

1968 and the ongoing revolt against the masses

Fred Siegel

The events of 1968 came forty years after the publication of *H.G. Wells' The Open Conspiracy: Blueprint for a World Revolution*, which would be reissued three years later with the new title *What are We to Do with Our Lives*. Wells' tract was written on the Nietzschean assumption that a 'declaration of war on the masses by the higher men is needed.'

Both as novelist and prophet, Wells was an enormous influence on the development of modern American liberalism. Showing the way for the radicals of the 1960s, Wells, referring to blue collar workers, dismissed 'the facile assumption that the people at a disadvantage will be stirred to anything more than chaotic and destructive expressions of resentment.' But, he argued, 'lose that illusion (and) we clear the way for the recognition of an élite of intelligent, creative-minded people, they are the ones who can remake the world.'

Give the 'best and the brightest' their head, said Malcolm Muggeridge, mockingly expanding on Wells, and 'golden youths,' would 'live delectable amorous lives' of a heaven on earth. Let the people known today as 'the creative class' or the 'brights' rule, argued Wells, and man 'will not be left with his soul tangled, haunted by monstrous and irrational fears and a prey to malicious impulse. From his birth he will breathe sweetness and generosity and use his mind and hands cleanly and exactly. He will feel better, will be better, think better, see, taste, and hear better than men do now. His undersoul will no longer be a mutinous cavern of ill-treated suppressions and of impulses repressed without understanding.' Could any of the gurus of the 60s from Herbert Marcuse to Theodore Roszak have said it any better?

The 68ers – who like Wells despised the small suburban houses and all the petty people without 'proud dreams' and 'proud lusts,' 'all those damn little clerks,' who lived in them – were the heirs to his vision. For the forty years since 1968, the 68ers have carried the idealised image of that time, their own 'Open Conspiracy' against the masses and their conventions with them. For many, the image is as vivid as ever. Their only glimpse of utopia, it stands in their mind like a sand castle that has never

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been eroded by the tides, or like the varsity letter jacket of a high school athlete preserved spotlessly over the years.

68ers (and I am one of them) will rightly and proudly tell you that they broke down (or if they are modest and accurate helped break down) the barriers holding African-Americans, women and gays back from a better life. But this is only partly true, since in the course of using oppressed groups as their catspaws, they helped raise new barriers to African-American advancement. The 68ers were, their rhetoric notwithstanding, not so much anti-elitist as the vanguard of the Wellsian alternative elite. They both genuinely felt for the suffering of blacks and used them for their own advancement.

In *The Open Conspiracy*, Wells appealed to the authority of science as the alternative to the authority of tradition. But the discipline and rigour associated with science, even if only as a rational ideal, was subverted in the sixties as a threat to the sovereignty of personal experience. Instead, the black hipster was idealised as the avatar of heightened experience. The collateral damage was consequential. Blacks who finally had the doors of opportunity opened to them found that the very values necessary for success – thrift, self-control and personal responsibility – had been dispensed with, along with older illegitimate claims to white authority over blacks. In the world of segregation blacks, notes Shelby Steele, had personal responsibility without opportunity; under the new Aquarian dispensation, it was reversed and so, to a considerable degree, was black progress. The growth of welfare dependency, the collapse of the schools, the rolling riot of day to day violence produced, as segregation had not, the creation of a massive urban underclass. The intersection of Aquarians and African-American has produced an enduring tragedy. Forty years later, the black underclass has become a self-sustaining phenomenon. By and large, the riot-torn sections of the big cities hit by sustained violence have either never recovered, or have only begun to recover in recent years.

The same cannot be said of the schools in general and inner city schools in particular. The last thing minority kids needed was to be told of the virtues of spontaneity. The 68ers faith in theatrical confrontations as a source of authenticity, and the associated notion of learning as a form of enhanced awareness, took hold with devastating effects to this day. For upper middle class kids the deficit could be partly made up at home, but it left those most dependent on public institutions at an increased disadvantage.

There was a similar moral deficit when it came to foreign policy. The xenophiliac 68ers, could by and large, never grasp that there were two competing truths about Vietnam. Yes, we, the Americans shouldn't have been there. But yes, the Communists were brutal thugs. When after the war had ended and a million and half people went into the sea to escape the regime of the North Vietnamese Stalinists, the famously voluble moralising associated with the 68ers was replaced by sustained silence. Today, aided by the Bush administration's extraordinary meld of simple mindedness and incompetence, the 68ers are similarly unable to come to grips with Jihadism. Too self-absorbed to be self-reflective, they both denounce the neo-conservatives for assuming that everyone wants freedom and democracy, yet insist that we can negotiate without conditions with terrorist regimes on the grounds that we share a great deal in common.

Forty years later the hostilities of the 60s endure. When Barack Obama, the candidate of the by now sixty year old 68ers spoke of the 'bitter people' of small town Pennsylvania, he was in his own way replicating the hostility Wells displayed toward the 'little people.' It is those hostilities which in Hazlitt's words are the 'very spring of thought and action down to the present.'

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