

## Unsettled Debts: 1968 and the Problem of Historical Memory

### *Foreword*

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This brief essay considers the broader significance of 1968 as nostalgia and counter-memory to the dominant narrative generated by liberalism and neoliberalism. It frames the essays included in this Special Section as not just critical interventions in historical and sociological studies but in current and future political struggles.

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Every movie or television series set in 1968 recycles the same montage: helicopters over the jungles of Vietnam, the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy; antiwar protests; the Democratic National Convention in Chicago; hippies, yippies, and the summer of love; White women burning bras; Black Panthers sporting leather jackets and guns; Richard Nixon raising the double victory sign; John Carlos and Tommie Smith on the stand in Mexico City, fists raised in defiance; and, if you are lucky, you might see students facing off with police in Paris or challenging Soviet tanks in Prague.

These images are part of a carefully curated narrative. Moments of violence and loss are always overtaken by scenes of youthful joy, militancy, wildness. They are supposed to represent the naïve days when today's corporate heads, politicians, professors, and graying investment bankers wore their hair long, smoked weed and dropped acid, and naively thought they could change the world. We are led to believe that those young people in the streets and behind the barricades were simply impatient liberals who grew up and learned how to work within the system or abandoned their ideals altogether. We would never know from these images that it was the *liberals* the insurgents of '68 were fighting; that they believed the system could not be fixed or reformed and had to be overthrown. Liberals were responsible for escalating the war in Vietnam—a war shrouded in lies and misrepresentations. Liberals oversaw the decade's countless covert and overt military actions in Indonesia, Dominican Republic, Brazil, Congo, Cuba, Chile, Southern Africa, Greece, Timor-Leste (East Timor), *ad infinitum*. Liberals turned the war on poverty into a form of counterinsurgency, investing more money in policing than on feeding the poor or creating jobs. And it was liberals who, in the name of security, helped defeat the rebellions in the streets, on university campuses, in the fields and factories, in the United States and abroad, clearing the path for the current neoliberal order, where the dream of a world free of militarism, materialism, racism, and patriarchy succumbed to the idea that market principles should govern all spheres of life.

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The commercialized memory of 1968 also obscures, if not thoroughly erases, the world beyond the borders of the United States or the sites of its imperialist wars. While intellectuals may be familiar with George Katsiaficas's (2018) extraordinary book, *The Global Imagination of 1968: Revolution and Counterrevolution*, we still have to be reminded that the fires of 1968 (the period from about 1968–1971) burned in the Philippines, Palestine, Thailand, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, China, Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, Iraq, Turkey, Columbia, Peru, Venezuela, Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Chile, Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad, Curacao, Bermuda, the Bahamas, Aruba, Anguilla, and, of course, South Africa, where a Black Consciousness Movement emerged that so threatened the apartheid regime that the state killed its leader, Steven Biko. In fact, the focus on Black protests at the 1968 Olympics has obscured the mass revolt in Mexico City, when students and workers used the occasion of the games to wage national protests to free political prisoners, reorganize the police, and demand more public funds for domestic needs.

Fortunately, the essays gathered here effectively widen the lens on 1968, bringing untold struggles into focus, offering new angles on familiar stories, and, in doing so, deepening our memory of the era's revolutionary possibility. They do not invoke the spirit of '68 out of nostalgia or a duty to commemorate, nor do they suggest that we can ever return to that moment or reproduce the fervor and belief that a new world is in the offing. On the contrary, the point of this Special Section is to show that the spirit of '68 is hardly dead. The "spirit" is the specter of (an unfinished) revolution haunting the current order. It haunts us even as neoliberalism and its offspring, liberal multiculturalism, seek to rewrite the history of the moment.

These essays revisit the spirit of '68, or better yet, its afterlives, as a counter to the normalization of the state of emergency we are currently facing, and have been confronting in some form or another, for the last three decades. We are reminded that one of the principal reasons to look back is to see how these struggles looked ahead, to produce a radically different future. What they did and what they imagined—for all of their flaws and internal contradictions—was clearly dangerous to the status quo, which explains why interrogations and assassinations were so prevalent.

In these dark times, we need to remember that the dream of revolution was rooted in what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called in his last speech in Memphis on April 3, 1968, a "dangerous unselfishness," the idea that we have no choice but to make a difference in the lives of the most vulnerable.

### Reference

Katsiaficas, G. (2018). *The global imagination of 1968: Revolution and counterrevolution*. Oakland, CA: PM.