few young rivals, since most of the jobs were already taken. What is more, those few younger scholars who did manage to find employment were often themselves socialized to accept the agenda of 1968, the agenda under which education, justice, and modernity had come to mean the opposite of what they had meant for four centuries of Western history.

Precisely how this new intellectual and academic agenda evolved into its present form, and the role played by the radical victories of 1968 in shaping it, is a subject about which the recent crop of books on the events of 1968 have a good deal to tell us. I want to begin by briefly discussing three of these books—*The Year of the Barricades: A Journey through 1968* by David Caute, *1968 in America: Music, Politics, Chaos, Counterculture, and the Shaping of a Generation* by Charles Kaiser, and *Turning Point: 1968* by Irwin and Debi Unger. And I shall also be taking a look at some recent European writings on this subject, particularly *La pensée 68; Essai sur l'anti-humanisme contemporain* by Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, and *Die Tränen der Revolution: Die 68er zwanzig Jahre danach* by Rainer Bieling. Finally, I will take up the debate as it appeared in a recent symposium published in the quarterly *Salmagundi*.

The common weakness of all three English-language accounts of 1968 is that their authors are tendentiously on the side of the “movement” in all its guises: against Vietnam, against university authority, against the bourgeois order. The conservative enemy is either invisible, anonymous, or, when quoted, faintly ridiculous. None of the three books conveys any sense that there might be serious arguments on the other side.

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That being said, all do offer passages of occasionally compelling journalism. Charles Kaiser, for example, is clearly enamored of the rock music of the 1960s and its associated culture. One does not have to share that enthusiasm to enjoy his exegesis of Bob Dylan’s long rivalry with the Beatles. David Caute, a veteran of the British Old Left, celebrates the barricades, but at least permits the other side to speak now and then, as in his account of the occupation of the London School of Economics in late 1968. Moreover, Caute’s chronicle is made more informative by being global; it includes Paris, Berlin, Prague, and even Mexico City.

Irwin and Debi Unger are the best historians. Their liberal (not leftist) sympathies are evident but do not detract notably from a clear and coherent narrative. Like Cauter and Kaiser, however, they argue that 1968 was the year when “traditional America began the long reconquest that culminated in the election of Ronald Reagan. ”Well, not exactly. What came back in 1980 was a rhetoric of conservatism that concealed a modified version of old-fashioned, Cold War liberalism. None of the important principles that gained ground in 1968 were seriously threatened, whether one looks at the dogma of equality of result, at the power of the media or congress, or at the New Left’s hegemony in cultural and intellectual life. In a way, the authors acknowledge this obvious fact. For all of them, 1968 irrevocably transformed the student generation and, by extension, America. None of them doubts that that transformation was good and valuable, and that we are all better for it.

Are we? Kaiser concludes his story by asking: “What did we accomplish? There have been no more Vietnams since 1968. That is our generation’s finest achievement. The 58,021 Americans who perished in Southeast Asia did not die in vain: their sacrifice saved the lives of hundreds of thousands who came after them, who thus far have been spared the folly of similar adventures.”

The sheer fatuous complacency of these lines would be hard to rival—and by fatuous I am not referring to the fact that Kaiser was all of eighteen years old in 1968, so that the word “we ”is surely to be taken in a fairly loose sense. Rather it is as though, for Kaiser, the rest of the world does not exist; the single standard of value and accomplishment is the short-term material safety of young upper-middle-class Americans like himself. The millions murdered by the Communist victors in Indochina do not enter into his world view.

This is curious since, earlier in his book, he had the honesty to say that the Viet Cong committed atrocities far worse than any attributed to Americans. Even so, he does not make the connection that the American defeat meant that all of Indochina had to undergo such atrocities for years on end. On the contrary, he celebrates that defeat, and his own minor part in bringing it about.

The European response to the post-Vietnam world has been very different from this. Kaiser's self-satisfied parochialism stands in stark contrast, for example, to the humility of Jean Lacouture, the French historian and journalist who, in the 1960s, used all of his considerable influence to attack the United States involvement in Vietnam. No sooner was it clear, by the mid-1970s, that Communist rule in Vietnam and Cambodia was so much worse than the war had been as to make any comparison obscene than he issued a public statement of contrition for his part in the American defeat. Lacouture believed that he bore a share of responsibility for the Cambodian and Vietnamese holocausts in the exact sense that the appeasers of the 1930s bore a share of responsibility for World War II and the murder of the European Jews.

Thus, although Vietnam was behind much of the uproar in Europe—the barricades of May in Paris, the terrorism of “Red Rudi” Dutschke and Andreas Baader—the residue of the Sixties is not the same there as it has been here. Few, if any, Americans on the winning side of 1968 doubt the worth or the justice of their cause; few European intellectuals today do not doubt it, at least to some degree, nor has their victory been as unambiguous or as broad. The American books on 1968, presented as works of historical journalism, are extended glorifications of the radical movements of that year, whereas the

European texts express skepticism. Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, in their *La Pensée 68*, even define the basic ideology of 1968 as “anti-humanism.” Are they right? To ask that question is to ask what 1968 meant, in Europe as well as America, and how that meaning is reflected, or distorted, in the current crop of commemorative analyses.

The German spectacle of 1968 was both more traditional and more radical than that of either America or France. More traditional because, according to Rainer Bieling in *Die Tränen der Revolution* (“The Tears of Revolution”), the German student leaders saw themselves as fulfilling a very traditional promise, namely the promise of the Enlightenment to free man (in Kant’s view) from his self-inflicted immaturity. The student leaders wanted to take the next logical step: to liberate citizens who were supposedly subjugated by powerful interests. But the German protest was more radical, too, because its leaders adopted revolutionary Marxism as their guiding doctrine. If most American radicals soon saw the folly of developing an indigenous Marxism, their counterparts in Germany chose the opposite path: they rejected both liberalism (in the original sense of the word) and the frenetic, dressed-up Marxism of Paris in favor of a dogmatic orthodoxy that, as the months and years passed, became indistinguishable from that enforced by bayonets and prison camps in East Germany and the Soviet Union. A significant fraction of them turned to terrorism when the majority of German citizens refused to endorse their program of liberation. Nothing remotely comparable to West German terrorism appeared on the French or American scene. The only parallel was Italy, where similarly small groups of radical students made the apparent discovery that they were uniquely called upon to enforce the project of liberation by murdering representatives of the forces of evil.

German terrorism can be explained in part by the same feature that, at first, made the student protest movement so traditional in its early phases. Despite the revolutionary upheavals of defeat and occupation, West Germany in 1960 remained a remarkably conservative, even authoritarian society. The universities had changed little since the early nineteenth century. As Germany adjusted to life in postwar Europe, economically affluent but politically weak, German intellectuals and students sensed a growing discrepancy between the institutions they lived in and the wider world, especially the world exemplified by the United States. The degree to which America was a model to young Germans in the early 1960s is scarcely conceivable to us now, when we are liable to think of young Germans as “Greens ” protesting American presidents and missile deployments. In Germany, modernism—in the shape of a more casual, egalitarian style of behavior, freedom from conservative constraints in scholarship and debate, and freedom from deference to paternal figures—was a time bomb waiting to explode. And, of course, it had a highly combustible element: the moral indignation of young Germans at the perceived failure of their fathers to atone for National Socialism.

The bomb went off in a series of landmark events from 1962 to 1968. In 1962, the German government tried to discipline the weekly magazine *Der Spiegel* for publishing military secrets. Its abject failure, and the resultant triumph of the journalistic Left, marked Germany’s arrival in the league of countries for whom authority seemed to rest in the democracy of “public opinion ” rather than in the metaphysical supremacy of the state.

In late 1966 the student movement entered its radical phase when the two major political parties, the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats, joined forces. This union left the role of official opposition to the tiny Free

Democrats. They were themselves in the middle of a sharp leftward lurch, fast becoming something much closer to a party of American left-wing liberals than the European-style party of classical liberals that they had formerly been.

At any rate, Rudi Dutschke, the leader of the Berlin students, proclaimed in the mid-Sixties that, since there was no truly democratic opposition in parliament, students must establish an extra-parliamentary opposition, the APO (“Ausserparlamentarische Opposition”). Like many West German radicals, Dutschke was a refugee from Communist-ruled East Germany. For a year and half he led German students in demonstration after demonstration, to protest professorial power, government policies, and Western attempts to exploit the Third World, the foremost example of which was, inevitably, the Vietnam War. As Rainer Bieling puts it in his somewhat sentimental review of this stage of the student movement: “How could the guardian angel of the Germans [i.e., the United States] have political and moral integrity if it was ruining a peasant people in Vietnam with devastating bombardments? If it was embracing the authoritarian regimes of South American dictators and even the Shah himself?”

It was the Shah who unwittingly marked the turn that ultimately split the German student movement into its reformist and terrorist wings. During his visit to Germany in June 1967 the Berlin police accidentally shot and killed a student, Benno Ohnesorg. In retaliation, the APO shut down universities throughout Germany for much of the next academic year. In the spring of 1968 more fuel was added to the fire when the German parliament debated a constitutional amendment providing the government with special powers in the event of a national emergency. In the middle of the Easter demonstration season, a right-wing house painter in Berlin shot and wounded Dutschke,

thereby confirming the radicals' view that there could be no compromise with established society. Dutschke, permanently disabled, retired to Denmark, where he died a decade later. Meanwhile, many of his followers moved sharply left, rejected any compromise with the democratic system, and submerged themselves in an underworld of Maoist and Stalinist sects. Others judged that the only response to the “structural violence” of the state was violence of their own in the form of terrorism. Andreas Baader, a high-school dropout, and Gudrun Ensslin, a schoolteacher, set fire to department stores in Frankfurt and Brussels in that same spring of 1968. By late 1969, the umbrella organization of the German student movement was dead. It had had the same initials as its American counterpart— SDS—and fell apart for similar reasons, namely that its members could not decide whether they should tolerate constitutional democracy or reject it.

Among the majority that decided for toleration was Rainer Bieling. *Die Tränen der Revolution* is his devastating attack on those who remained true to the radical cause. In Bieling's view, they overpoliticized the student Left after 1968. Frustrated by the failure of their rebellion to bring about radical change in society, the leaders of the German SDS and its successor groups decided to rally the proletariat. They ended up merely aping them with the ideological oddity known as “workerism”: the belief that, university student or no, one must pretend that one belongs to the working class; one must dress like a worker, speak like a worker, live like a worker, and try to think like a worker. My own hazy recollections of student life in Denmark in 1970-71 are that the identical phenomenon occurred there, for about six months. The absurdity of it all is evident the moment you pause to think that at this precise juncture in all Western countries the number of old-fashioned blue-collar workers was falling faster than ever before, giving way to a new white-collar service sector.

Somehow, the workerists never figured out how to integrate this new class, or how to adjust their own world view to account for it. Instead, they surrendered ideological ascendancy to interest groups tied to the established unions and social democratic parties.

Bieling notes correctly that, for the student movement, workerism was the beginning of the end. It repelled the next generation of students. They in turn staged their own rebellion under the twin banners of punk rock and yuppie materialism. This upset the generation of 1968, many of whom had meanwhile become radicals with comfortable, tenured positions at major universities. “The tragic consciousness of the 1968’ers is fed by a double guilt feeling, not only of having failed, but of profiting from that failure,” Bieling writes. “They have made their accommodation, but with their stomachs, not with their heads. Their stomachs swell with the privileges of the here and now, their heads remain lost in the yesterday of a tomorrow that had no future to begin with.”

This is also the condition of the army of 1968 in America, now teaching the gospel of anti-Americanism from the pulpits of America’s universities. But there is a difference. Because the German student movement was from the beginning locked far more firmly within the iron cage of Marxist ideology, the utter failure of that ideology across Europe has likewise discredited the movement’s ideological underpinnings. You cannot harangue your students with a message of doom and revolution if the truth of that message depends on an ideology that is either completely out of date or a lie. Since the American movement was never as Marxist, it was less affected by Marxism’s demise, and could continue its work in the guise of liberalism. That option was not available to the men and women of 1968 in Germany.

They have had the simple choice of fleeing into the environmental, anti-nuclear leftism of the Green Party or coming to terms with constitutional democracy. As Bieling himself demonstrates, many have chosen the path of democracy.

If the ideas of 1968 won in America and reached a stalemate in Germany, they were soundly defeated in France. But then the mix of ideas was different in France from what it was in the other two countries. In America an ideologically unsophisticated radicalism triumphed; in Germany the radical element espoused a heavy-handed Marxism. In France, the reigning ideology was a combination of the Marxism of Louis Althusser, Sartrean existentialism, and a smattering of ideas derived from the anthropological and cultural theories of Jacques Lacan, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Michel Foucault. The combination produced a high-temperature fever from which few were immune in 1968 but which faded with unforeseen speed when the component ideologies disintegrated. Held together by a logic of mutual dependency, none of the three proved able to stand alone once that logic began to unravel, as it did around 1975.

According to Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut in *La Pensée 68*, the sentiment common to all these ideological theories was “anti-humanism,” which they define as the conviction that Enlightenment humanism, with its faith in human reason as the foundation of social and political order and of culture, had failed. (Note the contrast to Germany, where, according to Bieling, some of the movement’s leaders of 1968 imagined themselves to be perfecting, not denying, the Enlightenment.) As Ferry and Renaut show, the followers of Althusser, Derrida, Sartre, and Foucault felt that humanism had failed because it was scientifically false, because it had not prevented colonialism,

imperialism, and Nazi totalitarianism. Even the rights of man, proclaimed by none other than the revolutionary National Assembly in France in 1789, were seen to be a sham. The radicals of '68 called for a new social order utterly different from that of the existing liberal society, which their mentors had so successfully de-legitimized. Foucault had shown that the idea of man as the subject of history was itself an historical construct, belonging to the epoch of European expansion and imperialism. Following Freud, Jacques Lacan had shown that humanism was, at best, camouflage for ruthless and sinister drives for domination. Althusser, finally, had shown that the march of history toward a collectivist future turned not on any romantic faith in human potential but on the iron laws of class struggle.

Ferry and Renaut rightly designate Claude Lévi-Strauss as one of the master thinkers behind the upheaval of 1968. And yet in 1987 it turned out that, whatever the effect of his ideas on the student movement, Levi-Strauss himself was far from endorsing its actions. In an interview in that year he stated unambiguously that May 1968 had “repelled” him. Pressed by an incredulous interviewer to admit that “you must have been seduced by that moment of innovation, of imagination,” the crusty anthropologist spelled out his position:

I can't accept cutting down trees to build barricades (trees are life, and worthy of respect), or making trash heaps out of public places that are a common good and a common responsibility, or covering university or other buildings with graffiti. Nor can I accept that intellectual work and the operation of established institutions should be paralyzed by rhetorical battles For me, May 1968 represented one more step down a ladder of degradation of the universities that had begun long before. Already in high school I told myself that my generation, myself included, could not stand comparison

with that of Bergson, Proust, Durkheim at the same age. I don't believe that May 1968 destroyed the university, but rather that May 1968 took place because the university had destroyed itself.

When Lévi-Strauss made these comments, of course, the radical anti-humanism of 1968 was long dead. It began to die when French intellectuals discovered Soviet totalitarianism as a consequence of reading Solzhenitsyn in the mid-1970s. Raymond Aron, the great liberal who had never succumbed in the least to anti-humanism, pointed out acerbically at the time that this discovery came a little late, given that there was full evidence of Soviet atrocities in the 1940s, and even earlier for those who were alert to it. The history of ideological fashions, however, shows clearly that facts, no matter how momentous, have no public effect if the political culture is not disposed to accept them. French political culture in the late 1940s and 1950s had been controlled by the Communist Party and its sympathizers, like Sartre, who vindictively silenced people who told the truth about the Soviet Union. By the mid-1970s, however, the cultural hegemony of the Party was weakening, partly thanks to the growing number of East European and, later, Southeast Asian refugees in French academic and cultural life. It should also be added that in France the movement of 1968 was somewhat more genuinely anti-authoritarian than it was in either America or Germany. There was less of that double standard by which authoritarianism of the Left is judged on its promises of liberation, whereas liberal democracy is judged by its alleged failure to perform.

In any case, the discovery of the moral bankruptcy of the Left in France was all the more effective for being late. Within months, it seemed, first Marxism, then existentialism, and finally structuralism in its vulgar version lost their

moral standing, their intellectual appeal, their credibility. The rights of man returned triumphant as French scholars and politicians made statement upon statement denouncing Soviet tyranny in Eastern Europe, the Vietnamese and Cambodian gulags and holocausts, and the complicity of European and American liberals in bringing them about. By 1980, France was swept clean of the effects of the fever of 1968. It was a final irony of history that the very country that saw the most extreme excesses of student behavior and rhetoric—leaving aside the terrorism in Germany and Italy—also saw the most extreme defeat of the ideologies that motivated them.

Of course, the French did not rediscover natural rights and the virtues of humanistic democracy only because they began reading Soviet dissidents or because they found some internal, logical flaw in the grand structure of radical ideology. They were also acting out a public drama. To a large extent the posture of 1968 was theater, in the best traditions of French public rhetoric since the seventeenth century. How intimately these two impulses were related—the wish for both radical commitment and the drama of proclaiming an *idéologie de choc*—can be seen in the recent astonishing revelations about the private thoughts of Louis Althusser, that most relentless and stern of anti-humanist Marxists.

Althusser plays an interesting part in *Un siècle, une vie* (“A Century, A Life”), the memoir of the Catholic philosopher Jean Guitton, who was for a few years in the 1930s Althusser’s teacher and thereafter his friend. Guitton deduces that Althusser was driven by a deep need to carry Marxism to such an extreme that it would become for him a substitute for the mysticism he had abandoned when he left the Catholic Church at the age of twenty. In 1980, Althusser’s wife Hélène, whom he was shortly to murder “in a fit of

passion, ”confessed to Guitton that the two of them had decided long ago to “forego all worldly honor ”and to consecrate themselves to the Absolute. This unconditional commitment to a logic of history above human logic was the key to Althusser’s Marxism, and the secret of the powerful attraction it exercised on so many young radicals around 1968. In 1974, Althusser acknowledged to Guitton that he was “considered a dogmatist. ”But this, he said, was unavoidable, for “I note that the philosophies that have had the most effect in history... were dogmatic. ”To admit doubts, in other words, was to ruin beforehand the public effect of one’s ideas. Althusser maintained that once a philosopher published his thoughts he no longer had the right to cast doubt on them.

Given this mystical ideology, it was not surprising that Althusser, by the time of his final collapse (in the form of schizophrenic psychosis, which relieved him of criminal culpability in his wife’s murder), had come to believe that the crisis of human history was imminent, and that the salvation of the world lay in an alliance of Communism and Catholicism, of Moscow and Rome.

There is, obviously, a vivid contrast between Althusser’s political mysticism—indeed, the entire intellectual debate of the European Left—and the more mundane concerns of the New Left in America. This contrast has been concisely documented in a recent *Salmagundi* symposium on the Sixties (Winter, 1989). Perhaps more than the Unger, Cate, and Kaiser books, the *Salmagundi* essays give us a sense of how the proud veterans of the New Left in America differ from their European counterparts and of what they see the legacy of the Sixties to be.

Ellen Willis, a senior editor at the *Village Voice*, leads off the symposium with an essay that focuses on her own liberal guilt as a privileged activist in the late 1960s. It is the sort of exasperating piece that prompts the reader who has never had the time or, perhaps, the opportunity to feel liberal guilt to ask what possible interest such revelations can have, apart from causing ridicule among more serious revolutionaries. Willis is followed by a member of the Old Left, the sociologist Norman Birnbaum, who from his position at Georgetown University's law school tells us that we need "a new New Left." Julius Lester, the black professor of Jewish studies at the University of Massachusetts who was recently read out of the progressive ranks by other blacks for defending Judaism, offers the only piece in the collection that ventures to defy the mainstream orthodoxy, albeit obliquely: he illustrates, by example and recollection, that the 1960s was a time when many people really believed that civil rights might lead to a multi-racial society, instead of to the self-imposed segregation, group-rights thinking, and black racism of today.

The best summary of the 1968 ideology, however, is Benjamin Barber's essay. Barber, the Walt Whitman professor of humanities at Rutgers University, notes complacently that "the generation that challenged the professoriate twenty years ago is today itself the professoriate The long hairs have gone gray but the ideals that inflamed these now balding pates continue to infuse sociology lectures on mutualism and political science seminars exploring Green politics or revisioned [*sic*] feminist liberation."

Coming from the white male holder of a named chair in a prestigious university, this profession of radical faith is a tempting target of critical deconstruction. Bearing in mind the sound and as yet uncontroverted

Marxist principle that the ruling educational ideas of the age are always the ideas of the rulers of education, I offer the following deconstruction of Professor Barber's views:

Twenty years ago, I and my friends discovered that our professors were wimps. They didn't really believe in their own authority over us, they had no intention of taking any risks for Western democracy, and they certainly weren't for American power. Why, any fool with half a slogan in his head could make them agree that the Vietnam War was wrong in the space of two minutes! Now we also saw that these professors lived well, had nice houses and so forth, and didn't have to work hard. So we decided we wanted a part of it. All we had to do was yell slogans about imperialism and chauvinism, and by God they gave us the store! All of it! There we were, with tenure after a dissertation and two articles! And you know what else; once they'd hired us, they considerately shut the door on new recruits so nobody could threaten our guild's hold on power. Of course we have to go on talking the same garbage we did twenty years ago, but who cares? Incidentally, we did invent one new gimmick. These days, it's really important to go on about racism and sexism. It's safe, too, even for a white guy like me, as long as you have tenure.

Professor Barber's essay lends itself splendidly to such translations. In substance, it is an attack on cultural conservatives—Allan Bloom, William Bennett, and the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre—for stealing the Left's thunder. Professor Barber, it appears, has discovered that American students in the 1980s are more interested in wealth and status than in culture. Bloom and Bennett have blamed this development on Professor Barber and other members of the 1968 generation who discarded the traditional curriculum of liberal education and alienated the young from serious learning—even as they gave their students a gloss of ritualistic leftism.

Mr. Barber pleads not guilty to this charge, at least on some counts.

According to him it is the conservative reactionaries of the 1970s who taught the young to be greedy. The legacy of the 1960s, by contrast, is the “critical” university, which has replaced an earlier university whose only function, according to Barber, was to socialize students into being loyal and unquestioning citizens.

This is a neat turn of the argument, since in fact it is Mr. Barber and his ilk who have used the university as a smoothly functioning engine of socialization. The dogma being unquestionably accepted this time around, however, is the dogma of the post-Sixties Left. The result is that curious and eminently useful creature, the contemporary middle-class American, with his conventionally middle-class mores—lots of exercise, no smoking, only a little drinking, and at least one money-market fund—and his secondhand New Left opinions about foreign policy, domestic politics, big business, and the big wide world. By contrast, the contemporary middle-class European holds quite firmly to the hedonism of the 1960s while rejecting with fair consistency the political world view of 1968. There are exceptions on both continents, to be sure, but in general the American New Left has produced a generation of healthy and effective consumers of bland anti-Americanism.

Mr. Barber demonstrates in his essay just how far liberalism has come since the days when liberals stood for American power abroad and equality of opportunity at home. He declares that the contemporary university is “in the hands of adults” who “believe in equality, in disarmament, in tolerance, and in social justice, gender justice, racial justice, and a variety of other contemporary justices.” A visitor from Mars might plausibly take these phrases at face value and conclude that these were

honorable and civilized purposes. In fact, unless Mr. Barber's ideology is really quite different from what it appears to be, he is not advocating what these phrases might traditionally have connoted but something very different.

For a proper measure of the Sixties legacy it bears repeating that for Mr. Barber and his soul mates in the academy (and media) "equality" means equality of result, to be measured crudely by the number of persons of a given sex or color to be found in a given occupation; "disarmament" means isolationism, and the end of any pretense that America stands for liberty in the world; "social justice" means egalitarianism; "gender justice" means learning to say "chairperson" without visibly wincing and in general conducting oneself so as to appease the feminist groups without actually doing anything drastic, like giving one's job to a woman (other people's jobs are another matter). "Racial justice" and the other "justices" have analogous meanings.

Mr. Barber is honest enough to admit that the New Left, to which he evidently still belongs, subordinated "scholarship to a political struggle for justice." Indeed it did. One is reminded of another such subordination, from a different time and different political orientation. I am thinking of Martin Heidegger in 1933, when he proclaimed that Adolf Hitler was the incarnation of absolute justice. Why should anyone believe that Mr. Barber's "justice," as the ideological cloak of certain special interests, is better than Heidegger's, which, as Mr. Barber would surely want to claim, was in fact mere tyranny? By what standard can he maintain that his political definition of justice is morally superior to Heidegger's, when there is no place for such judgments in his philosophy?

Of course, in his own opinion, Mr. Barber stands for progress, whereas Heidegger and the Nazis were reactionary (never mind that the slogan of 1933 was “the German revolution has begun!”). He admits that modernity has undermined traditional values, but cannot bring himself to support those, like Bloom and Bennett, who want at least to tell students what the tradition was so that they can choose for themselves whether to accept or reject it. Rather, he speaks vaguely of creating a new basis for social cohesion by “forging an art of politics capable of holding together and giving meaning to beings emancipated from the roots that once imprisoned their spirits even as it grounded their values.”

I think that Mr. Barber is being entirely honest in this statement of purpose. It may lend itself to ironical translation, but underneath there is a serious world view, one that I, for one, happen to find so obviously false that I cannot understand how anyone can seriously adopt it. The key is the idea that “roots, ”meaning a strong cultural tradition, “imprison the spirit. ”Why? Surely the lesson of high civilization from earliest antiquity to the day before yesterday is that the spirit is freed, not imprisoned, by culture, by a close familiarity with one’s own tradition. G. K. Chesterton’s saying that tradition is the democracy of the dead was never more relevant than in the conflict with today’s sloganeers of equality, who trash the history and achievements of the West in the name of global democracy. Another, now somewhat unfashionable, way of putting the essential role of culture as part of a fully human nature is to cite Sigmund Freud: civilization is sublimation. Like culture in society at large, adulthood and maturity in the individual are the fertile products of a tension between the demands of tradition and the impulses of individuality. Unrestrained by culture, those impulses often

regress either to infantilism, as they did for many members of the New Left, or to fanatical barbarism, as they do for many ruling elites in the Third World today.

Furthermore, all cultures teach that you have to know where you come from before you know who you are. Western culture further teaches that, when you do know who you are, then and only then do you have the right and the authority to reject the past or to build up on it. Only the modern West offers this unique option, which is why, *pace* Mr. Barber and the New Left, it is indeed a culture of universal value.

Neither the *Salmagundi* contributors nor Cauter, Kaiser, and the Ungers display any understanding of this heritage or indeed any sense of the threat it faces. The English-language writers, all belonging to what Europeans bitingly call the “pink bourgeoisie,” rest safely in the knowledge—belief, rather—that the movement of 1968 was a great step forward in the struggle against injustice and barbarism. Nothing in that movement or its aftermath can or will threaten them, they think; rather, what they resent is that the ideas of 1968 have not been universally victorious. Their position reminds me very much of the position taken by the American Catholic bishops in their 1983 pastoral letter. In that letter, largely written, not coincidentally, by a full-fledged representative of the post-1968 establishment view of American power and its evils, the bishops denounced the strategy of nuclear deterrence while ignoring completely the likely consequences of a further weakening of American power. One French bishop remarked that the document was obviously the work of people whose material safety and freedom had never been seriously threatened, and who expected no such threat in the future.

This is perhaps the key to the difference between the American and the European lessons of 1968 as they emerge from the writings under review. The French and German writers, who present their accounts with distance, irony, and a sure sense that the events of 1968 were not necessarily signs of progress toward more humanity, more justice, or more freedom, take less for granted. In short, they realize that any political movement carries costs, and no such movement is without its ambiguities and risks. The reader finds no trace of such a sense in Cauter, Kaiser, Birnbaum, Barber, or Willis. Rather, there are good guys and there are bad guys, unambiguously distinguishable by their support of or opposition to reason, justice, and liberation—as defined by the men and women of 1968. It is precisely this smug self-righteousness, and the intolerance that inevitably accompanies it, that has come to characterize so much elite opinion in the United States today. From newspaper editorial offices to college classrooms, the progressives of the Eighties have accepted the radical agenda of the Sixties as a kind of unchallengeable fact of nature. In too many cases, their own agenda is to destroy the very possibility that anyone might ever know that there is another truth than theirs.

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