

“The 1968 Exhibit” in Oakland: What was that year really about?

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A traveling exhibition developed by the Minnesota Historical Society in partnership with the Atlanta History Center, the Chicago History Museum and the Oakland Museum of California, at the Oakland Museum of California, March 31, 2012—August 19, 2012

A visitor hoping to get a new perspective on the political and social significance of the year 1968 from the current exhibit at the Oakland Museum of California will find that hope unfulfilled. The subject is a worthy one for a retrospective, but, while the exhibition has its entertaining aspects and is not devoid of interest, in the end it disappoints.

“The 1968 Exhibit,” running through August 19, is a largely myopic vision focused mainly on a US-centered representation of events and on surface appearances. Even within this limited scope, certain critical episodes worthy of exploration are presented as though there were no lessons to be drawn from the enormous experiences of the time and their consequences for the 21st century.

Overall, the feeling one gets from the Oakland Museum exhibition is one of *nostalgia*. It is as if the exhibition was designed to enable people who were young in 1968 to be wistful about their youth and the idealism they once imagined could change the world. The question of what led, in many cases, to the abandonment of those ideals isn’t broached. The displays are heavy on music, television shows, fashion and design and feature some entertaining interactive displays and trivia. But one wonders what today’s young people take away from it.

The exhibit seems to have relatively little to say to today’s youth about the squandered opportunities for profound social change. It offers no reflection, for example, on why the mass protest movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s shrank and eventually disappeared, without altering the political set-up in the US. In particular, it shies away from criticizing those movements for their unwillingness to break from the Democratic Party, under conditions of widespread disaffection.

In the introduction to the volume accompanying the exhibition, *The 1968 Project: A Nation Coming of Age* (\$25.00 in the museum shop), Brian Horrigan of the Minnesota Historical Society—one of the organizers of the traveling exhibition—argues that the year 1968 was

“momentous” and “transformational,” without, however, indicating whether these momentous transformations were for good or ill, or whether they had lasting value in advancing the general conditions of life.

It should be mentioned here that the book expands (somewhat) upon the subjects displayed in the exhibition itself. This would have been good to know before entering the exhibit. In the current economic situation, many of those attending, particularly young people and students, will not be able to afford the book. The expectation that every visitor would have the latter to fill in the blanks was a serious oversight.

The Vietnam war and the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, among the best-known events of 1968 in the United States, are given a large amount of space in the exhibition. However, other significant episodes are only given brief mention, aside from the fact that they involved young people and riots in the streets.

In France, in May-June 1968, ten million workers took part in a historic and earthshaking general strike, occupied factories and nearly brought down the government of General Charles de Gaulle, who fled to Germany. The Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in response to the mild reforms of Alexander Dubcek outraged people all over the world. Young people in particular identified with the suicide of student Jan Palach as the tanks rolled into Prague to crush demonstrations. As the antiwar demonstrators in Chicago chanted, while their comrades were being beaten up by the police, “the whole world [was] watching.”

Of course, the ongoing horror of the Vietnam war colored social life in the United States. Both the Tet Offensive and the My Lai massacre occurred in 1968. The military draft was sucking up all young men unable to get deferment, mainly through college attendance. Working class youth were disproportionately thrown into the meat grinder of Vietnam.

Therefore, it may not be surprising that the first thing one sees on entering the exhibit in Oakland is a reconstructed Bell UH-1 Iroquois “Huey” medivac helicopter, familiar to everyone in the US from the nightly news for its role in collecting the wounded and the dead in Vietnam. It dominates the exhibition hall. Inside, a television replays news stories from the period as they were reported live from the war zone. There are interviews with wounded soldiers and medical personnel against the background noise of the helicopter blades, a sound also instantly familiar to those who tuned the news in every night.

Of course, 1968 was an election year in the United States. In addition to those seeking the presidency in the two major bourgeois

parties (Lyndon Johnson, until he dropped out of the race, Hubert Humphrey, Eugene McCarthy, George McGovern and Robert F. Kennedy for the Democrats; Richard Nixon, Nelson Rockefeller and Ronald Reagan for the Republicans), there were a host of others, including arch-segregationist George Wallace of the American Independent Party; Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver for the Peace and Freedom Party, Henning Blomen for the Socialist Labor Party and Fred Halstead for the Socialist Workers Party (SWP).

Eugene McCarthy received support from youth and students largely based on his strong and vocal opposition to the Vietnam War. However, the real driving force of the Minnesota senator's campaign was the effort to block the emergence of a movement independent and to the left of the Democrats. Likewise with the campaign of Robert Kennedy, who also spoke quite eloquently about his revulsion at America's intervention in Vietnam. The assassination of his brother, President John F. Kennedy, five years earlier, had stunned the American population and was still vivid in its collective memory.

The Democratic National Convention in Chicago in August 1968 is chiefly remembered for the live television coverage of five days of police brutality against antiwar demonstrators, mainstream media reporters and television cameramen outside in the streets. While business went on chaotically inside the convention center, Chicago's Democratic mayor Richard Daley encouraged his police to go after press photographers and smash their cameras in an attempt to prevent the recording of the violence.

Despite the massive protests of the 1968 period and the general shift of the American population, especially its youth, to the left, the US ended up with one of the foulest, most depraved politicians at its helm, Richard Nixon, in January 1969. Through assassination and other means, American liberalism and reformism had been decapitated, and official politics was already moving sharply to the right, a process that has continued virtually unabated in the intervening decades. This goes unexplained in Oakland.

The failure of the working class to establish its political independence from the Democrats—a perspective vehemently opposed in the 1960s by the official anti-war movement, the “New Left,” the Communist Party, the SWP and others—helps account, above all, for the present situation in which millions in the US find themselves unprepared as of yet for the crisis of the world economy, the endless wars, fundamental attacks on constitutional rights and vast social inequality.

What made the year 1968 so historic, or more precisely, the period 1968-1975, was more than merely the *number* of major political events that occurred, but the fact of their *revolutionary nature* and *international interconnectedness* of these events and their political implications.

The promises of the postwar capitalist order, contrary to the assertions of endless sociologists, economists and assorted pundits, had proved false. The economic and social contradictions of capitalism, which the various global institutions and bodies set up after World War II had been established to regulate and suppress, burst to the surface, intersecting with working class struggles and producing a surge to the left.

The continued existence of the profit system was called into question in France, Italy and elsewhere. In Greece, Portugal and Spain dictatorships fell, amid massive popular movements. Enormous strike waves swept Britain—where the Tory government was brought down—and the US—eventually rocked by the Watergate scandal and the resignation of President Richard Nixon. In 1975, American

imperialism suffered a historic defeat in Vietnam.

If the system survived those years, it was principally as a result of the betrayals of the Stalinist parties, the social democrats and their “left” apologists. Not surprisingly, this perspective has not shaped the current exhibition at the Oakland Museum.

Many of the participants in the movements that erupted in 1968 made their peace with the establishment a long time ago, and even became members of it. Jerry Rubin turned stockbroker. Václav Havel became president of the Czech Republic, moving farther and farther to the right. Daniel Cohn-Bendit ended up a Green Party member of the European Parliament, supporting the intervention in Bosnia and other imperialist invasions. The ubiquitous Jesse Jackson, trading on his association with Martin Luther King, while having long since abandoned any trace of King's principles, has become a huckster of Democratic Party snake oil.

Others have made a good living as journalists for “left” and liberal publications, in the trade unions, in think tanks, on college campuses, etc. Many now support the interventions in Libya and Syria and still for Barack Obama, still trading on their “radical” pasts to bolster the myth of the Democratic Party as the “lesser of two evils.” In reality, they no longer (if they ever did) wish to associate themselves with popular struggles and instead devote themselves to diverting mass anger at injustice and inequality into protest politics and the Democrats' orbit.

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On December 24, 1968 the crew of *Apollo 8* transmitted the first pictures of the Earth from space. This breathtaking view of the planet should have slapped awake all who saw it with the fact that there are no national boundaries on planet Earth and that all of our evolutionary and social history occurred on this small bluish globe rising above the moon's horizon. It ought to have awakened a new conception of humanity's true position in the universe and how this material fact had finally, irrevocably, to be accepted as the basis for constructing our society in accordance with reality.

Instead, the Apollo 8 crew chose to read from the Book of Genesis! In the face of a stunning confirmation of the reality of science and the material world, the crew members' imaginations could go no farther than to repeat a creation myth from the time when primitive mankind found the forces of the universe to be unknowable and terrifying.

More fitting words while contemplating the Earth from space might be these, written by a 22-year-old Leon Trotsky while he was in a Siberian prison:

As long as I breathe I hope. As long as I breathe I shall fight for the future, that radiant future, in which man, strong and beautiful, will become master of the drifting stream of his history and will direct it towards the boundless horizons of beauty, joy and happiness! [1]

Note:

[1] “On Optimism and Pessimism, on the Twentieth Century, and on Many Other Things” (1901), as quoted in *The Prophet Armed : Trotsky, 1879-1921* (2003) by Isaac Deutscher , p. 45



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