

Requiem for the '60s
Response to a boycott of discussion of "40 years of 1968"

the Platypus Historians Group

The *Platypus* Affiliated Society in Chicago, in coordination with several chapters of the new Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in Chicago (at the University of Chicago, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and Columbia College, Chicago) organized a public forum on "40 years of 1968: the problematic drama of the past in the present," scheduled for the evening of Thursday, May 8 downtown at the School of the Art Institute. Invited panelists included Bill Ayers and Mike Klonsky, of the historic SDS and its Revolutionary Youth Movement, and currently active in the Movement for a Democratic Society (MDS). But these two panelists withdrew and the forum was canceled, as we will explain.

The motivation for the forum was the need to work through the very mixed and confusing legacy of the 1960s New Left. For instance, the new SDS, founded in 2006, has found it difficult to discern whether it takes its inspiration from the historic SDS in its early instantiation in the optimism of participation in the Civil Rights Movement, *The Port Huron Statement*, ERAP (the Economic Research and Action Project, funded by the United Auto Workers), or whether it is fated to pick up precisely where the preceding SDS left off, with the frustration at the on-going Vietnam War and manifest futility of anti-war protests, the Days of Rage, the insularism of division and break up, and transformation of a key faction of its leadership into the terrorist Weather Underground after 1968. 1968 seemed an important turning point. So a critical-retrospective appraisal of the trajectory of the 1960s by those who actually lived through it and still claimed its legacy seemed to be in order, and we looked forward to hearing what might be said.

The forum was prepared by a several-month long series of film screening-discussions hosted by SDS chapters and allies at various Chicago schools of *Columbia Revolt 1968*, *Finally Got the News* (1970, on the League of Revolutionary Black Workers/Detroit Revolutionary Union Movement), *Brother Outsider: the Bayard Rustin Story* (2003), *The Weather Underground* (2002), and *Rebels with a Cause* (2000, on the 1960s SDS), and readings and discussions of documents from the period collected in anthologies by Carl Oglesby (*The New Left Reader*, 1969), Massimo Teodori (*The New Left*, 1969) and Harold Jacobs (*Weatherman*, 1970), and contemporary histories by Irwin Unger (*The Movement*, 1974) and Kirkpatrick Sale (*SDS*, 1973).

But, at the last minute, several days before the forum, Mike Klonsky and Bill Ayers withdrew, causing the forum to be canceled: Klonsky made a noisy e-mail protest; Ayers gave a polite excuse. Ayers is a current subject of controversy for the Obama Presidential campaign for his participation in Weather Underground terrorism; in the 1970s Klonsky was the leader of the communist movement in the U.S. officially recognized by the People's Republic of China.

The following is a response written by members of the Platypus Historians Group who helped prepare the forum. Appended below this response are the original forum description and questions for discussion circulated to the panelists.

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Requiem for the '60s

The youthful (then, pre-) Marxist German literary critic, historian and philosopher Walter Benjamin wrote at age 21 in 1913, during the *ennui* of the terminal crisis of modern European civilization, but just before the advent of its apocalypse in 1914, that "experience" is an ambiguous concept, especially from the standpoint of youth. As an admonition in the mouths of one's elders, "experience" means not merely a caution against the folly of youth, but the message that "it's all been tried already -- and failed," which, to Benjamin's rebellious mind, poorly conceals the conclusion that "life is meaningless." Benjamin found this deference to past experience intolerable, and so should we.

The aggression of ancestors in frustration at their failures is found in their insistence that those who come after them live according to the supposed lessons of their experience. (For instance, we are supposed to learn that because they failed to overcome their own racism that we must accept as they did the late-1960s turn to Black Power separatist politics, and that, according to this enduring '60s-era sensibility, a critique of such politics must somehow mean opposition to black liberation.) But this then negates the very concept of "experience." It seems to maintain the meaningfulness of the past, but only at the expense of the present and future. Actually, it allows for neither.

Benjamin wrote (after Baudelaire and Proust) that "what is passing takes on the character of an image." But an image cannot be disputed by rational argument but only obliterated -- even if only under the dust of ages. The 1960s New Left insists on retaining its image-character, which might however indeed reveal that the politics of this period and its legacy belong definitively to the past. The enduring image of the '60s is a challenge to the present, to not remain spellbound by its power but to chart our own -- new -- experience for the present and future. For those of us who have been born only after 1968, this becomes not only an imperative but a simple necessity, for us to live through our own struggles and not relive those of our predecessors, however we might learn from them.

The present apparent inability to treat the 1960s as history finds its expression in various forms in this year marking 40 years of 1968, not least in the symbolism of the U.S. Presidential campaigns: McCain's candidacy offers the possibility of continuing the seemingly never-ending battle against the Nixon administration, Clinton offers the continued wisdom of post-'60s political cynicism with nostalgia for the 1990s when the 1960s generation found prosperous maturity, and Obama is regarded uncomfortably with both hope and fear as the "inexperienced" "youthful" upstart who promises -- symbolically -- to put the '60s behind us, after two administrations of Boomers. But is it

yet too early, or already too late for this requiem for the 1960s? For young people today the experience of the '60s is not only past but history.

There are two questions that remain for further consideration: Whether there are present and future social-political possibilities not circumscribed by the history and further trajectory of the thoughts and actions of the 1960s New Left; and whether it is possible to critique and overcome this history of our inherited present.

The answer that the '60s generation would seem to want to give us to both questions is: *No*. But perhaps this is because *they* can't abide that the real answer might be *Yes*.

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The Platypus Affiliated Society and new Students for a Democratic Society present a public forum on:

**40 years of 1968:
The problematic drama of the past in the present**

Karl Marx wrote in 1852 that "the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living" (The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte), and complained of the rehearsal of past historical dramas in the politics of his day. Marx cited Hegel that "great world-historic facts and personages appear twice," but added "the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce."

More than 150 years after Marx, in our time, after 40 years, the traditions of the world-historic moment of 1968 prove a problematic legacy. What is to be learned, both positively and negatively, from the 1960s New Left? How has the "New" Left grown old? And can it be redeemed? In what ways must we reconsider and depart from this legacy, in order to have an effective Left for today and the future? How can we avoid becoming trapped in the ruins of the political movements that have preceded us?

Join us for a panel discussion and audience Q&A, with distinguished veterans of the 1960s New Left, as we reflect critically upon the social and political necessities of the present and the obstacles to an adequate emancipatory imagination expressed in the inappropriate masks of the '60s we continue to wear in contemporary politics. -- What would it mean today, more than a generation after the 1960s, to start in the 21st Century what Marx demanded of the 19th Century, to take our poetry from the future?

Panelists:

Bill Ayers, former SDS, Revolutionary Youth Movement, Weather Underground

Chris Cutrone, Platypus

Atiya Khan, Platypus

Mike Klonsky, former SDS, Revolutionary Youth Movement, October League

Prexy Nesbitt, former Columbia University Student Afro-American Society during 1968 strike

(Moderator: James Vaughn, Platypus)

Questions for panelists:

(Panelists' opening remarks should be at most 5-7 min. [or 500-750 words or 2-3 double-spaced pages]. Please incorporate some of the following questions into your introductory statement. Those points not addressed in your opening remarks may be reserved for subsequent responses during the forum, in the panelist discussion and audience Q&A.)

For all of the following questions for which this is appropriate, please consider the question in two dimensions: (1) What did you think then (i.e., in 1968); and (2) What do you think now?

1. What was the historical heritage of the preceding, "Old" Left (of the 1920s-30s)? Why was a "new" Left necessary in the 1960s? What inspired and informed this "new" Left? -- What events, movements, thinkers?
2. Why did separatist politics (according to, e.g., race, gender, and sexuality, Black Power, feminism, gay liberation, etc.) become so salient by the late '60s? Why was it necessary, if so, to organize separately? -- How did ideas of "self-determination" affect and inform politics in the 1960s?

Despite such separatism, how was the common "movement" understood? What, if anything, was the basis for the unity of the "movement?" (Why, do you think, did all these various diverse aspects of the movement emerge at roughly the same time, by the late '60s?)

3. Why was the labor movement seen more as part of the problem rather than as part of any potential solutions to social and political problems in the 1960s? (For example, the 1960s Students for a Democratic Society broke up in 1969 over attempts to create a "worker-student alliance," with those resisting this orientation striking off on the basis of the "revolutionary" character of "youth.") How, if in any ways, was the labor movement part of the problem? What about the role of labor today? Do we need a "worker-student alliance" today? If so, why not then, or did it turn out to have been necessary, after all?
4. How was the U.S. role in the war in Vietnam understood in relation to other social and political issues?

What were the differences between the early and late '60s movement, e.g., from the Civil Rights Movement to the anti-war movement? What impacts did this shift of focus have on the possibilities for progressive politics?

5. It is said that those of you participating in the 1960s movement(s) thought you could have changed the world. How was this change imagined? What kind of transformation would have been involved? What was thought to have been necessary and possible? How and why, do you think, did your attempts to change the world fail? Or did they succeed? How do we now stand as regards such demand for change? What lessons can be learned from this demand and its success/failure?

How, in your estimation, has the world changed since the 1960s? How does your sense of such change inform your thinking now, both retrospectively about what happened then, and about the world as it stands and what might be necessary to change it today?