

*The Agony and the Ecstasy: 1968 in the West*  
By Chris Wright

Sometimes in history a year appears as an explosion. Tensions and conflicts that have been simmering or forcibly suppressed finally erupt and society is thrown into crisis. 1789 was such a year; so were 1848, 1914, 1917, and 1936 in Europe. And then, three decades later, there was 1968. In this year, attempted mini-revolutions flared up in the capitalist and Communist worlds, in countries from Mexico to Poland; all were put down by the authorities. Students, workers, women, and minorities rose up -- and would continue to rise up in the succeeding years -- but in 1968 they met mostly defeat. The Establishment would not yield power so easily. Ever since, historians and participants have studied the events of that year to determine what caused the upsurge, what went wrong, what its effects were, or just to reminisce and draw lessons for activists. In this paper I will review some of the literature on 1968 to explore how the scholarship has changed in the last twenty years and what its principal conclusions have been.

In the mid-1980s a number of works on 1968 appeared, among which were Chris Harman's *The Fire Last Time: 1968 and After* (1988), David Cauter's *The Year of the Barricades: A Journey Through 1968* (1988), and Todd Gitlin's *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (1987). Years later, in 2004, Mark Kurlansky's *1968: The Year That Rocked The World* appeared; then in 2007 Gerd-Rainer Horn published *The Spirit of '68: Rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956-1976*, and in 2009 the *American Historical Review* printed a forum on 1968. Many other relevant works have been published, of course, but I will use these few as a representative sample of the scholarship. When so much is written on a single year there are inevitably redundancies and common themes, such that a cross-section of the literature can reveal much about the tendencies of the whole.

A reasonable place to begin is with the recollections of a participant in the New Left, Todd Gitlin. His book is a particularly well-written and thoughtful exemplar of that genre, 'memoir-of-a-participant-in-the-Sixties.' It addresses not only 1968 but the decade as a whole from the perspective of an early member of Students for a Democratic Society. As a result, its analysis of the era is a bit one-sided: for example, Gitlin devotes relatively little attention to the later stages of the Black Power movement while recounting in great detail the demise of SDS. This is appropriate, however, in what is effectively a memoir, if an unusually analytical and historically conscious one -- the memoir of a movement more than an individual. Gitlin tells the story of the birth, rise and fall of the New Left, from the late 1950s to the early 1970s.

The principal virtue of his book, as of other such memoirs, is the *visceral* experience of reading it -- reading the testimony of one who lived the Sixties intensely, self-consciously, and is now remembering and critiquing the movements of which he

was a part. To read the book, written in vivid, journalistic, partisan prose, is to encounter the Sixties from the inside. The existential commitments, the driving hopes and dreams, the violent disillusionments and fratricidal rage of 1968 and after -- this is the New Left in its lived immediacy, not the cadaverous abstraction dissected autopsy-like in most scholarship. Above all, it is *movement*. "A series of epiphanies," as Michael Rogin defined the New Left. A whirlwind of music, drugs, sex, self-discovery, cultural rebellion, revolutionary politics, bloody battles with the police, vicious internecine warfare among ultra-left factions each claiming the mantle of the Revolution -- ultimately 'the revolution devouring its own' after 1968 -- and through it all, the common thread of youthful middle-class alienation groping for authenticity against a violent bureaucratic world. That is the impression one gets from reading *The Sixties*: the New Left was full of very serious young people (and many not so serious), students and ex-students and young spirits of all sorts, who were disgusted with American culture and politics but would not have had any particular cause to rally around had the two issues of *civil rights* and *Vietnam* not appeared. Hundreds of thousands of restless middle-class young Americans, the product of a 'baby boom,' an expanding system of university education and a dynamic popular culture, were rebelling against old authority-structures, repressive cultural mores, political shibboleths like 'anti-Communism' that did not resonate with them, and all things that seemed opposed to freedom, love, life, self-expression, humanity, authenticity -- the values of the young. This 'existentialist' revolt took many different forms,<sup>1</sup> but politically it latched onto, first, the civil rights movement, with which it felt an instinctual sympathy, and second, the anti-war movement. Indeed, the war in Vietnam came to symbolize to these youth everything abhorrent about American society, and by 1968 the New Left was obsessed with it.

Gitlin's account of 1968, of all its hopeful and dreadful happenings, is as compelling and visceral as the rest of the book. He writes of the assassinations of King and Kennedy and their "enormous repercussions" -- "In two strokes, liberalism....was 'decapitated'";<sup>2</sup> he writes of the Democratic Convention in Chicago, the chaos, the thuggery of the police; he writes of the student movement's radicalization by the events of 1968 and its subsequent splintering into feminist movements and ever-more-radical revolutionary cliques like the Weathermen, which destroyed SDS from within. It becomes clear that, if there was a turning point, the turning point was 1968. By 1969 the New Left had "trapped itself in a seamless loop: growing militancy, growing isolation, growing commitment to The Revolution, sloppier and more frantic attempts to imagine a revolutionary class, growing hatred among the competing factions with their

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<sup>1</sup> See Doug Rossinow's *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America* (1998).

<sup>2</sup> Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 305.

competing imaginations.”<sup>3</sup> However, Gitlin argues that the movement’s collapse in 1969 and afterwards, while probably accelerated by the traumatic events of 1968, was ultimately determined by a series of dilemmas or ‘structural tensions’ that had been present from the beginning. For example, as a student movement and a political movement at the same time, it “oscillated between narcissism (imagining itself to be the instrument of change) and self-disparagement (searching for the *real* instrument of change), eventually succumbing to the false solution of Leninism” with the elitism of the Weathermen, who hoped to ignite the revolutionary consciousness of the working class but ended up alienating the entire American public and legitimating political repression. Another dilemma is that, as an existentialist movement, the New Left “wanted to be both strategic and expressive, political and cultural”: it wanted to change the world in the future but *live* the change immediately -- values that were not easy to reconcile. Many such ‘structural’ conflicts foredoomed the youth movement.<sup>4</sup>

*The Sixties* is limited, however, to events in America, and it does not focus on 1968. To get a broader picture of that year in its international context we must turn to David Caute’s *The Year of the Barricades*, which surveys events throughout Europe and North America, and even Japan. As Caute narrates it, 1968 was the year that everything broke down. Anarchy was momentarily unleashed -- in the U.S., France, Czechoslovakia, Italy, Spain, England, Germany, Mexico, Japan, and other countries. Above all, power-structures could no longer contain the raging discontent of students. According to Caute, 1968 was truly the year of the students -- or, more generally, of the youth, since young workers in France and elsewhere played a role in instigating mass strikes. But student agitation seems to have lit the fuse everywhere, with the occasional help of intellectuals and academics, as in the coming of the Prague Spring. In Gramscian terms, the elite’s hegemony (whichever elite was in question in varying circumstances) had collapsed, and students led the way in trying to construct a new order, first and foremost in their universities. Hence the student boycotts and occupations of universities throughout the West. Grievances differed depending on the country and the repressiveness of its institutions. For example, in Spain, Poland, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, where democracy was lacking, the complaints were not against technocracy, consumer capitalism or Vietnam but rather the “corruption, overcrowding, and administrative breakdown [that] dominated students’ lives,”<sup>5</sup> as well as censorship of the press and political authoritarianism. Universities in France and Italy likewise suffered from overcrowding, as well as administrative inefficiency, poor housing conditions, segregation of the sexes, and general inattentiveness to the needs of

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 380.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>5</sup> David Caute, *The Year of the Barricades: A Journey Through 1968* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 83.

students. One common student demand was for participation in administering their own education -- in hiring faculty, in the proceedings of administrative committees, etc. These demands were echoed in the U.S., where there was also outrage at elite universities' complicity in the Vietnam war.

Caute discusses the counterculture and its offshoots as well -- radical art, theater, film, the drug culture, sex, women's liberation -- and touches on the public's hostile reaction to the radicalism of the youth, but overall his book lacks sufficient context. It does not explain why things erupted when they did, nor does it delve into the broader economic and social conditions of the time. The reader is left wondering how it was that essentially uncoordinated youth revolts broke out at the same time all over the world, between 1967 and 1970. What were the international dynamics that led to the synchronicity of student rebellions? How had higher education evolved to reach the bursting point of 1968? In fact, Caute's emphasis on the young is surely misleading. Societies in their entirety were being torn apart, riven by economic, political and social 'contradictions' (in Marxian terminology). These contradictions, it seems, were expressed in a particularly dramatic way in the university-system, due to a confluence of factors: masses of young people lived and studied together, had the time and youthful energy to think critically about their society and try to change it; universities were and are places of unusual ferment, where people of different races, classes, backgrounds and ideologies are thrust together -- a sort of elite semi-microcosm of society; a contradiction can, and did, develop between the great freedom and privilege of university life and students' (and professors') consciousness of being cogs in a bureaucratic machine; because of the elite status of universities, media coverage of them can be glaring and political. As for why student rebellions mostly failed, or at best resulted in minor reforms, Caute offers no satisfactory explanation.

Chris Harman does, however -- or at least he provides the framework for one, even though, or perhaps because, he is far more interested in classic economic and political conflicts than in student radicalism. Harman is a Marxist, and this shows in *The Fire Last Time*. He focuses on the class struggles and class structures that he thinks underlay the unrest of 1968 and succeeding years; he also attempts to place in their historical context the events of 1968, partly by carrying the story up to the mid-1970s, when the fount of radicalism in many countries finally dried up. The student revolts he treats as manifestations of deep-rooted contradictions in the evolving state-capitalist social order, contradictions that were even more forcefully and meaningfully expressed in years of workers' strikes and agitation throughout the West. In much of Europe, for example, huge portions of the peasantry were still migrating to the cities in the 1950s and 1960s; when industrial work proved low-paying and exhausting even as deskilling of the workforce was taking place (and consequent loss of workers' power), strikes began to break out frequently. At the same time, political repression was fierce in several fascist and semi-fascist countries, including De Gaulle's France, which were

trying to modernize their economies -- make them internationally competitive -- without yielding to pressures for political democratization. Harman's book is valuable as a reminder that students were not the only ones advocating democratization or increased power for the 'people'; workers and other oppressed groups were doing the same. The war in Vietnam became a symbol for many students of society's essentially authoritarian nature, but workers too, as well as African-Americans in the United States and other groups, fought for greater power in their own spheres -- sometimes against political regimes, as in southern Europe.

As for why student rebellions dissipated or were easily crushed, Harman's answer is that

the students did not have the power that workers have when they strike -- the ability to hit the source of their employers' profits. They could not build enduring organizations based on their ability to put permanent pressure on the authorities. The student upsurge could, by the very speed of its development, throw the authorities on to the defensive; it could force them to make concessions in a desperate attempt to reassert their ideological control over the mass of students. But it did not have the power to do real damage and that led the students rapidly to believe that little more could be achieved by direct action.<sup>6</sup>

Harman argues that workers might have been able to force significant changes in certain European countries, for instance France in May of 1968, when the largest general strike in history occurred, had not the leadership of their unions and political parties been essentially conservative. Worker unrest was corralled into 'respectable' channels of opposition, such as electoral action; leftist parties and unions effectively collaborated with governments to undermine their membership's militancy. Ironically, in the long run the victory of conservative 'reformism' over more radical tendencies led to the undoing of the organized left: their own parties being merely diluted versions of the political center and right, workers in many countries eventually lost faith in the left and turned to the right for solutions to their economic problems.

The three works discussed so far are quite different from each other, but they share a tendency not manifested in more recent scholarship: they take it for granted that the nation-state should be the basic unit, or should define the 'framework,' of analysis. This older scholarship is sometimes international in scope, but it is rarely or ever *transnational*. When one compares it to more recent works it seems relatively narrow and un-cosmopolitan. Timothy S. Brown expresses the perspective of the new scholarship well when he writes, "[T]he nation-state cannot function as our primary

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<sup>6</sup> Chris Harman, *The Fire Last Time: 1968 and After* (Bookmarks: Chicago, 1988), 47.

frame of reference, not only because of the importance of transnational influences in shaping local events, but because of how intimately '1968' was linked to the creation of globalizing imagined communities that cut across national boundaries."<sup>7</sup> Even if most recent authors on 1968 do not explicitly argue for the latter claim (the creation of globalizing imagined communities), it is implicit in their work insofar as they downplay national boundaries and emphasize transnational connections and cross-fertilizations in social movements.

For example, Mark Kurlansky organizes his book *1968: The Year That Rocked The World* in a decidedly anti-nation-statist way, hopping around anecdotally from country to country, city to city, famous figure to famous figure, in a disjointed but engaging stream of narrative. His very style of writing is subversive of rigid boundaries and parochial fixations, being breezily popular in tone, ranging easily over stories from one side of the world to the other. One of the theses of his book is that 1968, or the eruption of liberatory social movements all over the world within several years of each other, was made possible by the relatively new phenomenon of television. "Television was coming of age but was still new enough not to have yet become controlled, distilled, and packaged the way it is today."<sup>8</sup> Without television, the three other factors that he thinks brought about a global '1968' could not have had the effect they did: America's civil rights movement would not have inspired people elsewhere in the world; "a war that was hated so universally around the world that it provided a cause for all the rebels seeking one"<sup>9</sup> would not have been broadcast to millions of homes; and "a generation that felt so different and so alienated that it rejected all forms of authority" would not have known that its alienation was global in scope, that people on every continent were rebelling against authority -- in imagined solidarity, as it were. By bringing visions of freedom to some homes and visions of savagery to others, television connected the world -- eroded national or regional traditions and authority-structures. In the end, Kurlansky's conclusion is that "1968 was the epicenter of a shift, of a fundamental change, the birth of our postmodern media-driven world."<sup>10</sup>

Richard Ivan Jobs writes in the same transnational spirit as Kurlansky but takes his analysis in a different direction: he argues for the importance of *travel* in breaking down national barriers. His argument focuses on European youth in 1968. "The events of that year marked a turning point in the emergence of a cohort of young people who had come, through travel, to conceive of themselves not merely as members of a

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<sup>7</sup> Timothy S. Brown, "'1968' East and West: Divided Germany as a Case Study in Transnational History," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 114, Issue 1 (Feb., 2009): 69.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Kurlansky, *1968: The Year That Rocked The World* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004), xviii.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 378.

particular nation, but as a continent-wide, transnational social group." Specifically, young people traveled between protest sites -- Berlin, Paris, London, Prague, and so on. Their experiences "helped to shape a politicized European identity."<sup>11</sup>

Jobs and Kurlansky illustrate another tendency of recent scholarship on 1968: rather than emphasizing the politics of that year, the political agendas of radical movements, it emphasizes the 'spirit' of 1968 -- "the transformed daily behaviors and interpersonal interactions that emerged during this period. Young people started to dress differently, they began to talk differently, and, yes, they had sex differently during the 1960s. The old ways never returned."<sup>12</sup> One author even titles his 2007 book *The Spirit of '68*. Actually, this book considers the political aspects of the movements in some detail, but it does so precisely to illustrate the spirit of 1968 -- the way of being, the zeitgeist that had emerged by the late Sixties. It was a cultural revolution. After considering the "medium- to long-term paradigm shifts in modes of interpersonal and institutional behavior and short-term material advances" that were achieved by young people and workers, the author concludes that

the most important rearrangements occurred on yet another, rather elusive, constantly shifting, and ultimately vanishing terrain: the concrete experience of a qualitatively different way of life, the exposure to non-hierarchical modes of social interaction, the lived environment of solidarity, the heated atmosphere of open debate, the concrete strivings for a common and mutually beneficial system-transcending goal.<sup>13</sup>

For Gerd-Rainer Horn, the basic meaning of '1968' (the concept, not just the year) is *participatory democracy*. This is the meaning of the student occupations of universities, the popular revolts against dictatorships in Spain and Portugal, the experiments in workers' self-management in France, the strike committees and factory committees in Italy and France, the 'alternative' free schools and universities throughout the West during the 1960s, and many other manifestations of the mood of 1968. Of course, Horn's interpretation is not particularly original. To say that the spirit of 1968 was participatory democracy is just another way of saying that it was freedom, liberation, people's power, democracy, and so on. The point, however, is that his emphasis on the 'spirit' of the year exemplifies a recent trend in scholarship.

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Ivan Jobs, "Youth Movements: Travel, Protest, and Europe in 1968," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 114, Issue 2 (April, 2009): 376.

<sup>12</sup> Jeremi Suri, "The Rise and Fall of an International Counterculture, 1960-1975," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 114, Issue 1 (Feb., 2009): 48.

<sup>13</sup> Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The Spirit of '68: Rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956-1976* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 194.

The subtitle of his book, which refers to the years 1956-1976, points to another trend: the placing of 1968 not only in a transnational context but in a broad historical context. This fits with the recent tendency to extend the 'Sixties' as a whole into the past and the future. For example, in her influential article "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past" (2005), Jacquelyn Hall argues that we should conceptualize the civil rights movement as having begun in the 1930s, with the culture of the CIO, left-led unions such as A. Philip Randolph's Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the Popular Front against fascism and conservatism, the Communist Party's interracialism, and the various political advances made in the 1940s (such as FDR's Fair Employment Practices Commission and Truman's desegregation of the military). The Cold War put a temporary halt to progress, but in the late 1950s the movement resumed. In the same vein, Gerd-Rainer Horn finds that the 'spirit' of 1968 extends back to 1956 in some respects and forward to 1976 in certain European countries. Artistic and dissident circles in the late 1950s and early 1960s, such as Beatniks, Situationists and the Dutch Provos, anticipated the youth movements of the late Sixties, while the actions of, for instance, workers in Italy and collectivizing farmers in Portugal, as well as the multitude of popular far-left parties in the West after 1968, extended the rebellious spirit of that year into the Seventies.

The central element of all these innovations in contemporary scholarship is the 'problematizing' of established narratives. This is the case in all recent historical scholarship. The rise of various kinds of social history, cultural history, and postmodernism, as well as society's globalization, has made old narratives seem trite and narrow. The civil rights movement did not start with *Brown v. Board of Education* and end with the passage of the Voting Rights Act; 1968 was not *only* 'the year of the students,' nor was it some sort of inexplicable ultra-leftist aberration. As we have seen, earlier scholarship, such as Chris Harman's, made some of these same points; they have since become, however, the mainstream of academic literature, not the exception. The goal of writers now is to upset our preconceived notions, to 'layer' our understanding rather than letting it remain flat and complacent. Thus, in "Japan 1968: The Performance of Violence and the Theater of Protest" (2009), William Marotti gives a subtle analysis of the role of violence in Japan's student and anti-war movements, while also indicating the importance of "strikes, seizures, marches, and rallies [in] broaden[ing] the scope of political participation and [creating] new forms of political activism."<sup>14</sup> Sara Evans likewise unearths new meanings of 1968 by analyzing constructions of gender that prevailed in radical movements, against which women reacted in the resurgent feminism of the 1970s. Hippie culture was relatively androgynous, men dressing and behaving like women as women dressed and behaved like men, but in most leftist

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<sup>14</sup> *AHR Forum*, "The International 1968, Part 1 - Introduction," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 114, Issue 1 (Feb., 2009): 44.

youth movements the men used their control of female sexuality -- their access to the bodies of young women in the movement -- as a way of flaunting their rebellion against the middle-class mores of their fathers and reaffirming their own hyper-masculinity. Eventually women in turn rebelled against their subordinate positions in these movements, and modern feminism was born.<sup>15</sup>

All these 'problematizing' features of recent scholarship are definite advances over older literature -- which, however, retains much value. The next step should be to fuse the best of the old with the best of the new. For instance, while Chris Harman's *The Fire Last Time* has flaws (e.g., a certain superficiality and a doctrinaire Marxism), its ambition of locating the origins of 1968 in the evolution of international economic structures is commendable. Too much of recent literature focuses on culture while ignoring the structural economic changes that underlay the ferment of the late Sixties, "the radical and youth movements of [which] time were harbingers of the globalizing dynamic that would characterize subsequent decades."<sup>16</sup> Economic dynamics are less 'sexy' than cultural ones but arguably more important. At the same time, the tendency of recent literature to study areas of the world that received scant attention in past scholarship on 1968, such as Latin America and Japan, is excellent and should be encouraged.

Even more ambitiously, it is perhaps time for some enterprising author to make an attempt at synthesis, at relating to each other all the best analyses and insights of the whole literature so that a comprehensive understanding is possible. Such a work would start with the 'foundations' of economic and technological change in the postwar decades and proceed to politics, systems of higher education, culture, and so on, illuminating how these spheres influenced one another and gave rise to the creative anarchy of the late Sixties. Part Two of this project would be to explain the dissolution of radicalism in the Seventies. Not the least benefit of such an enterprise is that it might provide lessons and encouragement to present and future radicals, whose task is no longer just to stop a particular war or help desegregate society but to ensure the very survival of our species in an age of world-upheaval.

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<sup>15</sup> Sara Evans, "Sons, Daughters, and Patriarchy: Gender and the 1968 Generation," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 114, Issue 2 (April, 2009): 331-347.

<sup>16</sup> "The International 1968, Part 1 - Introduction," 42.