
AHR Forum
The International 1968, Part I

Introduction

Two thousand and eight marked the fortieth anniversary of a remarkable year, a year that has come to stand for a decade which, to rephrase Paul Kantner's memorable quip, we can only remember if we weren't there. Two months late, we present the first part of a two-part *AHR* Forum, "The International 1968," an act of historical recovery and analysis by seven historians who, whether they were there or not, offer a range of perspectives on the politics, the protests, the social and cultural transformations, and the historical significance of that tumultuous year. Of course, 1968 was marked by more than youth protests, popular mobilization, and manifestations of the counterculture. It was also a year of assassinations (Martin Luther King, Jr.; Robert F. Kennedy), the Tet offensive in Vietnam, Richard Nixon's election as president, the publication of the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (condemning birth control), the peak of the Cultural Revolution in China, and the decision of the United States to go off the gold standard, among other notable events. One might argue that in light of the subsequent course of history, these and other developments had a greater impact than the student uprisings and youth culture that we associate with that year. But our focus in this Forum is largely on the dramatic movements that, rightly or wrongly, captured media attention at the time and remain emblematic of the spirit of the era. Although the articles differ in subject and approach, they collectively make the point that these upheavals were hardly trivial or inconsequential. They were manifestations of large-scale social, cultural, and political transformations; they challenged the very nature of contemporary political culture. And their context was transnational, if not global.

Indeed, like many recent articles in this journal, the essays in this Forum take a perspective that is both transnational and international in reach. Thus, by and large, the better-known "events," including those that shook Paris and Morningside Heights in the spring, do not occupy center stage in what follows. Rather, the authors look at the European scene as a whole, both East and West, or the global trends that made up the counterculture, or the protests in such places as Japan and Latin America—regions that do not usually figure on the imaginary map of "the sixties." What they demonstrate is that even when protests were local in origin, scope, and cause, there were international and transnational forces at play, suggesting that the radical and youth movements of the time were harbingers of the globalizing dynamic that would characterize subsequent decades. At the same time, an issue that perhaps divides some of the authors is how much we can describe and explain protests in local

terms and how much they were inspired and indeed motivated by global trends. Jeremi Suri, for example, argues for a transnational counterculture, which in fostering disillusionment and discontent among millions, regardless of national identity, created the conditions for mass protest. In Latin America, on the other hand, Jeff Gould (whose article will appear in Part II of the Forum, in the April issue) shows that demonstrators in Mexico, Uruguay, and Brazil, while identifying in part with anti-American and anti-imperialistic causes, had reasons for taking action that were local in nature and mostly independent from cultural trends and global causes.

If one axis of difference in analyzing “1968” lies between the poles of the local and the global, another is configured in terms of culture versus politics. At the time, of course, there were those in “the movement” who insisted that a commitment to politics, and especially militant political action, should prevail over cultural concerns, while others believed that only radically different cultural choices or “lifestyles”—pastoral, utopian, communal, personal, or sexual—and decidedly *not* politics, could create the conditions for a new world. Most historians, it would seem, have gone beyond this rather dogmatic either/or, recognizing that culture and politics are always intertwined. In this Forum, however, some of the contributors put a greater accent on politics and political action, while others focus more on the cultural transformations that came to be known as the counterculture. Does this amount to a fundamental difference that is both methodological and interpretive? Perhaps so. For these accounts offer significant variations on how we should assess the mix of the cultural and the political, variations that offer the opportunity to debate the degree to which cultural change either merely provided the background for the upheavals of the sixties or defined the very essence of this contentious period.

In the first article, “The Rise and Fall of an International Counterculture, 1960–1975,” which itself serves as a kind of introduction to the topic, Jeremi Suri makes the claim that “the sixties” were fundamentally cultural in nature. While he notes the importance of street protests and dissident movements, whose grievances and goals were largely political, he asserts that their challenge was more cultural than political in nature. Those involved were contesting not only their leaders’ ideologies and policies but, more fundamentally, their values. This was consonant with what he sees as a feature of the period: the profound and widespread discontent and disillusionment, in both the West and the East, stemming from Cold War ideologies and policies that promised more than they could deliver. Not only did these raise expectations for a better life, but governments also sponsored and created educational and cultural opportunities that allowed millions of mostly young people to perceive and appreciate the gap between these idealistic expectations and reality. The result, in essence, was the counterculture.

In “‘1968’ East and West: Divided Germany as a Case Study in Transnational History,” Timothy S. Brown offers an analysis that handles the mix of culture and politics in a somewhat different way. He depicts a generation of young Germans who, though divided by the “Iron Curtain,” rival regimes, and competing ideologies, were united in the cultural values they embraced. Although their political protests were quite different in nature—as different as the political systems they challenged—they were equally swept up by the countercultural forces of antiauthoritarianism, rock music, communalism, and the like. But there were particular determinants to how

these forces played out in each country. In the west, Brown argues, the international counterculture—or what he calls the “big 1968”—reinforced and invigorated the local movement, and thus “broaden[ed] the possibilities for popular action from below, pushing back the boundaries of the permissible and creating democratic space in the political and cultural landscape of the Federal Republic.” The experience in the east was quite different; there, the creative potential of culture ran up against the obstacles of political repression and the absence of an open public sphere. The result was not a new style of politics, as in the west, but rather a generational drift into the apolitical nonconformism of the “dropout.”

In the final article in Part I of this Forum, politics—especially mass mobilization and militant action—occupies the foreground. “Japan 1968: The Performance of Violence and the Theater of Protest,” by William Marotti, provides a close analysis of a decade of popular protest against Japan’s ties to the U.S., and especially over the renewal of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. Culminating in a wave of demonstrations in late 1967 and early 1968, these strikes, seizures, marches, and rallies served to broaden the scope of political participation, and created new forms of political activism as well. While militants often dominated the scene and certainly captured the attention of the media, the events also provided increasing numbers of ordinary people with the motivation and means for political engagement. Marotti’s street-level view of these events in Japan allows him to demonstrate something that was clearly true in other contexts around the world: the very dynamics of popular mobilization, including the inevitable repressive reaction by the state, was an important factor in creating and perpetuating the new style of political activism that we associate with “1968.”

In April’s issue, Part II of “The International 1968” will include articles on the issue of gender in 1968, protests in Latin America, the situation in the Soviet Union in that year, and youth tourism.