

# Democracy Is in the **STREETS**

From Port Huron  
to the Siege of Chicago



**James Miller**

With a New Preface by the Author

# “DEMOCRACY IS IN THE STREETS”

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From Port Huron to  
the Siege of Chicago

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JAMES MILLER

*With a New Preface  
by the Author*

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FOR ALEXANDER, MICHAEL, BENJAMIN, AND THEIR GENERATION

"Men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes, turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name."

—William Morris, "A Dream of John Ball" (1886)

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# **PREFACE**





## PREFACE

# THE 1960s IN THE 1990s

It was an age of courage and folly, of darkness and light, hope and despair. At marches and demonstrations around the world, the forces of order shot tear gas and bullets. The forces of disorder responded with bricks and Molotov cocktails. In Vietnam, a brutal war raged on; in the United States, killers stalked the tribunes of the people. Facing chaos, two presidents—Johnson in America, de Gaulle in France—flinched. Anarchy seemed the order of the day. "Everyone instantly recognized the reality of their desires," a French activist declared, describing the confrontation between protesters and police in Paris on May 10, 1968, the "Night of the Barricades," perhaps the most impressive of the era's outbursts of anger at civilization and its discontents. "Never had the passion for destruction been shown to be more creative."

For those protesting, the turmoil was intoxicating. Thrilled by the prospect of change, young people plunged across the frontiers of experience, boldly exploring altered states of consciousness, new types of bodily pleasure, nonhierarchical forms of community. Like Marx and Nietzsche before them, they dreamed of creating new men and new women, undivided, without shame, each one in tune with a unique constellation of animal instincts and creative ideals.

"God writhes in his bonds," wrote Norman Mailer, evoking the millenarian mood in *The Armies of the Night*, published at the height of the revolutionary euphoria in 1968. "Rush to the locks. Deliver us from our curse. For we must end on the road to that mystery where courage, death, and the dream of love give promise of sleep."

It is hard, in the sobriety of hindsight, to credit sentiments like these: out of context, they sound exaggerated, mannered, baroque, entirely *too much*—excess being one of the most salient features of the era. And as that edgy and agitated era recedes into the past, its intoxicating aura of turmoil inevitably dimmed, it has left behind a puzzle and a mystery. Why did countless young people throughout the world experience a kind of political exaltation at roughly the same time? And what (if anything) of lasting value came out of that exaltation?

At first glance, particularly for anyone coming to the topic without prejudice, it is tempting to conclude that little of consequence actually happened. At the height of the decade's turmoil, in 1968, there was a lot of loose talk about new beginnings. Three decades later, such talk rings hollow. The world did not begin anew; and neither did the lives of most men and women.

Perhaps the colorful mass movements of the 1960s, then, were mere theatrical happenings, full of sound and fury but signifying nothing—at least, nothing properly political. That would certainly explain why young people in America today, if they know anything about the era, apart from a handful of facts about Kennedy and Martin Luther King, are most likely to know something about the music of the time, from the Beatles and Bob Dylan to the Doors and the Grateful Dead.

Indeed, by almost any conventional measure of political achievement, the radical student revolts of the 1960s were a more or less spectacular failure. Few leaders of lasting prominence emerged from these movements. Many of the most important organizations of the era—including the one that is at the center of this book, the American Students for a Democratic Society—cracked apart quite quickly in the early 1970s, plummeting into a deserved historical oblivion as one after another self-styled guerilla warrior turned to grotesquely counterproductive acts of terrorism.

But that is not the whole story. For the sixties witnessed a real revolution—not a Marxist-style revolt of the oppressed (which some students deluded themselves into believing they were helping to provoke), but rather an uncanny, indeed all but unprecedented spiritual uprising by the relatively well-off. Repelled by the emptiness of social roles they felt obligated to fulfill, as well as a burden of guilt that struck them as both needless and misdirected, young people questioned public authority and attacked their own inhibitions, developing a shared conviction that another form of life—freer and more just—was possible.

Vaclav Havel, the playwright and dissident who helped lead Czechoslovakia to independence in 1989, and who experienced some of the headiest moments of the sixties in both Prague and New York City, has memorably described how the ethos of the era, ephemeral though it was, nevertheless marked him for life. "I think everybody must have been intoxicated and delighted by what was happening," Havel has said. "Just think of it. Suddenly you could breathe freely, people could associate freely, fear vanished, taboos were swept away, social conflicts could be openly named and described, a wide variety of interests could be expressed, the mass media once again began to do their proper job, civic self-confidence grew; in short, the ice began to melt and the windows began to open."

When I set out to write this book a decade ago, I found it perversely hard to conjure up, and make credible, the elation and shared sense of moral seriousness that Havel evokes, and that I recalled from my own experience of the time. As a topic, the sixties remained largely untouched, perhaps because the volatile climate of the time seemed so elusive, so hard to grasp. No world leader dared speak in Havel's terms. Few historians paid much attention.

Since then, a number of young researchers have added much to our detailed knowledge of the period—and inevitably led me to have some second thoughts. If I were to start over again, for example, my book would certainly lay more stress on the nature of the debt that white students owed to black civil rights activists, a debt whose moral and spiritual terms are beautifully conveyed in *Parting the Waters*, the first volume of Taylor Branch's magnificent biography of Martin Luther King, Jr. I would also want to emphasize more forcefully how *unrepresentative* most of the characters in my story really are. Tom Hayden looms larger in this account than he ever did in practice, even in those events he helped to shape directly. Besides, the point of his guiding ideal, participatory democracy, was never to produce celebrities (even though it did): it was, rather, to nourish a shared commitment to thoughtful citizenship and collective action.

But the gravest omission in my text may well be cultural. Given the political focus of my narrative, it was all but impossible to convey adequately the era's carnivalesque atmosphere of confusion—an air of chaos that was, depending on one's aspirations, either fearful or liberating.

Consider some of the main cultural benchmarks of 1968 as it unfolded in America. Everybody, of course, has by now heard a lot

about this *annus mirabilis*, if only because it was the year “the sixties” came to a shattering political climax. It was also, not by coincidence, the year that products from the so-called counterculture—roach clips, tie-dyed shirts, records by the likes of Janis Joplin—became widely available over-the-counter, joining the other commodities crowding America’s cultural marketplace.

Not that older Americans were paying much attention. In 1968 there was still a gap—a generation gap, it was said, though it was more than that—between the feverish experimentation centered in the youth culture and the events and artifacts deemed worthy of coverage by the nation’s mass media. If parents watched the nightly news, they could see terrible things, like the police chief in Saigon during the Tet offensive pulling the trigger on a suspected Vietcong: while the cameras rolled, the victim collapsed, a trail of blood blackening the pavement. Murder was that easy.

Then again, if parents just waited for prime time they could almost ignore the rage and rancor in the air altogether. It is worth recalling that the top-rated television series for the 1967–68 season was “The Andy Griffith Show,” which offered America the image of Mayberry—a town without crime, policed by men without malice.

Still, by August of 1968, it had become hard to block out the rumors of apocalypse. In those days, the Republican and Democratic conventions pre-empted prime-time re-runs; like it or not, many Americans saw the confrontation in Chicago between protesters and police. And the mainstream media, awakening to the possible political implications of cultural phenomena they had previously ignored, also began, belatedly, to broadcast news of a new sensibility. The talk of Broadway in 1968 was *Hair*, which some people took seriously as an example of “tribal love-rock.” The talk of Hollywood was *2001*, a plotless but visually ravishing blockbuster that invited viewers simply to gape in wonder.

Looking back, it is not surprising that one person’s intoxicated self-discovery should appear as another person’s desecrated faith. For how could the moral universe of Mayberry ever be reconciled with the revelry of *Hair*—let alone the melee in Chicago?

Making sense of the sixties depended on one’s cultural perspective. The typical George Wallace voter and the Bob Dylan fan lived in two different worlds. The popular culture of the time did not produce a single dominant style or shared aesthetic. What created elective affinities around the world among a handful of influential musicians, moviemakers, and political activists (and touched a witness like Vaclav Havel) was rather a shared *spirit*: fluid and amorphous,

impatient and impassioned, obsessed with the *new*, the unprecedented, the unthinkable, and willing to try almost anything to realize it.

In America, the great prophet of this spirit was Norman O. Brown. "There comes a time—I believe we are in such a time—when civilization has to be renewed by the discovery of new mysteries," Brown declared in a Phi Beta Kappa address at Columbia University in May 1960, deliberately echoing Ralph Waldo Emerson's critique of the American Scholar one hundred and twenty years earlier. "There is a hex on us, the specters in books, the authority of the past; and to exorcise these ghosts is the great work of magical self-liberation. Then the eyes of the spirit would become one with the eyes of the body, and god would be in us, not outside. God in us: *entheos*: enthusiasm; that is the essence of the holy madness."

The holy madness—and the promise of "magical self-liberation"—is certainly what Bob Dylan's music contained in 1966, the year he recorded *Blonde on Blonde* and toured with the Hawks, playing music that was "very dynamic, very explosive and very violent," as Robbie Robertson, the band's guitarist, later recalled. A similar sort of ecstatic derangement flared up in the fiction of Thomas Pynchon (*V* was published in 1963); in the free jazz of John Coltrane (*Ascension* was released in 1965); in the stagecraft of Peter Brook and Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade* (1967); in a film like Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend* (1967); and, in bright day-glo lettering you couldn't miss—in some of the era's greatest rock anthems, including "Light My Fire" by the Doors (1967) and "Sympathy for the Devil" by the Rolling Stones (1968).

The student politics of the era were of a piece with this unfettered cultural spirit, helping to shape it, and being shaped by it in turn. "All power to the imagination" was a slogan of French radicals, but it can stand for the American student movement as well.

In the event, empowering the imagination proved to be no easy—or innocent—matter. The protests, like the artworks that shared in their mad embrace of the new, often enough climaxed in acts of spectacular destruction. Struggling to set their wildest fantasies free, musicians, movie directors, and student radicals all tried to lay waste to some part of the old order: no more melody, no more narrative, no more governing structure; no taste, no reason, no law and order.

But at its best and bravest, this will to destroy was also a will to create, clearing a site in order to build something new. The spirit was one of harrowing experimentation, risky, dangerous, vibrantly alive—if only with the gnawing fear that some of these prodigies

of uninhibited freedom might also produce prodigious messes, which they predictably did.

Given the bloodshed and terrorism that marked the end of the sixties, it seems fortunate that its animating cultural spirit should have been, by design, ephemeral—a matter of shifting impulses and fleeting desires. The disorder that produced marvels also produced monsters—as the story told in this book will show.

And yet for better or worse, something of the spirit of that time lives on, not least in the world of rock. Provoking a genuine cultural revolution, the movements of the sixties were instrumental in producing the extraordinary freedom of mores that now characterizes most Western societies. And this revolution is far from finished. The wish to pioneer new forms of personal freedom and citizenship still informs some sectors of the women's movement, the gay movement, and the green movement—though it is a constant temptation of the contemporary American left to evade the burdens of open debate through the imposition of speech codes and the pieties of the new academic etiquette. Indeed, it is in Eastern Europe that the dreams of 1968 most vividly live on, especially in the political vision of Vaclav Havel, a leader far more attuned to the wild hopes and mystic chords of those memorable months than his generational peer Bill Clinton.

It is true, of course, that conservatives in the United States continue to use the imagery of 1968 against professed liberals like Clinton. The political and cultural turmoil of the sixties still vividly conjures up a Manichean threat to the old-fashioned values of family and flag; and Andy Griffith's *Mayberry* testifies to the popular longing for a kinder, gentler America.

But listening to a song like "Sympathy for the Devil," and pondering, too, the sometimes frightening nihilism that was an essential facet of the student movement that my book describes, I cannot help thinking that our culture, like our political life, would be richer if we would stop trying to run away from the recklessly questing spirit that informed the artworks and activism of that era.

Something of value did happen in the sixties. New voices were heard, new forms of beauty appeared. And most of the large questions raised by that moment of chaotic openness—political questions about the limits of freedom, and cultural questions, too, about the authority of the past and the anarchy of the new—are with us still.

January 1994

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