

# The History Guide

## Lectures on Twentieth Century Europe

### Lecture 15

#### 1968: The Year of the Barricades

*We are confronted with one of the most vexing aspects of advanced industrial civilization: the rational character of its irrationality. Its productivity and efficiency, its capacity to increase and spread comforts, to turn waste into need, and destruction into construction, the extent to which this civilization transforms the object world into an extension of man's mind and body makes the very notion of alienation questionable. The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment. The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed, and social control is anchored in the new needs which it has produced. ([Herbert Marcuse](#), *One-Dimensional Man*, 1964)*

*The revolution which is beginning will call in question not only capitalist society but industrial society. The consumer society is bound for a violent death. Social alienation must vanish from history. We are inventing a new and original world. Imagination is seizing power. (Poster attached to the main entrance at the Sorbonne, May 13, 1968)*

*For better or worse, most of what is presently happening that is new, provocative, and engaging in politics, education, the arts, social relations (love, courtship, family, community), is the creation either of youth who are profoundly, even fanatically, alienated from the parental generation, or of those who address themselves primarily to the young. (Theodore Rozack, *The Making of a Counter Culture*, 1969)*



Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s Europe recovered from the slaughterhouse that was [World War Two](#) (see [Lecture 11](#)). More than 50 million people died during that war and unlike the Great War, WWII was also responsible for the death of millions of civilians. However, unlike the generation of Europeans who managed to survive after the Great War, the generation that emerged from WW II could hardly be called lost. True, the [existentialists](#) (see [Lecture 12](#)) may have laid

claim to being yet another lost generation, but for the most part, the 1950s, thanks in large part to the role played by the United States, became an era of affluence and plenty. Germany recovered so quickly that today historians refer to its rebound as the "German economic miracle." And Germany's growth had the effect of stimulating renewed economic growth throughout most of western Europe.

The status quo of Europe and America seemed restored if not actually rejuvenated. [Adolf Hitler](#) and the Nazis had been defeated and the policy of mutually assured destruction (MAD) kept the Americans and Soviets from initiating a thermonuclear war. The armed forces returning to their homes in England, France, Belgium, America and elsewhere wanted to put the war behind them and get their lives back to normal. But the children of this generation, especially as they became university students, were apolitical and remained basically quiet. From the perspective of the past twenty-five or thirty years, this calm was deceptive. In actual fact, it was the calm before the storm.

The 1950s, whether we look to Europe or the United States, was characterized by consensus -- there was little need to see the world continually engaged in battle. American sociologists began to talk about something they called "the end of ideology debate", something which they deemed necessary in the age of the cold war. Of course, this was perhaps all clever rhetoric for the simple fact remains that this end of ideology debate took place in the midst of the Cold War, a war whose foundation was clearly ideological difference and hence, ideological conflict (see [Lecture 14](#)).

Regardless, these quiet times associated with the 1950s were good for morale. The generations who had fought in WW II had to get back on their feet. And so, Germany, France and England were rebuilt. Material wealth seemed to be increasing for most middle class members of American and European society. Technology had managed to create an automatic society and unemployment became less of an issue than it had been for perhaps the entire century.

But suddenly in 1967 and 1968, a wave of student protest movements broke out across Europe, Japan and the United States. And I need to stress here that this student protest movement was not solely American but global in scope. As it turned out, 1968, often dubbed the "year of the barricades" became one of the most turbulent years in western history since WW II. It is for that reason that the episode of 1968 deserves out attention.

In 1968, the entire post-war order was challenged by a series of insurrections from Berkeley to London, from New York to Prague. Oddly enough, the challenge was not successful, at least not in the period in which it actually took place. The true effects of the student protest movement were felt well after 1968.

1968 was a year of revolution. That's the year that John Lennon sang *Revolution*. It's the year that Grace Slick and the Jefferson Airplane sang, "Now it's time for you and me to have a revolution" from their album *Volunteers*. In a period of unprecedented material prosperity and cultural activity, the sons and daughters of the most privileged sections of the United States and of Europe decided to make their own revolution. They were the sons and daughters of the Left, better yet, the Old Left. Their parents, many of them at least, were either pink or red, that is, many of them were communists, socialists, Trotskyites, feminists, pacifists or just plain liberals. Their sons and daughters began to refer to themselves as the New Left. We'll return to this in a minute.

1968 was, among many other things, a moral revolt -- it was a revolt of passion in the interests of humanity. This revolt was generated by what they perceived to be their alienation from dominant social values, from the values of the power elites, the Establishment, the "It." Alienation is the keyword here. To be alienated is to be alone, to be isolated against your will. To be alienated is the sense of being outside, of being trapped outside. It was the feeling that you were under the control of an alien other which you simply could not identify. The Old Left did not understand alienation - - they recognized only exploitation -- the exploitation of the working classes by the wealthy.

As you may have surmised, the Old Left had strong Marxist and socialist roots. Many members of the Old Left also had strong Leninist and in some cases, Stalinist, roots as well. After all, it was this generation which had seen what a revolution had produced in the Soviet Union. But, the Old Left, at least in the 1950s, was willing to work within the system for radical social and economic change. The Old Left exhibited a passionate desire to end the exploitation of one social class by another but they were not willing to change the social order entirely. However much they wanted to free the working classes they remained reformist rather than revolutionary.

The New Left believed the Old Left had run out of steam. To use the lingo of the 1960s, the Old Left had copped out, sold out to the Establishment. So, the Old Left, rather than act as a direct stimulus to social change, by the 1960s had become an obstacle to such change. The New Left was indeed new. They believed in spontaneity and action. They distrusted the System. They hated the corporate world. It could almost be said that the members of the New Left were existentialist by nature. They wanted to unite humanity: male/female, black/white, Jew/Catholic, Protestant/Existentialist. And alienation was their motto. They were revolutionary rather than reformist.

In the vanguard of the year of the barricades were college students. That much should be clear by any brief review of the 1960s. But what were these students rebelling against? Why had the typically quiet 1950s suddenly burst forth with the student protest movements of the 1960s? Well, a partial list would have to include: representative democracy, big business, capitalist technocracy and the rule by experts, the Vietnam War, the effects of a media-manipulated society and in general, all authority. Why? What had all of these things produced? Was the world a better place in which to live? Or was something dreadfully wrong? The year of the barricades served as a symbol of everything an entire generation of young people detested about the generation of their parents: the "It," the System, the Establishment. They hated the late 20th century hypocrisy of material, bourgeois, liberal, consumerist western society. They hated their parents for consuming it. They hated their universities for teaching it. They hated their governments for murdering for it.

These students wanted their voices heard -- they were not content to let their hearts and minds be controlled by that alien other. The real danger was not the class struggle, as it had been for their parents. No, the real danger came from the "It," the establishment of consensus that their parents accepted. So, these students marched, demonstrated, they occupied administration buildings across Europe and the United States.

Who were these students? Were they courageous visionaries, or romantic utopians? Were they genuine revolutionaries whose battle cries were "make love, not war," "the whole world is watching," and "never trust anyone over 30"? Or, were they nothing more than spoiled brats who, with their ids denied, simply stamped their feet in unison as some sort of collective tantrum? Was 1968 a genuine challenge to authority in the pattern of a 1789 or an 1848 or a 1917? Or, was it nothing more than clever rhetoric designed for immediate hedonistic consumption?

Without looking at the causes of 1968, we are left with a movement which does look a great deal like juveniles in action. All this talk about "naked street theatre," street art, "turn on, tune in, drop out," "commodities are the opium of the people," long hair, [Bobby Seale](#), the Chicago 7, flower power, LSD and rock and roll all gave the movement a rather comical and less genuine flavor. Of course, this is the counter-cultural aspect of 1968 and as such, only part of the story. Well, think about it. Who were these kids? A bunch of white middle-class American and European kids -- kids who had little knowledge of poverty, deprivation, the Depression, unemployment of World War II. They were, collectively, a cross-section of western society that had missed the major events of the 1930s and 40s: Stalin, Hitler, the Depression, Fascism and WW II. They were a generation for whom history had literally begun in 1960.

The psychologists of the late 1960s attributed the student protest movement to something which [Eric Erikson](#) had identified as identity crisis. Most kids were trying to find themselves, they were

trying to create a unique identity for themselves and other like themselves. The only way they could do this was to rebel against everything that mainstream American or European or western society had deemed holy. As Erikson put it in *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968):

*The youth of today is not the youth of twenty years ago. This much any elderly person would say, at any point in history, and think it was both new and true. But here we mean something very specifically related to our theories. For whereas twenty years ago we gingerly suggested that some young people might be suffering from a more or less unconscious identity conflict, a certain type tells us in no uncertain terms, and with the dramatic outer display of what we once considered to be inner secrets, that yes, indeed, they have an identity conflict -- and they wear it on their sleeves, Edwardian or leather. Sexual identity confusion? Yes, indeed; sometimes when we see them walking down the street it is impossible for us to tell, without indelicate scrutiny, who is a boy and who is a girl. Negative identity? Oh yes, they seem to want to be everything which "society" tells them not to be: in this, at least, they "conform." And as for such fancy terms as psychosocial moratorium, they will certainly take their time, and take it with a vengeance, until they are sure whether or not they want any of the identity offered in a conformist world.*

This was and still is an intriguing analysis and sounded good as cover stories in *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines as well as the *New York Review of Books* and the *London Times*. But such a psychological perspective ignored a great deal of actual historical reality. In other words, there were real and vital events that fashioned the year of the barricades, both from the perspective of students and the media Establishment.

The most important factor for the students of either Europe or America was the [Vietnam War](#). Worse than a blunder, it was a crime. [Kennedy](#) and [Johnson](#) were to share near total responsibility for this war as was [Richard Nixon](#) after 1968. While young men burned their draft cards on the steps of their local Selective Service office, crowds chanted, "hell no, we won't go," or "hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?" The governments of Europe were to blame as well -- after all, Vietnam was a French problem before it was inherited by the United States. That cold warrior mentality viewed Southeast Asia as a breeding ground for international communist aggression.

The Vietnamese perhaps paid the highest price for the war -- but the cost in domestic friction within and between nations was perhaps even worse. Recall the statements of [George Bush](#) and [Colin Powell](#) during the "Desert Storm Show." They were so adamant that Kuwait not become another Vietnam. They were so careful to criticize all those who dared assert their criticism of direct US involvement. And the bumper stickers are still in place as a constant reminder. I don't recall seeing these bumper stickers back in 1968, do you? Furthermore, anti-war protest became one of Bush's strongest attacks against Clinton during the presidential elections in 1992.

1968 was a year of violence. And the violence of the Vietnam War era was reflected in the violence which began to emerge in Europe and America. So 1968 marked the year that both Bobby Kennedy and [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#) were assassinated. Who could forget the battleground which developed at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago? And what about the [My Lai Massacre](#)? Lt. William Calley oversaw the events as his GIs shot women, children and old men -- women were raped, bodies were mutilated and corpses were buried in mass graves. And the My Lai Massacre was only one of similar episodes that occurred in Vietnam. Meanwhile, the French government was temporarily paralyzed by the most severe social protest movement since the days of the [Paris Commune in 1871](#). Administration buildings at the London School of Economics were occupied by protesting students. And as all this took place, Soviet tanks rolled into Prague, and event known as the [Prague Spring](#). In Central Park in New York City, a 92 year old woman, a Quaker, set herself on fire in protest of the war in Vietnam. And 1968 was the year that Richard Nixon was elected President. 1968 was also the year that my mother began to send telegrams and

write letters to Nixon in protest of the escalation of the war in Vietnam. What was wrong? Why all this violence and protest? Why did it appear to European and American youth that revolution was the only way out? At bottom, it was the System, the Establishment, the "It."

Well, what was "It"? For youth, it meant blind obedience to all forms of authority. Sounds like modernism, doesn't it? Sounds like the Reformation. Sounds like a great many social protest movements of the past 2000 years, doesn't it? Instead of the tyranny of authority, which was the favorite battle cry of the 18th century, we know encounter the tyranny of repression. Youth suddenly realized that "It" would not let them be themselves.

During the 1950s and into the 1960s, the United States witnesses an era of conformity, almost of the variety [Ortega y Gasset](#) discussed in *The Revolt of the Masses*. The era was also one of prosperity and affluence, an era of material plenty. Television fashioned a new generation of media-manipulated consumers to a degree unmatched throughout history. "Ward Cleaverism" seemed to win the day. The governments of Europe and America became the "State," a Leviathan - a gigantic monster whose power was without limit and which seemed to say, "do as I say, not as you think." The universities, whether in New York, California, London, Prague, Berlin, Rome or Paris became knowledge factories and independent critical thought suffered a profound yet temporary setback. "These are your courses! Take them and obey!" Why else would so many administration buildings be occupied across Europe and the United States?

**Warsaw**, March 1968: a student demonstration leads to riots in the streets. March 13: all Polish universities are out on strike. Between March 13-24, there are more strikes, protests and marches. University buildings are occupied by student protesters. On March 25, Warsaw University fires six faculty members whose sympathies remained with the protesters. On the 28th, 3000 students march in protest. 34 are expelled, 11 are suspended, 200 are injured and 11 academic departments are closed.

**Rome**, March 1: 200 students are injured during a protest march. 19 of 33 Italian universities are affected by the riots which broke out in response to the Rome march and 23 buildings are occupied. The students demand (1) control over their curriculum, (2) control over the selection of new professors and (3) the student supervision of all grading. Why? Well, of 60,000 students attending all the universities in Italy, there were only 300 faculty members. In other words the faculty-student ratio was 1:200.

**Paris**, February 1968. Students strike at the Sorbonne. They demand an end to visitation rules. They also demand control over course content and the selection of new faculty members. In the streets of Paris, Molotov cocktails are heaved at the police. Students are beaten by police. 100s are injured and there were several deaths. Interestingly enough, 80% of the population of Paris supported the student protesters.

So, revolution seemed to be in the air, and it seemed to be everywhere. It became a moral revolt against consumerism and the fetishism of commodities. Why? What was so wrong about consumption?

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