

On 1968

Noam Chomsky

May 8, 2008

Nineteen sixty-eight was one exciting moment in a much larger movement. It spawned a whole range of movements. There wouldn't have been an international global solidarity movement, for instance, without the events of 1968. It was enormous, in terms of human rights, ethnic rights, a concern for the environment, too.

The Pentagon Papers (the 7,000-page, top-secret US government report into the Vietnam War) are proof of this: right after the Tet Offensive, the business world turned against the war, because they thought it was too costly, even though there were proposals within the government – and we know this now – to send in more American troops. Then LBJ announced he wouldn't be sending any more troops to Vietnam.

The Pentagon Papers tell us that, because of the fear of growing unrest in the cities, the government had to end the war – it wasn't sure that it was going to have enough troops to send to Vietnam and enough troops on the domestic front to quell the riots.

One of the most interesting reactions to come out of 1968 was in the first publication of the Trilateral Commission, which believed there was a “crisis of democracy” from too much participation of the masses. In the late 1960s, the masses were supposed to be passive, not entering into the public arena and having their voices heard. When they did, it was called an “excess of democracy” and people feared it put too much pressure on the system. The only group that never expressed its opinions too much was the corporate group, because that was the group whose involvement in politics was acceptable.

The commission called for more moderation in democracy and a return to passivity. It said the “institutions of indoctrination” – schools, churches – were not doing their job, and these had to be harsher.

The more reactionary standard was much harsher in its reaction to the events of 1968, in that it tried to repress democracy, which has succeeded to an extent – but not really, because these social and activist movements have now grown. For example, it was unimaginable in 1968 that there would be an international Solidarity group in 1980.

But democracy is even stronger now than it was in 1968. You have to remember that, during Vietnam, there was no opposition at the beginning of the war. It did develop, but only six years after John F Kennedy attacked South Vietnam and troop casualties were mounting. However, with the Iraq War, opposition was there from the very beginning, before an attack was even

initiated. The Iraq War was the first conflict in western history in which an imperialist war was massively protested against before it had even been launched.

There are other differences, too. In 1968, it was way out in the margins of society to even discuss the possibility of withdrawal from Vietnam. Now, every presidential candidate mentions withdrawal from Iraq as a real policy choice.

There is also far greater opposition to oppression now than there was before. For example, the US used routinely to support or initiate military coups in Latin America. But the last time the US supported a military coup was in 2002 in Venezuela, and even then they had to back off very quickly because there was public opposition. They just can't do the kinds of things they used to.

So, I think the impact of 1968 was long-lasting and, overall, positive.

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