



AND THE CROOKED PLACES MADE STRAIGHT

THE STRUGGLE
FOR SOCIAL CHANGE
IN THE 1960s

2ND EDITION, UPDATED | *David Chalmers*

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David Chalmers

Second Edition

UPDATED



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And the Crooked Places Made Straight

For Jean

I will go before thee, and make the crooked places straight: I will break into pieces the gates of brass, and cut into sunder the bars of iron.

—Isaiah 45:2

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plains and the crooked places will be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

Washington, D.C., August 28, 1963,
transcribed by David Chalmers

Editor's Foreword

Proximity to the past tends to fragment time. Inevitably, it seems, we calibrate our recent history by decades. We speak of the forties, the fifties, the eighties, and so on. Such splintering provides convenient boundaries for some simple level of understanding. Historical processes, unfortunately, are not so orderly and do not dramatically alter with the passing and beginning of a decade. But occasionally, a particular time frame provides a convenient shorthand for describing a unique series of events that had important ramifications beyond the immediate time segment.

The 1960s witnessed profound changes in American life, certainly ones that sharply differentiated the society from what it had been a decade earlier. David Chalmers has given us a thoughtful, incisive account of those momentous events—the civil rights movement, the assault on poverty, the student rebellions, the development of a counterculture, a new wave of feminism, and, pervading so much of all this, the veritable civil war at home over the Vietnam War abroad. Chalmers's graceful narrative is sharpened with his sensitive, informed portraits of both famous and lesser-known persons who left an indelible imprint on the times.

A generation and more later, the meaning of the sixties remains contested ground. Was it a moment of idealism, springing from the spontaneous enthusiasm and energy of people struggling to gain control of their lives? Or was it a veritable lark of self-indulgence by comfortable elites? Undoubtedly, the times had elements of both. The legacy, too, is ambivalent. "Much from the decade remained," as Chalmers writes; yet much was forgotten and even angrily repudiated. For some, much of the next two decades can be read as a conscious repudiation of the excesses; yet, who can deny the existence of a new national consciousness on issues of war and peace, race, gender, and class?

Without doubt, the powerful, convulsive political and social movements of the time commanded exceptional national and international attention. Succeeding generations must measure and evaluate those events for themselves. Perhaps the moral and ethical concerns of the period have faltered and waned over time. But any fair evaluation,

of course, obligates us to consider the events in their context and on their own terms. David Chalmers has done exactly that in an account that is at once compassionate and involved, yet sustained with a critical historian's perspective.

Stanley I. Kutler

THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN

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Portions of the account of the life of Martin Luther King Jr. in chapter 2 are based on my review in *Southern Changes* (August 1987).

Introduction

The history of the 1960s is to be found in the names of places: Montgomery, Greensboro, Birmingham, Selma, Oxford and Philadelphia (Mississippi), Memphis, Dallas, Port Huron and Berkeley, Haight-Ashbury and Woodstock, the Bay of Pigs, Saigon, Khe Sanh and My Lai, Watts and Detroit, Chicago, Kent State and Jackson State. The social agendas of the sixties were not set in New York and Washington, but worked their way up from distant places and from the streets of the cities across America.

The dominant Western versions of social change are incorporated in Marxism and Christianity. In the 1960s they were embodied in the concepts of “structure” and “consciousness,” whose clash and comingling ran through the politics and turmoil of the decade. For Karl Marx, the material conditions of life defined the arena of social existence. In his *Critique of Political Economy* (1859) he wrote the classic lines, “the mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness.” Although there is room for growth and diversity of social institutions and ideas, basic needs and economic conditions shape their acceptance and use. Social change would come with the construction of new institutions that adjusted behavior and beliefs to the realities of the productive system. Attitudes would respond. Structure would command consciousness. The classical alternative is the primacy of consciousness: only when people’s values are recast can their basic behavior be changed. “Except a man be born again,” Jesus taught, “he can not see the kingdom of God.” To be free externally, you must be free internally. The conversion experience is the change in consciousness. The “New Jerusalem” is the product not of a new technology or a new building code, but of a new way of seeing the world.

At the beginning of the 1960s, the Prohibition experience of the 1920s was frequently introduced into discussions of race. The nation went dry, but people remained wet. The way the argument went was that laws could not change people’s beliefs and prejudices—and, therefore, their behavior. President Eisenhower often commented privately that the school desegregation decision *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) was a mistake that would set back progress in the South at least

fifteen years. "I don't believe you can change the hearts of men with laws or decisions," he said. Martin Luther King Jr. responded to such arguments when he offered testimony to the Massachusetts legislature on the power of laws. "It may be," he told them, "that you can not legislate morality, but behavior can be regulated. It may be true that the law can not make a man love me, but it can restrict him from lynching me, and I think that is pretty important also."

Particularly for King, however, the attack on American racism sought to change people's ways of thinking and feeling. The combination of nonviolent confrontation and Christian love was aimed at black pride and white guilt. The willingness to accept punishment for refusing to obey unjust laws was a psychological weapon to bolster the self-image of blacks and to put pressure on whites to face the evils of a system of racial dominance and subordination. Out of an awakened sense of injustice would come the institutional changes that would sweep away segregation and open up equal opportunity for all. That restructuring of society would in turn change behavior. If people were judged by the quality of their character rather than the color of their skin, racial prejudice itself would disappear.

Basically, the civil rights movement sought to reach through conscience to consciousness, through consciousness to institutional change, through institutional change to behavioral change, and through behavior to consciousness. The 1960s was particularly marked by the extent to which this strategy emerged as the chosen path. King led his people through the streets of Montgomery, Albany, Birmingham, Selma, and Chicago to appeal to the consciousness, first of the South and then of Washington, D.C., and the nation. The neatly dressed students who "sat in" at the lunch counters of Greensboro and other Southern cities had only the power of making a statement. Subsequently organized as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), they came to believe that the white consciousness in the deep South was a killer. SNCC undertook to build both a new consciousness and an independent institutional base within the black communities of Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama. When the strain became too great, SNCC gave up its organizational effort among the Black-Belt poor and lost its way in a search for Black Power consciousness in the urban ghettos.

Broadly speaking, the campaign against poverty also meant a major shift in consciousness. During the 1930s, society had faced the problems of economic depression, but the idea that the government should—or, indeed, could—undertake the eradication of poverty was new. In *A Thousand Days* (1965), his memorial history of John F. Kennedy's presidency, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. indicated the psychological underpinnings of the undertaking. Giving credit to two widely read

contemporary social critiques, he wrote that John K. Galbraith's *The Affluent Society* (1958) had "brought poverty into the national consciousness" and that Michael Harrington's *The Other America* (1962) had "placed it on the national conscience."

The manifesto-writing members of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the anti-Vietnam War demonstrators chanting "Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?" were reaching for the same consciousness levers of change that the army did when it spoke, unconvinced and unconvincingly, of winning "the hearts and minds" of the Vietnamese people. The mantras and acids of the counterculture were seeking a consciousness breakthrough, and the counterculture itself was a cumulation of shifts in personal and social values. In consciousness-raising groups across the country, women were concluding that all aspects of their lives were defined by their gender, that the personal was political.

Never before in American history had there been so much conscious talk of raising and changing consciousness. Writing at the end of the sixties, the Yale law professor Charles Reich and the hard-nosed New York City political scientist Andrew Hacker deduced conflicting American futures from the changing social values. In *The End of the American Era* (1970), Hacker lamented the changed consciousness of a people who were no longer willing to sacrifice and accept class discipline. In contrast, Reich's best selling *The Greening of America* (1970) celebrated that refusal. A liberating, new "Consciousness III" was changing America from a controlled, uptight, production-oriented society into a relaxed, anything-goes, counterculture world, which was emerging "out of the wasteland of the Corporate State, like flowers pushing up through the concrete pavement."

The sixties was a decade in which group consciousness emerged among blacks, the poor, the young, students, women, gays, Hispanics, and Native Americans. There was a civil rights revolution, an assault on poverty, campus unrest, an antiwar movement that sometimes threatened to become an insurrection, and an apparent cultural disaffiliation of the young that seemed to challenge the moral values of American society. The spreading contagion of social dissent placed great strain on American institutions. What was going on in the streets of the nation raised doubt about the assumption of American liberalism that an unseen hand would guide the diverse efforts of a pluralistic society toward a greater social unity. However challenging the new ways of looking at the world might be, their long-run effect would be determined largely by the ways in which they were translated into both national and local organizations and institutions that would shape governmental and social behavior.

Behind the headline events of the 1960s, there was both a replace-

ment of local standards and ways of doing things with more open, national ones; and a search for grass-roots participation and community, a dialectical interaction of changing consciousness and institutions, and the explosion of classic social questions into politics and into the streets of the Republic.

At the beginning, there was no question about what was important. In an afternoon meeting the day after Rosa Parks had been found guilty of not getting up to give her seat on a bus to a white man, Martin Luther King Jr. was picked to head the hastily formed Montgomery Improvement Association. Only a few minutes later, the young minister addressed the several thousand people crowded into the Holt Street Baptist Church and massed around the loudspeakers outside:

If you will protest courageously, and yet with dignity and Christian love, when the history books are written in future generations, the historians will have to pause and say, "There lived a great people—a black people—who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization." This is our overwhelming responsibility.

By the end of the decade, there was great confusion. Malcolm Cowley, the dean of American literary critics, called Sara Davidson "the liveliest historian" of the generation. Her account of her sixties life and the lives of her two Berkeley roommates, *Loose Change* (1977), sold 350,000 copies in hardback, more in paperback, and was made into a television miniseries. At the end of the sixties, Sara, Susie, Tasha, and their friends looked restlessly back at their student days:

We knew what politics was then. It was marches, elections. Now politics means who you fuck, what you eat, how you cure a cold. No theory is big enough to encompass that broad a notion of politics. That's why the New Left is dying. Okay, we know we can't unlock the problems of the country without doing something about sex, the body, the blacks, the schools, ecology. But what is the priority?

The decades that followed provided no answer. Although America withdrew from Vietnam, no dominoes toppled in Southeast Asia. The Watergate scandal made Richard Nixon the first American president forced to resign, but the conservative reaction to the sixties continued and carried Ronald Reagan and George Bush into the White House. In the mid-1990s, Newt Gingrich and a Republican majority took control of the Congress by campaigning against the 1960s. The sixties began well, but it was no heroic age. Those who lived through it have strong memories. Some hate it; others mourn the missed opportunities. The sixties left many legacies. It is not yet finished.

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1. Coming out of the 1950s

Writing in *The Sociological Imagination*, C. Wright Mills quoted from Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves." Although few social scientists or political experts would have agreed with him in 1959, Mills argued that at that moment "the scope and chance for conscious human agency in history-making" was "uniquely available."

Going against the conventional wisdom of the 1950s, which saw society as stable and quiescent, the radical Columbia University professor argued the need and the possibilities for major social change. Even though young people seemed so apolitical that it was popular to call them a "silent generation," Mills predicted that they could be its instrument. Although he died in 1962, his ideas became the leading intellectual influence on the new, young political radicals of the sixties. The particular strength of Mills's analysis was the connections he drew between long-range economic, social, and cultural change. Such relationships lay beneath the social turmoil of the sixties. What went on during that decade was the product of an interaction between material circumstances; human agency; chance; and the coincidental massing of events such as the civil rights movement, the Berkeley Free Speech fight, and the Vietnam War. Together, all these things helped shape popular views of the nature of reality, and from the resulting shifts in consciousness came many of the efforts to build the organizations and institutions of social change.

TRANSITIONS

The national government that had placed 16 million men and women in uniform and spent \$330 billion on its successful effort to win a global war did not leave the return to a peacetime society solely to chance. Although no comprehensive plan existed, congressional legislation provided a piecemeal shaping for postwar America. New laws affecting returning servicemen, the economy, atomic energy, and national security particularly pointed the way. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, popularly known as the "GI Bill of Rights," provided benefits that included low-interest home loans and insurance and the chance to attend technical school or college. The Employment