

1968

End of an Era

Paul Berman

If you look back now that the left – the real classic left, not the left in some vague way but the real class left – was something that arose arguably in the French Revolution, but really it arose in the revolutions of 1848, which is exactly when the Communist Manifesto was produced. Other modern documents of leftism came out of that. I think if you look back on it now you can see that the history of that left – the real classic left – began in 1848 and it ended in 1968.

Immanuel Wallerstein

For me, 1968 is a historic turning point in the whole history of the modern world system. It's the end of the dominance of what I call the centrist liberal geoculture of the Modern World-System, which starts more or less in 1848 and ends in 1968.

David Nasaw

The spring of 1968 was a moment of hope. We thought it was the beginning of something big. We weren't the catalyst, but we were part of this large movement. In the end this movement would comprise suburban housewives and businessmen and black and Hispanic teenagers and women's rights groups and civil rights groups. Everybody, one after the other, would stand up against the war and it would be a democratic groundswell that would change the course of American history. We were extraordinary naïve. We had no sense of what the backlash would be against what we were doing.

Immanuel Wallerstein

Milton Friedman was thought of as a mad joke who wasn't taken seriously before 1968. Everybody was a Keynesian. But that centrist consensus just breaks down after 1968. The right is liberated, and so is the left. It's only after 1968 that in the United States and indeed throughout the world you can have the emergence of neoliberalism and neoconservatism. These are phenomenon that were made possible by 1968.

Martin Kenner

1968 was the culmination of anti-war demonstrations, SDS growing on every campus, mobilisation against the war, increasing demonstrations. I hadn't realised that this was what they say is a "blow-off top," the way an oil well will spume the most oil right before it runs out of oil. This was not the beginning of a trend, it was really the end of a trend. It was actually the end of a very liberal/radical era.

Paul Berman

A main foundation of world civilisation for more than a hundred years – the left, the real left, the classic left, the left that was expressed best of all by Karl Marx, that main foundation of civilization – was staging its last moment, when that left was going to count for something. 1968 was the last moment on a mass scale where you had a mass left that thought of itself in connection to that tradition. 1968 was finally the moment in which that collapsed.

Michael Steinlauf

This is the last time that anyone in our world took Marxism/Leninism seriously. That's it. We're kind of a footnote to Marxism/Leninism.

Paul Berman

If you look back on these demonstrations they led almost nowhere and achieved almost nothing in terms of serious institutional change. Capitalism was threatened for not one moment and none of the Guevaresque, Maoist or anarchist dreams were achieved.

Martin Kenner

The demonstrations a few years later were larger, but they were one-off affairs, and they were in the context of an expanding military might: bombing Cambodia and expanding the war. They were protests against expansion, while we felt we were part of something that was going on that was winning. The 1970/1 protests and activities were more like a defense movement.

Paul Berman

The uprisings of 1968 at Columbia and many other places were incoherent because the student leaders had at their disposal the archaic documents of Marxism, so the students were famous for giving preposterous sounding speeches, this unbearable wooden rhetoric pouring from the bullhorn. The students had inherited these old ideas which were turning to dust even as they were leading the uprisings.

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