

## 1968 and all that...

The Sixties — what caused them, and what were they? How did they end and what, if anything, has been their legacy? Where to start, eh?

Personally, I feel a strong sense of continuity between myself then and myself today — at least in terms of ideas, but like most anarchists I don't agree with the Whig view that history is a steady march of progress towards a freer and more just society. That clearly is not the case in post-Blairite Britain.

Looking back, the Glasgow in which I was politicised in the 1950s and early 1960s seems like a parallel universe when compared with today's post-Cold War, post-industrial society, with its global economy — and a precariat instead of a proletariat — hoodies instead of beatniks

I find it difficult to take the sixties too seriously. As I said, my political consciousness was formed more in the Fifties and early Sixties. And besides, when I talk to people who lived through the same period, they don't seem to be particularly aware of what was going on at the time — politically anyway. Their response helped me put things more clearly into context.

But the dogs have barked and the caravan has moved on... but where has it brought us?

Where did the radical movement of the sixties come from?

We baby boomers were the awkward squad of optimists and iconoclasts who were born into the Brave New World, which followed the Second World War, a war which began in 1936 with the Spanish Civil War, and which had been fought for high moral principles. It was a world for which so many people had sacrificed themselves in the previous two decades. We grew up unwilling to tolerate an imperfect world. We also had a strong sense of entitlement, and great expectations of a world in which anything seemed possible. We firmly believed that the onus was on us to ensure that the mistakes of the twenties and thirties weren't repeated. After all, we had the legal authority of the Nuremberg war crimes tribunal ringing in our ears that individuals have a moral duty to resist wrongdoing by states in pursuit of their domestic or global interests.

Throughout the Fifties the old order was being challenged and the social and political conventions, shaken by two world wars were finally crumbling. Communism was cracking up as evidenced by the popular uprisings in East Germany, Poland and Hungary — and of course by Khrushchev's revelations of the crimes of Stalin and Stalinism at the XXth Party Congress in 1956

In the so-called Third World — in Vietnam, in Algeria, sub-Saharan Africa and

South America — the anti-colonial and guerrilla movements were challenging the reactionary old regimes and brutal dictatorships.

Bursting onto the scene at the same time, however, was a new, effervescent, youth culture that allowed us to see ourselves, historically, as a distinct group — teenagers!

This manifested itself in all sorts of ways:

- in fashion – with the Teddy Boys and bumfreezer suits and winkle picker shoes
- in music, both rock 'n' roll and protest folk music;
- in literature, comics and magazines ... in came Holden Caulfield, Mad Magazine's Alfred E Neumann, and Private Eye and out went Biggles, Oor Wullie and the Sunday Post. Well, maybe not Oor Wullie, but certainly Andrew Glen and Black Bob
- and in politics with the emergence in 1958 of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament - CND and the annual Aldermaston marches — and of course the Direct Action Committee, which later became the Committee of 100 — and in 1960 - The Young Socialists, the Trotskyite dominated youth section of the Labour Party

But the fuel in the fire — in Scotland anyway — was the decision to locate US Polaris carrying submarines in the Clyde, Kennedy's Bay of Pigs fiasco and the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962.

As Norman Mailer said: 'The world stood like a playing card on edge while the superpowers played poker with humanity.' At that moment, for a week, people all over the world truly believed we only had days left to live before we were engulfed in a nuclear holocaust

It's from around this time, I think, that we can identify a marked shift away from passive protest towards increased revolutionary militancy and direct action.

Alongside this was the creation, in 1961 and 1962, of the so-called white-tile universities, many of which had a strong focus on social studies.

The rationale behind these new universities was to extend higher education and absorb young working and lower-middle class people into the system,

The unintended consequence of this policy was to create a seedbed of governability problems for the state, inasmuch as it led to an explosion in the numbers of highly educated, articulate and discontented young people with impossible to meet expectations of society and democracy — at least as far as the State was concerned.

These were to be the classes of 1967 and 1968. Many of whom shared a declining respect for traditional authority and were completely disconnected from party loyalties. Men and women were also being increasingly radicalised by America's war in Vietnam and were hungry for ideas and debate on direct democracy,

racism, sexism, self-management and extra-parliamentary politics. It's difficult to convey now the intensity with which life was lived at the time

It's obvious that Lord Robbins — the head of the original Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education — never saw Oscar Wilde's play 'The Importance of Being Earnest', in which Lady Bracknell declaims at length about the dangers of educating the working classes"

I won't even attempt the Dame Edith Evans accent:  
'The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately, in England at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square.'

The widespread collapse of deference was accompanied by a growing sense of alienation in people's everyday lives, which could be seen in films like Saturday Night and Sunday Morning. It was also described in the remarkably perceptive Situationist critiques of consumer capitalism produced in the mid-Sixties. There were also the insensitive housing policies with the building of vast impersonal high-rise housing estates that destroyed communities and showed little regard for the needs of the people who occupied them.

But it was the US's escalation of the Vietnam War in 1967 and 1968 that proved to be the catalyst for the explosion of social unrest.

The violent nature of the March 17 1968 anti-Vietnam war demonstration outside the US Embassy in Grosvenor Square was the Sixties equivalent of 9/11, at least in terms of the government response. By bringing home to the government mandarins that a genuine threat of revolutionary disorder existed in Britain it effectively changed the nature of protest in Britain.

As the New Statesmen put it... The British tradition of polite protest was past... Things could never be the same again, especially after the profoundly revolutionary and unpredicted Events of May in France, when the country was brought to a complete standstill and it seemed likely that France, as in 1789, was again about to erupt in revolution and counter-revolution.

By mid-1968 — for the first time since the 17th century — there was open talk in Britain of a military coup d'état and, with industrial decline, inflation and unemployment, nationalism, racism and fascism all re-appeared to heighten social tension. I must stress here that much of this tension was ratcheted up quite deliberately by the press, particularly the Times and the London Evening Standard, who were cynically presenting their readers with fabricated stories planted by the security services about activists plans to seize key government buildings.

As in Italy and in France, the officer class of the British army was also waiting in the wings. The Greek Colonels had already made their move in April 1967 round about the same time as the Italians had launched their Strategy of Tension. The Ministry of Defence was lobbying strongly through the Cabinet Office and joint police working parties to increase the role of the military in providing aid to the civil power to contain the growing sense of disorder— at least in terms of intelligence gathering and harassment and intimidation.

The argument, advanced by senior army officers such as counter-insurgency expert General Frank Kitson, was that the increased industrial militancy, protest activities such as those of the Spies for Peace, and the Committee of 100 and the anti-Vietnam war demonstrations, were not just 'subversive' or public order threats — they were the opening skirmishes in a revolutionary war which threatened the security of the state and prepared the way for open insurgency.

So what happened after the long hot summer and autumn of 1968?

My personal view is that the student-centric movement — which had provided much of the dynamic — peaked after May and the anti-climactic October 1968 demo and began to fragment into the alternative culture of the underground - the counter-culture. A lot of this had to do with the nature of the right wing backlash to 1968 and how various industrialised states responded to the threat presented by contestation. Some, responded with either the bloody strategy of tension — as in Italy — or else fell back on recession, democratic rollback and fear, by showing protestors that challenging the state was career-damaging as well as being physically dangerous and life-threatening.

I'm thinking here of the death of Benno Ohnesorg in 1967, the Kent State students in February 1970 and later the Red Army Fraction prisoners in Stammheim jail, and Bloody Sunday in Derry.

As happened in 1918-1919 after the hopes of European social revolution faded and reaction began to set in, the bubble just burst for many people, and with it went that sense of hope which had characterised the decade. The resultant polarisation led ultimately to the 'burn out' and atomisation of what remained of the 'New Left'. Many activists felt they had given everything they could — to no apparent effect. There was nothing further they had to offer without endangering their careers, their freedom and possibly their lives. They refocused and narrowed their political horizons away from the prospect of radical socio-economic change towards a politics based more on expediency and self-interest rather than fundamental principles.

As for the influential student leaders of the time, many of them such as David Triesman, Jack Straw, Kim Howells and Peter Hain disappeared into the smoke-filled committee rooms of the Labour Party, which was, as always, the home of

enthusiastic careerists rather than enthusiastic radicals. For them at least, the movement had degenerated into a means for the advancement of the few rather than the liberation of the many.

Even so, the radical movement did have its little victories — moral, educational and tactical - in consciousness-raising, creating an effective counter-force to the Vietnam War and helping bring it to an end. We highlighted the weaknesses and emphasised the dual standards of Western liberal democracy and the current limits of protest; we also subjected authoritarianism in all its forms, including sexism and racism to strong scrutiny which led to marked improvements in terms of racial and gender equality. But then again, that suited capitalism, which, unlike fascism, did not find racism or genderism particularly useful. It just wanted the best units of labour for the cheapest price - male, female, black or white.

What happened to that surge of fervent optimism and idealism that characterised the late 1960s, a time when people felt they were part of something bigger than themselves?

Clearly, many things have changed since then, notably the extraordinary growth in the power of the executive at the expense of individual freedoms; the disappearance of manufacturing industry and the neutering of the unions, the only serious force capable of providing the potential for collective action — and the only serious counter-balance to unfettered free-market capitalism and the state.

But perhaps the most noticeable change between then and now is the current apparent political indifference and lack of substantial numbers of committed people who are prepared to go out and fight for a better world — or even to defend their ancient hard-won liberties and challenge unjust wars, unjust laws and unjust practices...

Where are today's angry young people? They can't all have been muzzled by debt or seduced by the idea that freedom is somehow linked to property ownership. What if anything are they doing to vent their anger about Britain's criminal military adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan, the blatant infringement of habeus corpus, the stifling of free speech, the medievalising of the public realm with the so-called anti-terrorism laws which allow police officers to shoot suspects dead and detain people without trial, charge or even explanation. Or to halt the present onward march to an undeclared permanent state of emergency - and the constant, grinding erosion of our liberties

But idealism — the human search for something beyond ourselves, a star to follow — has not died, nor will it. You can see it today in the anti-globalisation, ecological as well as human and animal rights movements — even though they are still fringe activities – but then again, perhaps our activities in the sixties/seventies were

probably fringe too! Unfortunately, some idealism, has re-surfaced in the form of religion with fundamentalist Jihadist Islam. Who'd have thought forty years ago that religion would still be on the agenda? That too won't go away!

What about the legacy? It's difficult to say what, if anything, that might be. We now live in a disproportionately more authoritarian and socially controlled society than we did forty years ago, a big-brother world in which we are under constant surveillance and our civil liberties are being steadily eroded under the guise of preserving our liberty. I am reminded here of Goethe's dictum that he would rather choose to suffer injustice than countenance disorder. It seems we have sleepwalked into becoming a banana republic run by Taliban-like committees of public health and safety in which even personal lifestyle choices such as smoking, drinking and eating are no longer simply disapproved of, but criminalised. Brown's cabinet is even considering obliging our children to swear loyalty to the crown — just like the old days! — of the Killing Times of the 1680s

But I don't worry too much about it. As the American psychologist William James wrote "The ceaseless whisper of the more permanent ideals, the steady tug of truth and justice — give them but time — must warp the world in their direction."

It's always darkest before the dawn, and although I don't subscribe to the Whig theory of history I do believe, like Brutus, that our cause is ripe and there is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune.

The aspirations that moved *soixantehuitards* are much the same as those that have moved all rebel movements down through the centuries, from the slave and peasant army of Spartacus through the Diggers, Levellers and Cameronian Covenanters, to the Paris Commune of 1871, the Spanish Revolution of 1936 and the Zapatista movement of today.

These aspirations are inherent in human nature and can never be extinguished, no matter how brutal — or sophisticated — the repression. We just have to make sure that next time we float on a full sea at such a Spring Tide, we manage to take the current when it serves.

Stuart Christie  
Aye Write Festival, Mitchell Library, Glasgow  
March 13, 2008  
(Panel discussion on 'the legacy of the Sixties')