

What made 1968 such an iconic year?

Obviously, it was a year of dramatic world-historical events. Through the year, we'll be getting retrospectives on the Tet offensive, the Prague spring, the Paris uprising and general strike, the Apollo missions to the moon, the Olympic games and the black power salute, the Columbia University occupation, the disruption of the Miss America pageant, the first of the Northern Ireland civil rights marches, the assassination of Martin Luther King, after which US cities were burning, the assassination of Robert Kennedy, the Chicago Democratic convention beset by rioting and repression, the election of Richard Nixon, the massacres of Mexican students in Tlatelolco and Vietnamese peasants in My Lai, the Warsaw Pact tanks on the streets of Prague, the poor people's campaign culminating in the Resurrection City occupation of Washington DC, protests all over the world against the Vietnam war. There was also the Chinese cultural revolution, the ongoing process of African decolonization and the military dictatorships in Spain, Portugal and Greece. And much more.

My focus will be not only on these events, but on the issues raised by them, on the movements animating them, on the rhythms of history pulsing underneath them. My aim is to articulate the zeitgeist, the temper of the times and to convey what it was like to live through those times.

In 1968, I was 24, a postgraduate, a university teacher and an activist in the US new left. My background was catholic and working class. I had entered the convent when I graduated from high school in 1962. The world as I saw it in my 1950s childhood was the best of all possible worlds. The US was the greatest country in the history of the world. The Catholic Church was a bastion the ultimate truths of the universe. I was true believer. It was so strong, so stable, so sure of itself. Until it wasn't.

In the 1960s, it all came unravelled.

Vatican II began the unravelling. What was absolute suddenly became relative. An atmosphere of fresh air and a process of questioning began and it took many beyond the bounds of anything even the most liberal elements in the church envisaged. It took me out of the church altogether. My crisis of faith shook me profoundly. My whole world view collapsed. At first, I felt as if I had fallen into an abyss.

In time, I built up a new world view, which was an excruciating yet exhilarating process. At first, I felt very alone in it, but I began to feel less isolated in my searching. Perhaps there was no better time for someone to go through a crisis of world view, because such crises came to be the agenda of the times. I had a sense of call and answer, a longing toward the world that seemed to echo all around me.

It wasn't only the church, but the state, and beyond that the whole system, that came into question.

The Port Huron Statement, the founding document of Students for a Democratic Society expressed what so many of us felt:

We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit.

It was the civil rights movement that opened the first cracks in the political edifice. When I first heard civil rights marchers singing "We shall overcome", and my whole being was with them, I saw it as a resolve to prevail over cosmic evil generally and southern racism specifically. At first, we saw the Kennedy and Johnson administrations as basically on the same side as ourselves and our political system as basically sound, if in need of serious reform. As time went by, it became the administration, the nation and even the system itself that we hoped to overcome.

Then there was the Vietnam war. It was so obviously an unjust war. Why did so many Vietnamese peasants have to die? Why was it the US underclass who were sent to kill them? We started with simple opposition to US policy on Vietnam and eventually many came to support the other side. Chants were no longer just "Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?" but "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, the NLF is going to win". Flags

of the National Liberation Front, the Viet Cong, began to appear at anti-war demonstrations. I was shocked at first, because I was just against the war, but that didn't mean that I supported the other side. Before long, I did.

Protests against the war became an integral part of our lives. The march on the Pentagon in October 1967 was like nothing I had ever experienced. There were more people than I had ever seen all together, as far as you could see in every direction. I thought that the power represented by the Pentagon had to crumble in the face of the power of the people who were converging upon it that day. No matter how naive that came to seem later, that was how it felt on the day. It did not come as a surprise that the Yippies failed to levitate the building, but it was a source of disillusionment over time that our voices had so much less impact than we felt they deserved. I still thought then that truth and justice would somehow prevail. I did not understand power.

1968 was a year of spectacular, often shocking, events. We beheld the ferment we were experiencing at home taking fascinating forms abroad. We cheered on the events of the spring of 1968 in Prague and Paris, although we sadly saw their efforts overtaken, as were ours, as the year wore on. The imaginative slogans of Paris, such as "All power to the imagination", lived on in our imaginations, even if the immediate promise of what we imagined then did not come to pass. In Prague, we watched an experiment in "socialism with a human face" unfold, which broke down our prejudices and raised our hopes, only to see it falter as well.

Nevertheless, the global momentum continued to build.

The election of 1968 was the first presidential election in which I was old enough to vote. I had longed to vote in 1960 and 1964 and supported Kennedy and then Johnson wholeheartedly. By 1968, my enthusiasm for electoral politics was already well past its peak. The voices articulating my sense of the world were all outside the electoral arena. Those inside it sounded so myopic, so compromised, so bland, by comparison. However, I supported Eugene McCarthy in the primary. I did not think that the entry of Robert Kennedy into the campaign was a good idea, as it split the anti-war vote, but I was stunned and saddened when he was assassinated. I beheld the protests on the streets of Chicago during the Democratic Party convention and was sorry that I could not be there. I found it amazing and appalling in that wondrous year of 1968 that our political system presented us with a choice between Hubert Humphrey and Richard Nixon and the election of Richard Nixon.

The consensus that characterized our youth was destabilizing rapidly. The discordant notes became more frequent and furious. A momentum had been building and gathering mass and velocity. Questioning that began in response to particular injustices swelled into a critique of capitalism, which saw racism, sexism, poverty and war, no longer as isolated phenomena that occurred in spite of the system, but as interconnected manifestations that emerged because of the system.

Movements mobilized for specific reforms converged and adopted the rhetoric of revolution. Peaceful protests erupted into increasingly bitter and violent confrontations. The opposition to the war in Vietnam turned into active resistance to the military industrial complex and all its works. We engaged in many forms of civil disobedience, whether minor offenses, such as marching without a permit or breaking through police lines or major ones such as refusing the draft or breaking into draft boards to destroy files, which carried substantial prison sentences.

For those of us who became part of this emergent new left, life changed suddenly and dramatically. There had been a profound shift of mood and it reached into virtually every corner of American life. No one could have been untouched by it. The American dream had suddenly become a nightmare, ironically, at the very peak of its material fulfillment. The polarization intensified and all the mass movements spawned increasingly radical successors.

It was nearly an atmosphere of civil war. Civil society was torn asunder. Families were split down the middle. We could no longer sit down cosily to thanksgiving dinner together. One year, in my family, it erupted furiously. It was not only the tension between my brother and I on the opposite sides of the barricades. He was in the army in a chemical and biological unit based in Thailand. It was a total clash of world views with one fault line after another opening up, with most of my family on one side and me on the other. I called them cozy, conformist and cowardly. I stormed out and didn't speak to anyone in my family for months after that.

The legendary 60s generation, don't forget, also included George W Bush, Donald Trump and many of our brothers, neighbors, cousins and classmates, who seemed oblivious to the tides of history that pulsed so powerfully through us. There were the fraternity brothers and sorority sisters, the jocks and the bikers, the hard hats cat-calling at passing feminists, the John Birch Society and the Young Americans for Freedom, who organized counter-demonstrations.

However, it was the new left who defined the decade, even if there were still flag waving citizens, who wanted the 4th of July to be the same as it always was. Although we lived much of our lives in our own enclaves, our own counter-culture, we could not ignore the dominant culture, which was still all around us. We sometimes felt like aliens in our own land, as we were shaken with an overwhelming revulsion for the culture which had nurtured us. We didn't want to live as our parents had. We rejected their gender roles, cultural conformity, and political passivity.

There was a battle of ideas and a struggle for power in the world and those of us who grew up together, sat in the same classrooms together, were on the opposite sides. The interface between them and us was becoming more and more extreme. It was increasingly marked by marches, occupations, denunciations, arrests, trials and prisons.

All the big questions were in the air and sometimes the answers too were there, blowing in the wind.

The folk music of the time resonated with such force. The songs of Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Simon and Garfunkel, Joan Baez, Tom Paxton, Pete Seeger and others converged to provide a fitting sound track to the times. The words seemed so much more substantial than those of songs we heard when we were young, such as "By the Light of the Silvery Moon", or even those to which our own generation rallied in adolescence, such as "Hound Dog", "Heartbreak Hotel" or "Blueberry Hill". The new songs were not just about one-to-one romantic relationships, but they seemed to reach down into the psyche and out into the social order. It was music that that undermined the existing order and incited to rebellion, rather than mooning and spooning and finding one true love and living happily ever after.

Movies too vibrated with meaning. The films of Ingmar Bergman, especially those dealing with faith and doubt, such as *Winter Light*, captured my existential dilemmas so artistically and appropriately. Some of the other iconic films of the era, such as *Easy Rider* and *Midnight Cowboy*, didn't quite get me as excited as others. I didn't identify with drug-dealing bikers and street-hustlers as accurately symbolic of the era as I was experiencing and conceptualizing it.

There were so many questioning and challenging books being published and discussed. *The Feminine Mystique*, *The Secular City*, *Labor's Untold Story*, *Vietnam Will Win*, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, *Red Star Over China*. These and others opened new horizons for us.

Television was the terrain of the enemy. We struggled to have our voices heard. Nevertheless, television did in its way convey something of the insistent questioning and sweeping social unrest that was changing the character of the social order, at least in news and current affairs, where it was impossible to ignore the death toll in Vietnam, the massive demonstrations at home, the draft resistance, the constant disruptions of virtually every type of institutional function in the country, even if these were often reported in a hostile and distorted manner. Nevertheless, our movement was there and television played a role in

spreading it. It had the feared contagion effect. "The whole world is watching" we chanted as police charged at us.

In contrast, television drama continued much as before. The police we encountered bloodying the heads of peaceful demonstrators bore little resemblance to those in *Car 54 Where Are You?* The military, who now pointed their guns at us, hardly endeared themselves to us in the way that those in *No Time for Sergeants*, *West Point* or *Men of Annapolis* once had. The judicial system, as we saw it in the farcical trial of the Chicago 8, was far from the inevitable triumph of truth and justice in the world of *Perry Mason*. In the face of priests and nuns leaving in droves, draft cards burning, black power militancy and feminist fury, *Bonanza*, *Bewitched* and *Beverly Hillbillies* seemed like something from another planet. In contrast to the dizzying kaleidoscope of images unfolding in the streets and on the news, it seemed absurd that *Search for Tomorrow* and *I Dream of Jeanie* should go on and on as ever. Television drama completely ignored the war in Vietnam, but it did come forth with a rash of war drama, much of it a vain attempt to recapture the world-war-two consensus for the war in Vietnam.

However, there were some changes coming even there. In the face of devastating criticisms of the moral and intellectual emptiness of American popular culture and the insistent demands for relevance, the networks began to cancel long-running series and to make some concessions to at least the superficialities of social change in new series like *The Mod Squad* and *Storefront Lawyers*. Programs such as *Rowan and Martin Laugh-In* with its irreverent humour went as far as network television dared to go at this point.

The mood on campuses was becoming more and more radical. Even those who did not join left groups came out to support numerous ad hoc activities: speak-outs, teach-ins, sit-ins, bitch-ins, draft counselling, brown bag boycotts, building occupations. The university felt the full pressure of the wider world upon it, not just in distant North Vietnam, but in its immediate surrounding community in North Philadelphia, where I was. The university became increasingly conscious of itself as a white island in a black ghetto. There were increasingly militant demands from black students within the university and the black community outside it, such as the creation of a black studies program, academic credit for community work and an end to university expansion into the neighborhood. Consciousness of the racialized character of poverty was heightening. It had consequences in crime and punishment. It was not by accident that the population of our prisons was so disproportionately black.

I was teaching on the day after the Martin Luther King assassination in 1968. The atmosphere was fraught. Students, especially black students, wanted to talk about it and not go about business as usual. It was impossible to do otherwise. Indeed, it was hard to talk about anything else anywhere on that day. We articulated our common grief in a cathartic class. I made other arrangements to make up the planned material. I pondered *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire and *The Wretched of the Earth* by Franz Fanon. I wanted my teaching to be liberating and transformative. I realized that decolonization of consciousness was a primary aim.

The whole texture of everyday life changed. Although I was supposed to be writing my PhD thesis, and I did try to keep it on track, the movement became a whole way of life for me. I was involved in meetings, marches, protests, strategic brainstorming and tactical tête-à-têtes, morning, noon and night. I was giving talks to small community and student groups as well as rabble-rousing speeches at mass demonstrations. I did a lot of writing, but it was more memos for meetings, searching letters about the nature of our movement, articles for left publications, notes for a book I never wrote, than a doctoral thesis.

Many of our activities in Philadelphia took place in Powelton Village, a city area bordering the campuses of University of Pennsylvania and Drexel University. We made the most of campus facilities, but we sided with local activists, however, in fighting the encroachments of Drexel and Penn into the neighborhood, entailing evictions of local residents. It was a racially integrated area. It was the site of communes, coffeehouses and

co-ops. It was the locus of many meetings and activities, many parties, including street parties. It was a centre of alternative culture. The whole country was full of such enclaves and experiments. There was a vibrant counter-culture of communes, co-ops, collectives, speak-outs, sit-ins, teach-ins, be-ins, die-ins, vigils, consciousness raising, street theatre, happenings, underground press and independent cinema.

There was a strong utopian dimension to our activities. There was a genuine groping to a new way of life, with much talk of a "new man" and the relationship between psychic and political liberation. The new man would not emerge *ex nihilo* the day after the revolution. We had to create a new society in the struggle for a new society. A liberation movement should itself be liberating. We were creating liberated zones.

There was a whole vast network of alternative institutions, which we saw as the embryo of a new society germinating within the shell of the old. This was the pre-figurative politics of the time. We thought that we should live as far as possible according to the norms of the sort of society we wanted to create. We saw politics as not just about seizing the commanding heights of economic and state power, but about everything, about a revolution in consciousness, about a transformation in the texture of everyday life. We believed in continuity of means and ends. We lived by different norms, making us put flowers in the barrels of guns, practice free love, renounce or suspend careers. We talked long into the night in an atmosphere in which everything was up for grabs, all philosophical assumptions had to be re-thought and all social arrangements had to be re-negotiated.

There was some tension between politicos and hippies, although the boundaries became increasingly fluid. Photos of left activities through much of the 60s show a clean-cut look with males even wearing suits and ties and females wearing dresses and high heels. As time went on, clothing became less formal, looser, wilder. A new vocabulary too came into use. We said: Let's rap. Dig it. Right on. Far out. What a rip off. What a bummer. The dude needs a crash pad.

We had a different way of occupying space. We sat on floors or on the ground rather than on chairs or benches. We slept on floors and on grass quite often too. When we danced, we did it all together, rather than in couples, to celebrate a wider love and larger vision. We papered our walls with political posters.

Although elements of a hippie lifestyle began to permeate the culture of politicos, even drug taking, there was still a notion among politicos that it was important not to sink into self-indulgence to the point of losing perspective and social commitment. Timothy Leary incited our generation to "turn on, tune in, drop out", but Tom Hayden warned of the danger of "creating islands of post-scarcity hedonism far from blood and fire of third world". I was on Tom's side there.

The Yippies (Youth International Party) aimed at a particular fusion of politics and counter-culture. They had done their time in serious left politics and moved to a more theatrical zany style of politics. They were into anarchism, rock 'n roll, psychedelic drugs, guerilla theatre, crazy costumes. They specialized in pranks, such as throwing dollar bills from a gallery on to the floor of the New York stock exchange and nominating a pig to run for president in 1968. They invaded Disneyland and occupied Tom Sawyer's island. They applied for a permit to blow up General Motors and, when denied, argued that it just showed that you couldn't work within the system to change the system. The most famous were Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, especially from their role as defendants in the Chicago 8 trial. Stew Albert ran for sheriff in California and challenged the incumbent to a high noon duel. Some Yippie women founded WITCH (women's international terrorist conspiracy from hell), bringing guerilla theatre into the feminist movement.

There was in the movement a strong sense of guilt about our privilege that played out in all sorts of ways, sometimes very destructive ways. Weatherman played a crucial role in breaking up SDS, raged through the streets and then went underground and bombed buildings to redeem themselves of their white skin privilege and bring on revolution. The guilt was also a source of accusation and counter-accusation at many meetings with conflicting factions that was ugly at times. It intensified with the rise of the black power movement with

black activists sometimes denouncing all whites and then the women's liberation movement with radical feminists denouncing all men, even those who stood shoulder to shoulder with them. However, it was most often well-educated white men denouncing each other for their privilege. There was a lot of more-militant-than-thou macho posturing. There was a lot of scurrying about in the blind alleys of identity politics.

We talked a lot about the relation of psychological and cultural liberation to political and economic liberation. We all felt it as a problem that we had to resolve for ourselves personally as well as with each other collectively. We believed that the personal was political. We were seeking personal liberation that would avoid the pitfalls of both apolitical personalism and impersonal politics. There was strong sense on the new left that we were legitimate agents of the historical process in our own right and not just allies of the wretched of the earth. We needed to liberate ourselves even to be any use to the liberation struggles of others. We knew, however, that we were children of privilege, especially when we looked at the lives of the oppressed, whether in our own cities or in the third world. In articulating the nature of our movement, there was constant tension between the liberation of others and ourselves.

We confronted those in power in an imaginative way that matched their moves to our counter-moves. The Nixon inauguration provoked a counter-inauguration. Federal grand juries incited people's grand juries. Their wanted posters provoked ours. We issued wanted posters for the president, the attorney general, the special prosecutor, the police commissioner. If the police could not be trusted to protect and serve, we would set up structures for community accountability of police. If the government would not make peace with Vietnam, we organized a peoples' peace treaty. We formed our own foreign relations, as we built our network of connections with liberation movements abroad. Some governments, such as those of Cuba and North Vietnam, dealt directly with our movement. If their newspapers and magazines presented a distorted view of the world, we would produce our own. We had *Distant Drummer*, *Free Press*, *Ramparts*, *Liberation* and many more. As the mainstream wire services wouldn't convey our truth, there was Liberation News Service. If the whole range of their media failed to represent the world as we saw it, we would make our own films and find openings to make our voices heard on radio and tv. If they persisted in parading women in beauty pageants, we crowned a sheep Miss America in Atlantic City.

We saw ourselves as making a long march through all the institutions of society: homes, schools, workplaces, neighborhoods. It was not just seizing control of factories or government buildings. It was a long, hard, intricate process.

Sexual identity was a constant theme in all of our movement organizations at this time. We believed that sexism had to be addressed seriously, both in how it played out in the wider society as well as in the movement itself. Some pushed for a separatist women's movement, but I saw the women's movement as a movement within a movement. I saw patriarchy as a powerful force, but not the primary form of oppression. I was focused on the relationship of gender and race and class within capitalism. I rebelled against received conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity. To be fully human was to be both rational and emotional, both logical and experiential, both political and domestic.

Many of us were moving between the academic world and the movement. The tensions and contradictions came into particularly sharp focus during academic conferences, where we formed radical caucuses. The conventions of the American Philosophical Association each year were sites of sharp confrontation between the academic establishment and radical academics. Initially the radical caucus was focused on passing resolutions protesting against war, prohibiting defense research and supporting Angela Davis. Angela Davis was a philosopher who had been fired for her radical views and then was arrested for implication in the kidnapping and murder of a judge. She was a major icon of the day, a face on many posters and t-shirts.

Such resolutions, we now argued, were not enough. It wouldn't do just to get philosophers to oppose the war and then keep on doing philosophy as before. We had to engage in a radical analysis of philosophy itself

and a critique of the sort of philosophy prevailing in philosophy departments. The profession was dominated by analytic philosophy, which we found increasingly sterile, irrelevant, even repressive. At a plenary session of the APA, I exploded at Arthur Danto and Sidney Hook, both renowned philosophers of the day, on their stance insisting on the political neutrality of philosophy. I argued that there was no neutral ground, that the whole capitalist economy, the whole bourgeois social structure, was grounded in certain thought patterns. Danto replied that it was necessary to separate a philosopher's work in his profession from his moral concerns as a man and as a citizen. I argued back.

At the American Historical Association, there were more dramatic confrontations, one involving a melee in which the AHA president fought to wrest the microphone from Howard Zinn. At the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the scientists were having the same arguments as the philosophers and historians. Some thought that politics should have no part in such proceedings, arguing that they might take positions as citizens, but could not let it interfere with the "objectivity" of science. Science for the People brought a more radical critique to bear. It was formed in Boston by Harvard scientists Richard Levins, Richard Lewontin, Stephen Jay Gould and spread from there. They had been refused permission to sponsor a seminar on the official program or even to set up a literature table. Nevertheless, they distributed copies of their manifesto, rented a suite in the hotel where they held unofficial seminars and strategy meetings. At official sessions, they spoke from the floor, particularly targeting ones on weapons research, and continued speaking, even when ruled out of order. Their efforts were supplemented by demonstrations organized by the anti-war movement against scientific support for the war.

So it went in other disciplines. The sociologists, economists, psychologists, litterateurs and the rest were all arguing for and against value free discourse in their disciplines. There was a Sociology Liberation Movement that opposed "fat cat sociology", value neutrality, emphasis on consensus and de-emphasis on class. They published several radical sociology readers. They produced a counter-convention newspaper at the ASA, which turned into a journal called *The Insurgent Sociologist*. Its editor, Al Szymanski, a big, energetic, intellectual powerhouse of a guy, held up a sign saying "bullshit" at any particularly objectionable statement made by a speaker at ASA conventions. It was, he explained, "an experiment in ethnomethodology".

Radical caucuses continued, but were soon supplemented with overlapping ones: women's caucuses, black caucuses, gay caucuses, third world caucuses. Journals multiplied: *Radical America*, *Critical Sociology*, *Rough Times*, *Radical Teacher*, *Review of Radical Political Economics*. URPE, the Union for Radical Political Economics, founded in 1968, still exists today, as do successor organizations of the various radical caucuses, such as the Radical Philosophy Association.

We came together under multiple auspices and in various venues to probe the interface between the movement and the university. We wanted our teaching to be truly transformative: to bring students to the point of liminal experience, to question received dogmas, to work out their own world views. We wanted to write books that would scrutinize the foundations of knowledge and advance knowledge in new directions. Our ambitions were boundless, even if our achievements, while considerable, hit against many boundaries. All this ferment left its mark on the mainstream curriculum. The demands for history from below, for black studies and women's studies mutated into labor history, gender studies, subaltern studies and many area studies. These were not easily won, but they transformed academe, so much so that they have come under waves of attack in the decades since then.

The "culture wars" resulted in real intellectual liberation as well as a lot of nonsense. I was uneasy with some ideas that took hold in the new left, particularly with the tendency to new age mysticism. I understood the need for a cosmic perspective, but I was critical of the gravitation towards eastern religions as a panacea for all that was wrong with western culture. I was regularly asked what was my star sign, as astrology got a grip. Some feminists got into a cult of goddesses. When some who had a track record as serious organizers, such as Julius Lester and Rennie Davis, began to drift in this direction, I worried.

I pondered and polemicized on these matters, from gender to geopolitics, and scurried around from city to city, campus to campus, group to group, trying to build our movement. I pursued this with an almost unbearable intensity at times. I surged from revolutionary exhilaration and then plunged into apocalyptic despair and back again. I felt the tide of history cascading through me. I was often emotionally overwrought and physically distressed. The constant movement from place to place, sleeping on floors and in cars, sometimes talking all night and not sleeping at all, eating whatever I could grab, maintaining a number of intense relationships, took its toll, but I kept going

So here we are in 2018, 50 years later looking back on 1968. I can't help remembering, not only 1968, but 1988, when there was much ado marking the 20th anniversary of that watershed year. There were some solid books giving sound and stimulating assessments of its meaning and impact. In the mass media, in contrast, there was a flurry of superficial and spurious assessments of the new left. Jerry Rubin's exhibitionist trip from yippie to yuppie received more media attention than all the serious work of all of others in the years since, who were still addressing the nature of the system and exploring ways to transform it. The lingering impression left by it all was of spoiled kids running on a rampage and getting high on the action, who grew up to see the error of their youthful ways and became prospering entrepreneurs and or else did not grow up and basked in anachronistic sixties nostalgia irrelevant to the subsequent decades.

The media consensus was expressed in a tone of affectionate derision, indicating that those who rose up at that time were now either trading on the stock exchanges or growing organic vegetables, either turncoats or dropouts. I did a study of images of the 60s in the 80s as it played out in television drama and all of these images were in play.

Looking back on this 1968-1988 syndrome, Daniel Bensaid wrote of the battle of memory between rebels and repentants: "The 68ers had reached their greying and bourgeoisifying forties ... Masses and classes were erased ... reducing the largest general strike in history to a juvenile prank or narcissistic wound".

The fact that there was and still is still so much fallout from 1968 it is itself a kind of victory. The year itself symbolizes the new left indicates the extent to which we set the agenda of the times.

So what did we accomplish? Not what we intended obviously, but not nothing either. We defined the era. We transformed the terrain in many respects. We played a part in ending the war. We were responsible for many reforms that have endured. We did not, however, make the revolution we envisaged. So many years later, knowing all that transpired in subsequent decades, it may seem crazy that we ever thought otherwise, but many things seemed possible then, even if they were not. A revolution was necessary, but not possible, we had to conclude eventually. We were not even able to translate massive social upheaval into a sustained political force. We were deserted by the opportunist, the cowardly, the faint-hearted, the flotsam that flow with every tide. We had our casualties and tragedies. We had our traitors too.

Nevertheless, most of those who were really committed then continued to be committed and found ways to advance the ideas and ideals formed in the 60s into subsequent decades. Sadder but wiser, we carried on. The system against which we set ourselves turned out to be far more formidable and durable than we thought.

We seized the intellectual and moral initiative. We shook up a very smug and stable social order, which would never be the same again. We challenged the hegemony of the dominant ideology and shattered forever the consensus of the fifties.

It is true that no government fell, but it is also true that no government has ever ruled in such an uncontested way as before. It is true that capitalism has prevailed and has shown itself to be a far more resilient system than we ever imagined, capable of restructuring itself and regaining lost ground on a scale we never could have anticipated. However, our critique of capitalism has not been refuted and massive disaffection still

simmers, which could flare up again. Briefly, during the occupy movement, we saw that on a global scale, but also in many forms of protest and resistance and alternative networks during these years of crisis. I saw this take particularly powerful forms in Greece.

It is true that we then lost that initiative and witnessed the aggressive re-assertion of all that we sought to undermine: the primacy of the free market, imperialist domination, traditionalist definitions of male and female roles, fundamentalist religion. However, the pendulum has not swung back to where it was and these areas remain contested terrain.

On this contested terrain grew crops we did not intend to plant. For example, I did not intend postmodernism to sprout from the seeds of doubt and disaffection that we sowed. Nor the call-out culture of narcissistic identity politics, privilege-checking, trigger warnings and safe spaces. Nor the alt-right nor the alt-light.

The legacy of the new left is contested and complex. It is a story of both victory and defeat. Our defeats were due, not only to the resilience of the capitalist system, but also to our own limitations and blind spots. Our movement splintered into bitter and opposing factions, each with its own set of particular limitations and blind spots.

As for myself, I took issue with the strain of anti-intellectualism, the cult of violence, the shambles of structurelessness, the romanticization of the third world, the indulgence of drug culture, the ethos of consumption versus production, even at the time. I did, however, share the general new left rejection of the old left, naiveté about power politics, ignorance of economics, suspicion of science and technology. I would re-evaluate on these fronts as the next decades unfolded.

I kept thinking over these past decades that the pendulum had swung as far to the right as possible and would soon swing back to the left again, but that didn't happen, not on that scale, not yet anyway, despite some significant surges in recent years. Those of us who rose up in the 60s and persisted through the half century since have navigated mighty historical waves, but we haven't yet come into port. We are still seeking, still sailing, still struggling for a better world.

This text was adapted from an inaugural lecture for a series of events marking 1968 sponsored by University of Limerick and City of Limerick. A longer version of this autobiographical history will appear in *Navigating the Zeitgeist* to be published by Monthly Review Press later this year.