ONE, TWO, THREE, MANY 1968S? A PANEL DISCUSSION

Normal Birnbaum, Patty Lee Parmalee, and Tom Hayden

To commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the events of 1968, the German Historical Institute Washington, DC, organized a panel discussion with three activists and contemporary witnesses: Norman Birnbaum, Patty Lee Parmalee, and Tom Hayden. The event, moderated by Philipp Gassert and Martin Klimke (both GHI), took place on May 14, 2008. The opening statements of the panelists as well as their responses to the moderators’ first questions are documented on the following pages. The GHI would like to thank the three panelists for making their contributions available for print.

Martin Klimke: Although the fires of the 1960s may have died down, the memory of that decade surely has not. The events of the metaphorical year 1968 and the decade in which it was embedded have long been overtaken by subsequent waves of historical and pop-cultural representations. This year in particular, the media attention, as well as the number of conferences, books, and lecture series dealing with ‘68 is at an all-time high.

Consequently, “1968” has, in fact, become a commodity that is on display in countless movies, musical references, and car commercials. As a veteran ‘68 activist in Uwe Timm’s novel Rot (Red) proclaims, “If there were a revolution today, people would think it was an ad campaign.” The most recent wave of memorial fervor seems to fully adhere to this principle. In accordance with the insight of one of the protagonists in Hans Weingartner’s movie The Edukators that “What used to be subversive is now for sale on the shelves,” the 1960s and 1970s have experienced a renaissance across the cultural spectrum from Prada-Meinhof fashion to the use of neo-Marxist vocabulary in descriptions of today’s globalization processes.

Of course, this renaissance has also engendered some ‘68 bashing among the protest movement’s erstwhile opponents. In Germany, the end of the Red-Green coalition in 2005 and Joschka Fischer—the supposed symbol of the ’68 generation—departing from active politics have turned into a swan song on this generation’s failure to transform politics and culture with the “long march through the institutions.” When drawing up a balance sheet on the political

1 Uwe Timm, Rot (Munich, 2003), 283.
impact of this very generation, Edmund Stoiber, in 2005 the leader of the Bavarian branch of the conservative party, underscored that this cohort had successfully replaced values such as “decency, loyalty, and reliability with egotism” and destroyed the “we-feeling” of Germans. For Stoiber, they had given rise to the maxim “To each his own and to me the most,” which after 1968, he claimed, became the governing principle in society. At the beginning of 2008, this love-to-hate discourse received a further boost with the by now infamous publicity stunt of historian and public intellectual Götz Aly, who compared West German student activists of the 1960s to the National Socialists of the 1930s in his latest book.

Anti-1968 sentiment has figured in public discourse in other nations, as well. French president Nicolas Sarkozy declared himself the representative of the silent majority in the last national election campaign, vowing to take on the legacy of May ’68. In Poland, President Lech Kaczynski recently broached the subject of his country’s anti-Semitic crackdown on its Jewish citizens in March 1968. Finally, in Britain, historian Michael Burleigh argued that “1968 was a narcissistic celebration of youth as opposed to such values as caution, responsibility, restraint and shame,” and that although “Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher may have won major economic battles with the unions or the Cold War with the Soviets ... they largely sold the pass in terms of ‘culture’, where the Left still exercises a compensatory ‘hegemony’.”

Yet such critical remarks, often acts of political posturing, tend toward a narrow, sometimes national view of the protest movements and fail to see the broader context in which they occurred. Interestingly, German chancellor Angela Merkel recently pointed this out concerning the current debate about “1968” in the Federal Republic, which she characterized as marked by a distinct provincialism. Recalling her own East German perception of the “profound atmosphere of departure” triggered by the Prague Spring, Merkel argued, “This movement existed in America, in France, in Germany, but also in Eastern Europe. Therefore, what I miss in the current debate is the positioning [of 1968] in international developments ... Germans should please not consider themselves so important and imagine that they invented 1968.”

That such national debates continue to be so insular, even after forty years, is striking. Only slowly is it giving way this year to a more global perspective that historians, activists, and adversaries alike have long...
recognized. As former British student leader Tariq Ali phrased it, "A storm swept the world in 1968. It started in Vietnam, then blew across Asia, crossing the sea and the mountains to Europe and beyond."

Moreover, in the impressive array of memoirs, interviews, and opinion pieces that appeared during or leading up to this fortieth anniversary, a more reflective and balanced tone can be discerned in comparison to earlier anniversaries—next to the traditional defiant posture, of course. As the Scottish journalist Magnus Linklater observed,

> It is easy to deride the middle-class rebels who wore Che Guevara T-shirts or worshipped Malcolm X before going on to hold down executive positions or comfortable professorships in the bosom of the Establishment that they had sworn to destroy. But if, by the end of that momentous decade, it was no longer acceptable for a police force to beat dissenters to within an inch of their lives or a communist dictatorship to crush freedom of expression under its boot, then they deserve some of the credit.

Even one of the most well-known representatives of the revolt, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, provocatively announced this year: “Forget it: 68 is over—buried under cobblestones, even if those cobblestones made history and triggered radical change in our societies! ... So, revisit 68? Yes, but only in order to understand it, grasp its scope, and retain what still makes sense today.”

And this is precisely what we have in mind for tonight. Our intention is not only to outline the battle lines and conflicts of the 1960s but talk about the lessons and legacies of this colorful decade. It is therefore a great honor to introduce three people who have agreed to share their memories and opinions with us tonight.

Our first panelist is Norman Birnbaum. He has been described as “one of the country’s foremost public intellectuals.” He has been active in progressive politics on both sides of the Atlantic, advising US trade unions, Robert and Edward Kennedy, as well as a number of organizations and political parties in Europe. From the late 1950s to the mid-1960s, he taught in England at the London School of Economics, at Oxford University, and at the University of Strasbourg in France. He is one of the founding editors of the *New Left Review*. He witnessed the creation of the British and European New Left first hand. Both during his time in Europe and after his return to the US, he played an important role as a link between the protest movements on both sides.

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of the Atlantic. Norman Birnbaum currently is University Professor Emeritus at the Georgetown University Law Center. He is on the editorial board of the *Nation* and is a regular contributor to American and European newspapers. He is the author of numerous publications, most recently the monograph *After Progress: American Social Reform and European Socialism in the Twentieth Century*. He is currently writing a memoir entitled *From the Bronx to Oxford and Not Quite Back*.

Our second panelist is Patty Lee Parmalee. She was active in the student movements on both sides of the Atlantic. A cofounder of the University of California-Irvine Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) chapter, she traveled to Berlin in December of 1967 to write a dissertation on Bertolt Brecht. Before she could complete her dissertation, she was swept away by the German student movement and became an activist in the German Socialist Student League (Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund, which shares the initials SDS with its American counterpart). Working with the American group “US Campaign to End the War in Vietnam,” she took part in various activities: She helped organize dissident GIs in West Berlin, went to Cuba as part of a German SDS delegation, and cofounded the first expatriate chapter of the American SDS in West Berlin. As she told me, in Germany she learned that knowledge of Marx could be used to analyze contemporary relations of power and thus be a tool for organizing. Patty Lee Parmalee has also taught comparative literature and social relations at the California Institute of the Arts and Ramapo College in New Jersey. She was the LA bureau chief and labor editor for the *Guardian* and a member of the steering committee of the New American Movement and the Union for Radical Political Economics. She is currently an environmental activist in upstate New York and serves on the editorial board of *Capitalism Nature Socialism*.

Our third panelist is Tom Hayden. According to the *New York Times*, Tom Hayden was the single greatest figure of the ‘60s student movement. He was a Freedom Rider in southern Georgia in 1961. In 1962, he was involved in drafting what would later become the founding manifesto of the American SDS, the Port Huron Statement. From 1964 to 1968, he was a community organizer in Newark, New Jersey. He also participated in the strike at Columbia University in April 1968 and the demonstrations at the National Democratic Convention in Chicago in August of that same year. For this, he and seven others were indicted in what came to be known as the Chicago Eight conspiracy trial. As part of his opposition to the war in Vietnam, he made
several trips to Cambodia and North Vietnam, including an especially controversial one in 1972 with his future wife Jane Fonda. After the war, he entered politics in California and served in the California State Assembly from 1982 to 1992 and in the California State Senate from 1992 to 2000. In recent years, he has taught at Pitzer College, Occidental College, and the Harvard Institute of Politics. He has written or edited fifteen books and hundreds of essays and op-ed pieces.

Now I will open the floor to the panelists. They will begin with a statement about their experiences of 1968, and then we will begin the question and answer session. Would you like to start, Norman?

**Norman Birnbaum:** I am very glad to be here with my old friends to participate in another one of those marvelous German Historical Institute activities that enrich the cultural life of our city. We are supposed to talk about experiences in ’68. At least in Germany, and to some extent elsewhere, the phrase “68er” [Achtundsechzigter] designates a common generational experience.

**Patty Lee Parmalee:** They call that the hippie generation here.

**Norman Birnbaum:** This is less the case here in the United States, where you can observe the precipitous flight of one of the presidential candidates from her own past. At any rate, I can’t claim to be a “68er.” I would rather claim to be a “38er.” This made some difference for how I lived through ’68 and the 1960s.

I was born in 1926. Once after talking at a major institute in a country that now lives on stronger than ever in memory, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), I was taken out to a (very mediocre) lunch at the Opera Café on Unter den Linden. My host (I think it was Otto Reinhold, then head of the institute, which dealt with ideological matters for party and state) said that he could not understand how an American knew so much about Marxism. I replied that I had had, for my period, a typical New York adolescence. I made the transition from Stalin to Trotsky at the age of twelve. I was at twelve in 1938, which was the year of the Munich Conference, the Anschluss of Austria, and of the winding-down of the Spanish Civil War. Also, it was the year of the final electoral defeat of the New Deal, when Franklin Roosevelt attempted to purge the Democratic Party.

It was quite a year to come to political consciousness. I think the long experience of that has shaped my perceptions and, indeed, shaped my
actions over time. I later saw both the consolidation and end of the New Deal in the emergence of the American warfare-welfare state. I had a perfectly good place to observe this transformation from—Harvard (with its near total integration both in actual governance and its exquisite practice of apologetics) between 1947 and 1952. Afterwards I had my first encounter with Europe. When I got there, I met the German Left in the form of [the Marburg political science professor] Wolfgang Abendroth and some of the survivors of the plot against Hitler. Not all of them, by any means, were on the Left. That was an encounter with a very different kind of conservatism than the one I had known in the US. It paralleled my learning about German Catholicism and Protestantism—strikingly different at the time from many American churches with their national triumphalism.

I then settled in England to teach. I participated in the beginning of the British New Left. Great Britain was, for once, in the second half of the twentieth century, ahead of its time: the British ‘60s began in the ’50s. The British New Left was attached to a large mass movement, namely, the first wave of protests against nuclear weapons in England, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). I think that experience of the British New Left, which had a troubled dialectical relationship with the Labour Party, had an effect on my later perceptions of things.

I also kept close contact with both Germany and France. From 1964 to 1966, I taught in France, where I had previously come to know the left Catholics, and, of course, a steady stream of intellectual migrants from the Communist Party. My colleague was the great senior, older French Marxist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre, who had long since broken with the sclerotic French Communist Party. Intellectually, the ex-communists were among the most interesting people in France. They covered an enormous spectrum. Furthermore, in the Soviet Bloc, I met dissidents and revisionists. In Eastern Europe, a great many people followed the activities that culminated in Western Europe in 1968 with great interest on television and in books, and eagerly and stringently questioned their Western friends about it.

Now, if you ask what lessons I drew from this, I think one of them was that even though these phenomena were international, they each had a particular national flavor and particular cultural accents. They each had a particular relationship to national histories, either long term or short term. The British New Left is inconceivable without the legacy of a certain kind of militant Puritanism in England. Obviously,
the French New Left was inconceivable without the whole French revolutionary tradition. And, of course, the West German experience was shaped by the memory of the years 1933–1945 and the disaster of the German Left in the Weimar Republic.

Similarly, I would say that, in this country, our own student movement, or rather the movements of protest, which united several very different streams—black protest, the civil rights movement, anti-imperial protest—did draw on moral traditions, sometimes unconsciously, sometimes transmitted by intermediaries of an older age. It did draw upon both American notions of progressivism and the idea of an open future, as well as on American religious or Christian traditions wherein the nation was the Church. Here in the US, those on the Left believed that the nation had to become a church of redemption. Perhaps that is why they often reverted to sectarian models of behavior.

After the excitements of the ’60s, I was convinced that the only path for reform in the foreseeable future was to join existing reformist structures and to begin working with trade unions, with Democrats like Ted Kennedy, and the Progressive Caucus in Congress.

What I took from this experience and particularly from the more exhilarating periods of the ’60s was a sense of the possibility of groups and persons developing historical creativity. There are situations that are historically open, not predetermined. Things erupt at different times as the result of an overdetermined sequence of historical causes. This leads me to think that ’68 can’t be repeated. It’s not a model for contemporary action—witness the utterly different tonalities of the present radical discussions in our country. On the other hand, the possibilities for openings should never be discounted. Those who seek a different society have to prepare themselves to be ready for those openings while doing the less exhilarating daily work of striving for reform in the unredeemed world. Well that’s that.

**Patty Lee Parmalee:** Well, that’s a hard act to follow. It’s kind of liberating to be able to talk about the ’60s because I’m forbidden to talk about this around my daughter. Every year, I go to an old New Lefties summer camp for a week with some friends and relatives. All the kids there always say, “Is that all? All you people want to talk about is the ’60s.” And every year we look for a theme and ultimately say: “Ah, why don’t we just talk about the ’60s again.” I think people are pretty sick of hearing about it.
On the other hand, I think that the younger generation is envious in some ways. They feel left out because this happened before they had a chance to run around in the streets and act crazy. Yet sometimes they are a little embarrassed that their parents were that crazy. But they wish they would see something like that come around again.

What I can talk to you about is the experience of having been on the ground in a local SDS chapter. This was at the University of California-Irvine in the year that university started, 1965. I came from the University of Utah the previous year, where I had organized a teach-in against the war in Vietnam. This was really early and in a really unlikely place. It was very successful, however. It turned out that there were a lot of professors against the war, even back then. Knowing that I was going to go to this new university that was starting up, I thought there should be some kind of student movement there. Somebody was going to have to start it. So I started thinking about what it ought to be.

I read an editorial in the *Nation* about the various different student organizations CORE, SNCC, etc. It mentioned that SDS was the only one that was multi-issue. And I thought: “Well, if we are going to have a brand new organization at a brand new place, it better be multi-issue.” That’s how I came to join SDS, reading about it in the *Nation* and deciding that it needed to happen in Irvine. It was pretty early, when Carl Oglesby was president of the American SDS.

I have just finished reading Carl Oglesby’s book *Ravens in the Storm*. He has worked on it for God knows how long. Looking back on what happened to SDS (it eventually killed itself), Oglesby seems to see the whole thing as a debate between himself and Bernadine Dohrn. There were a lot of other people involved, however, although you can see the different positions by looking at these two personalities. Essentially, Dohrn argued that all of our demonstrations, all our organizing on the ground, and all our community work had not stopped the war. She said that we needed to get serious. And to get serious meant being willing to participate in stuff like bombing.

I was of a different opinion. I always thought what was most important was to be able to reach as many people as you can. If you engage in scary tactics, then you scare off the public. And the public is who needs to be persuaded.
When I went to Berlin at the end of 1967, I immediately got swept up in the student movement. They were planning a big anti-Vietnam War demonstration. It was going to be preceded by what was essentially a giant teach-in. The German SDS called it the Vietnam Congress. They asked me to speak as a representative of US SDS. I called the talk “From Protest to Resistance,” stealing a phrase Students for a Democratic Society had been using to analyze its own current phase. For some reason, little though I knew about the German movement, I thought I (or, rather, US SDS) had a lesson to teach about being serious and moving the masses.

Little did I realize how much I would learn from working with the Germans for over a year. It was my first acquaintance with the use of Marxist theory for understanding the forces in one’s own society and developing a strategy. I was very impressed by the high level of debate in the endless, smoke-filled meetings. I was a little less impressed by the militancy of demonstrations, which, while exciting, ultimately seemed counterproductive. This was before Baader-Meinhold extremism arose, and also before the (quite different) Weathermen surfaced in the United States. Yet people everywhere were increasingly frustrated about being unable to stop this immoral war and were desperate to do something. Due probably to my wide-eyed curiosity and enthusiasm to attend every planning meeting I could, I was told at one point that I was suspected of being in the CIA. Back then (not so very long after World War II, after all), in the United States, Germans and Germany still represented evil, and I wondered who should be suspicious of whom. But I must say that the people I had the fortune to work with there were generally very accepting and helped me to find niches where I could be useful; it was, in fact, truly an international movement.

Tom Hayden: Thank you kindly for asking me to share. I’ve benefited very much from Martin Klimke’s work in Heidelberg and at the LBJ Library in Texas. The ongoing declassification of documents, which he has helped in, is essential to getting the history out for everybody.

The question asked was: What were you doing then? Forty years ago now, I was just recovering from the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. His murderer had fled to Canada and to Portugal with passports and money. Yet, he was continually described as another lone assassin. I was, of course, unaware that the murder of Robert Kennedy was coming just a few days later.
I had deep feelings about these murders because I had gone to the South, to Georgia and Mississippi, at the beginning of the 1960s to participate in the civil rights movement, the direct action movement, the voter registration movement, the sit-ins, and the freedom rides. I also had become a friend of Robert Kennedy. We had an ongoing relationship, and I tried to urge him to step up and to oppose the war in Vietnam. I think if he and King had lived, the ‘60s would have been another story. We would now know what might have happened if a progressive majority had come to power. We would also be able to answer the question of what you can do with political power under a President Kennedy advised and pushed by a Dr. King. A friend of mine told me with those murders we became not has-beens—that’s a phrase—but might-have-beens.

These murders killed off the possibility of this progressive majority, and history took a different course. That’s part of the reason people often think of the ‘60s as chaos: Murders, riots, sex, drugs, rock ‘n’ roll. There is that kind of a kaleidoscopic image of the ‘60s that does not help us to understand what the essence was. Rather, it is important to make a list of achievements to lift the image of chaos. Let’s make such a list before we go into the discussion:

Voting rights for Southern blacks and for 18 to 21-year-old Americans: that’s 27 million people who previously could not vote or who were not registered to vote; the Indochina wars were ended; the military conscription system, that is the compulsory draft, was ended; congressional checks and balances were placed on the FBI and the CIA, at least temporarily for about a ten-year period; the growth of the imperial presidency was checked; President Carter granted amnesty to 50,000 young Americans who had gone to Canada as draft and war resisters; the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) was passed—as a direct result, millions and millions of documents, certainly not all fully disclosed, revealing the secret operations of government have become available; the Roe v. Wade abortion or reproductive rights decision was made in 1973 as a direct result of the women’s movements and the general liberalization that came with the ‘60s; I would even include the environmental laws signed by Nixon—the establishment of the Occupational Safety Health Administration (OSHE), the Endangered Species Act, and the Clean Air and the Clean Water Acts, which were the strongest environmental laws passed to this point. Those were direct outcomes of Earth Day, a typical ‘60s event, in which 20 million people went out on the streets on April 22, 1970, after a movement was started by a handful of people just a year before.
I also would include the invisible but fundamental reform of what kids are taught in school and college. It may not be adequate, but that’s good. That’s why we have a once and future SDS here in the room. Then there was nothing like [the progressive historian] Howard Zinn—you could not read these things in the classroom. You read the classics. Maybe if you were a sociology graduate student like me, you could get a little into Marx. But basically everything that you considered relevant in life was excluded by definition from the school curriculum. To get it required demonstrations: In Berkeley, for instance, I remember participating in demonstrations that caused the National Guard to be called out for weeks. Helicopters sprayed CS gas on people; demonstrators were constantly beaten; I was arrested; different people were all arrested. What was it all about? It was about including Black Studies in the curriculum, Women’s Studies in the curriculum, Environmental Studies. All of these things that are now in today’s curriculum were put there by the crudest of methods, by social movements that forced universities to come to terms with their emptiness.

The list could go on: Two presidents were thrown out of office. You might think of the ’60s as not having accomplished all of these things. I am telling you, however, that until you think so, you won’t be able to reclaim this era. I’ll argue that the single most important reason that the ’60s ended, besides the simple fact of the calendar, is not the counterintelligence programs, not the faction fighting within the SDS. Although that is important, it was the assimilation by the political system and the culture of the core demands of the ’60s.

The ’60s ended when the ’60s won. Ever since there have been attempts to overcome and destroy the ’60s—usually during Republican tenure, during the Reagan period, in particular, and by so-called neoconservatives who have been running things just off the road from then until now in Iraq. That contingent, that faction, is a direct result of their hostility and hatred toward the ’60s; they’re still at it, and they will be for some time.

If you think there is a lot of attention to ’68 in 2008, just wait. Coming to your neighborhood culture center or historical institute: the fiftieth anniversary of everything that ever happened in the ’60s is about to begin. It will begin on January 1, 2010. Things being what they are, the fiftieth anniversary will be celebrated with more intensity than the fortieth, and this will go on for 10 years.
I have two more points to make in conclusion. Here is a question I have asked my friend Martin and many others: I don’t think we have come to terms with why the ’60s happened as a global phenomenon. My brief comment is that it was not like 1848. 1848 I believe, was Eurocentric.

**Norman Birnbaum**: Absolutely.

**Tom Hayden**: The ’60s were like nothing that had come before, which meant that it required some new means of communication, of course. I think it has to do with the institutions of the Cold War that organized the whole world into pro-US and pro-Soviet and China, Africa, Asia, Latin America. It excluded anti-colonial revolutionary countries or independence movements.

Even the beatniks in San Francisco complained about the stifling nature of the Cold War, which required repression, which required apathy, which required fear. I remember as a young boy I was constantly being sent under desks during the school day and being told by the school teachers that this would provide protection from an atomic bomb. This attracted my great interest: how would the desk prevent the blast, which we had all seen in movies and on television inflicted on Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

The question of why it happened is partly answered by the Cold War and partly, I think, by the peculiar nature of young people who came of age at a time when they dreaded the future being more of the past.

Everybody I knew in the 1960s had a problem with their parents: Their parents had not gone far enough; their parents had compromised. Where were the elders? It was not a youth crisis—it was an elder crisis. The absence of elders meant that people at my age—20–21—were thrust into leadership roles without knowing much about leadership, social movements, or history. It was because of the deficit caused by the elders, which I don’t want to see repeated.

I want to make one other point to bring us up to date: [Republican presidential candidate] John McCain was bombing North Vietnam in 1967; his history is in the 1960s. [Democratic presidential candidate] Hillary Clinton had just got out of Wellesley, where she was a rising student leader, a defender of the Black Panther Party, and all sorts of things that are not well remembered. Her roots were in the pragmatic wing of the radical feminist, countercultural, civil rights, and peace movements. And that leaves [Democratic presidential candidate]
Barack Obama. I am going to disclose something for the first time: He may run but he can’t hide from his ’60s origins as he’s learning more about his Hyde Park friends. There will be more to come about his associations with members of the Weather Underground, SDS, and Reverend Wright. Things that happened when he was five years old will come back to haunt him. They will, because it’s open, contested space. In about 1979–80, he was a student at Occidental College in Los Angeles. Barack was drifting and discovering his African-American identity; he was going through this process of post-adolescent identity formation. He came upon a table where students were distributing leaflets about a divestment rally from South Africa. They were Students for Economic Democracy, which was the student branch of the Campaign for Economic Democracy I was chairing. We were organizing on campuses the divestment movement from South Africa, which was wildly successful—far beyond anything we could have imagined. This encounter led to Barack taking a leaflet and giving the first speech of his life from that platform on the need for students to get organized and the need to divest from South Africa and apartheid. I know this story because I recently received an e-mail from the student organizer back then who wrote, “He’s transformational. I tell you this story: I saw Obama give his first speech, and it was spectacular. We began Barack Obama’s speaking career, signed: ‘Americans in Spain for Barack Obama: send money.’”

Philipp Gassert: Thank you for this excellent first round, which touched on many of the issues we would like to discuss tonight. Let me bring up an anecdote that was hotly debated in this recent presidential campaign. The remark that Hillary Clinton got so much criticism for: that it was Martin Luther King Jr. who moved ahead with the civil rights movement. But it also took a president to implement laws via Congress. That brings me to the question that I was hoping you would address and which Tom has already talked about in part: What was the relationship between the movement and the more established politics of the 1960s?

Norman Birnbaum: Despite the absurd reaction of some to her remark, Hillary Clinton was right that it took Lyndon Johnson as well as Martin Luther King Jr. to make progress in civil rights. We are sitting here in the GHI lecture hall under the portrait of Willy Brandt. In Germany, the nationally unique anti-imperial and anti-militarist and anti-revanchist themes and motives of 1968 flowed into the German version of détente, Ostpolitik. Ostpolitik not only stabilized
the situation on the border between the blocs; it also was a major pre-
condition of that sometimes gradual, sometimes sudden expansion
of political discussion and open political conflict in the state socialist
societies, which, in turn, made the events of 1989 possible.

Recall the not quite forgotten ideological discussions between the
Social Democrats of the BRD and the Socialist Unity Party of the
GDR, in which the Social Democrats were represented by move-
ment thinkers like Erhard Eppler and Johanno Strasser. Social
movements like those of 1968 do not necessarily end in immediate
political changes. They can be understood as shaping the attitudes
of the age cohorts who participated in the movements, indeed, who
collectively created these. The cohorts move on, circumstances
change, but possibilities ostensibly closed remain in their psyches
as something other than memories, as a reservoir of responses
which can be drawn on, reshaped, and reactivated.

**Philipp Gassert**: So how do you see the relationship between the
movement and established politics? Was Tom right about Nixon?

**Patty Lee Parmalee**: That’s a tough question. I was listening to
an interview that Amy Goodwin did with Gore Vidal this morning
on *Democracy Now*. He said at one point that the idea was that every
major movement against capitalism has only strengthened it. I’m
so glad that Tom gave that positive list. The same thing has been
said about the New Deal frequently. When the people rise and de-
mand that capitalism reform itself and it then does reform itself, it
becomes stronger because it needed those reforms.

**Norman Birnbaum**: And it is no longer the original capitalism.

**Patty Lee Parmalee**: Yeah, capitalism is a chameleon for sure. This
brings me to the point that we need to talk more about socialism.
In other words, capitalism can only reform itself so far, but it still
is the root problem.

**Tom Hayden**: Was Martin Luther King Jr. needed as well as Lyndon
Johnson? Yes. The way I would put it theoretically is that social move-
ments begin with outsiders at the margins in quite mysterious ways:
four students sitting at a lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina.
They didn’t act alone; they had conversations; they remembered things
that other people had told them. But at the end of the day, they did
decide to go there. They had no idea if they would be entering oblivion
or be thrown out of school. But they actually had even less of a concept that they would be entering history.

So it’s a mysterious process, but if the core demand resonates with enough people and if they can survive the initial opprobrium and repression, they will enter the mainstream. At least the demand will enter the mainstream, and, at that point, politics becomes involved because politicians will oppose them, support them, or try to come up with a compromised version. It’s inevitable because that’s what politics is. They’ll get to a point where their demand has majority support and, inevitably in our history, their demand wins. They then get disillusioned because they then think that capitalism has been strengthened. Capitalists are very unhappy because they’ve lost a lot of money and they’ve given people certain rights and protections that they didn’t have before. A counter movement always starts to try to undermine the gains of the movement.

So the thing that was wrong with Clinton’s formulation was that it was just a little too much of the “great man theory.” Did it take a president? Of course. Did it take Martin Luther King? Of course. But they were leaders of processes that involved millions and millions of people giving their time, going to meetings, writing leaflets, marching, getting their heads bashed in; some of them died. The way to look at this is that social movements eventually succeed and demobilize. The reason this is not apparent to us (and this is pointed out by Dick Flax, my old friend from SDS) is because the benefits of the social movement become a part of everyday life. You don’t even notice that the social movements have succeeded. As their activists retire back to everyday life to enjoy the benefits, the radicals are really frustrated: without them the movement never would have succeeded. But when it succeeds there is no justification for their radicalism any longer, not on a mass basis. Radicals become stranded, unless you believe more thoroughly in reform, and this is something we need to ponder.

**Philipp Gassert:** Is that something that you were aware of at the time, this dialectic between the movement, radicals, and the established political forces? Or is that more of a historical insight?

**Tom Hayden:** No, this was the early SDS view.

**Norman Birnbaum:** I first met Tom in September, I think of 1962. You were in Ann Arbor. I was then making a kind of pilgrimage, a visit, to the United States as the resident American of the British
New Left, which was much read about. I had the impression that the American New Left was very much aware of its organic connections to the union movement and to the possibilities of the Democratic Party. The latter had just been enlarged by the Kennedy presidency, and therefore this dialectic [of established politics and the movement] seemed to be present.

There is another dialectic, a historical one. Christopher Hill, the great British historian of the seventeenth century, wrote a book called The Experience of Defeat. What happened to the Fifth Monarchy, what happened to the left wing of the Cromwellian revolution after the Restoration, and how did that go into English and British culture? They were on the margins, yet they permeated the culture. They affected the emergence of the so-called Country Party in England, whose ideas directly influenced the American Revolution. Some of these processes take a long time; some can be grasped immediately.

Patty Lee Parmalee: I remember that we endlessly talked about reformist reforms versus revolutionary reforms. We tried to figure out which reforms to work on, and when to enact them so that they would lead to further attempts at reform rather than just be an end in themselves. I remember the eight-hour day was an example that was always given because workers would then have more time to talk about politics after they finished working.

Tom Hayden: Marx didn’t create the Soviet Union, but he had a hand in the eight-hour day. Right, there is no question that that was one of his principle demands, in addition to his support of workers’ strikes. It was a very revolutionary demand at the time, and it became the foundation for social democratic parties and labor unions. It was achieved, and it remained a consensus in certain countries for about fifty years. But then you notice a countermovement. The eight-hour day didn’t really make workers want to be more radical; they were relieved that they didn’t have to work sixteen hours per day. And now you see the countermovement—in the States you’ll face this immediately, and in Europe. Few people remember the eight-hour day. They’re all working more than eight hours. The demand has been slowly eroded. But nobody ever announces on behalf of the establishment, “We have ended the eight-hour day during my term in office.” Though it’s been gradual, they have. The eight-hour day is a memory now, and people are just trying to get back to ten or nine.
Martin Klimke: Two final comments before we open the floor: The three of you have all been very positive in terms of the establishment response and the way protest finds its way into society. As you know, Marcuse wrote about the phenomenon of “repressive tolerance.” This is something I want to toss out here, that there is an alternative view about the “success of protest.”

Furthermore, when we talk about the 1960s, we always seem to talk about the New Left and the protest movements on the Left. You mentioned the arrival of the neoconservative movement, which also had its roots in the 1960s, with Barry Goldwater and the New Right. It could be a question of discussion here: Are we leaving that particular story out? Because the New Right learned a lot from New Left tactics and grass-roots organizing. But now, I would like to thank the three panelists and invite people in the audience to react to our discussions and ask questions.

Norman Birnbaum, University Professor Emeritus of Georgetown University Law Center, witnessed the creation of the British and European New Left first hand and provided an important link between protest movements on both sides of the Atlantic.

Patty Lee Parmalee was a student activist in both the US and West Germany in the late 1960s. Currently, she is an environmental activist in upstate New York and serves on the editorial board of the international journal of theory and politics, Capitalism Nature Socialism.

Tom Hayden, very active in the US student movement in the ’60s, was involved in founding the American SDS. Today, he continues to be a social and political activist, as well as a politician, educator, and author.