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1968 and the Sixties

If we take “1968” relatively narrowly, then we mean the events that took place during that year, which means radical student upheavals in Western Europe and North America and the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia. I can't speak with any authority about the consequences of the latter: Did it push sociological theory to the right, to more conformist “Soviet Marxism,” or did it (also) have an underground effect, triggering the ruminations about humanistic Marxism and the revival of theorizing about civil society that began to appear in Eastern European social theory in the early and mid-1970s?

In the West, the events of 1968, again considered relatively narrowly, intensified what seems in retrospect to have been a counter-productive turn toward militancy and revolutionary Marxist-Leninism-Maoism. Young theorists of my generation – student intellectuals like myself at Harvard and Berkeley – came away from the uprisings and confrontations of 1968 with the idea that our capitalist democracies were teetering on the edge of revolution, and that physical, often violent confrontations with what Althusser called “the state apparatus,” if they were courageous and massive enough, could be successful in ushering in a post-capitalist order. This “68” produced the splintering of broad based student leftism into Maoist, even Stalinist factions that went back to orthodox Marxist thinking, leaving “New Left” ideas behind. I vividly remember reading the cover of the New Left Review when I entered graduate school at the University of California, Berkeley, in Fall 1969; it had the word “Militancy” splashed in large letters across its cover. In my view, these were dangerous and regressive intellectual developments. They made it very difficult for my generation of social thinkers to understand the nature of Western democracies, to see the possibilities of civil repair. They also created powerful right-wing backlash movements that took power for decades.

But if we understand 1968 in a broader metaphorical sense, as a sign standing for “the sixties,” then I see its effects in two, much more positive ways. Perhaps the broadest and most decisive effect for sociological theory was that the radical political and cultural experiences of this decade challenged scientism and evolutionism. Theorists in my generation were committed to normative and critical modes of thinking, to inserting the idea of a non-existent but still possible idea of utopia into any theorizing about contemporary societies. This is precisely, for example, what the theorizing of myself and Erik Olin Wright have in common. We were graduate students at Berkeley at the same time. Erik emerged as a Marxist, and I as a neo-functionalist,

and we both eventually broadened and changed, but our thinking was deeply effect by our theorizing about what Erik later called “real utopias.”

The other pervasive effect of the sixties was to create the intellectual conditions for the cultural turn in sociological theory. The experience of utopian communes, whether political or hippy, of “sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll,” of what many called the cultural revolution of that time – all these created a sensibility to the role of meaning-making and the arbitrariness of signifiers. It's no accident that cultural sociology was created by the sixties generation two decades later. And not only this new generational sensibility was involved. The cultural turn in sociological theory drew from radical new thinking in the generation that preceded us, and these figures were deeply affected by the sixties too. Victor Turner's theory of liminality/communitas drew direct inspiration from the sixties sensibility, but so, less directly, did the writings of Clifford Geertz and Mary Douglas. Robert Bellah's turn to “symbolic realism” was a product of the sixties too.