**Making Sense of the Sixties**
**Fortieth Reunion, Harvard College Class of 1968**
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> *What has been the legacy of the Sixties in our own lives and the life of our country? Was it all for the better, the worse, or, as Chou En-Lai said of the French Revolution, is it too soon to tell?*

Chou En-Lai's famous but misunderstood remark is highly apropos today's symposium. Chou was talking with Henry Kissinger in the early 1970s and was almost certainly referring not to the French Revolution but rather to the Paris student riots of May 1968, whose leaders had been emphatically Maoist. According to Chou's biographer, Gao Wenqian, "too soon to tell" was probably not a bon mot at all but just a throwaway, a polite way of changing the subject. At the time, Chou was mopping up after the Cultural Revolution—still in full fury in 1968 before the Red Guards were disbanded, which had left Chinese society and culture a shambles and piled up another million or so corpses on top of the dozens of millions from the Great Leap Forward. So the subject of the Paris student riots would have struck very close to home and not been something he would have wanted to talk about with a foreigner. Anyway, Chou had himself been a young radical agitator in Paris before getting serious as leader of the Nanchang Uprising of 1927 which launched the Chinese Civil War. Nanchang had been an exciting failure that he then followed up, and in a way redeemed, with forty-five years of hard military leadership and painstaking diplomacy. Chou knew that after moments of revolutionary exuberance have passed there remains the world to contend with.

I think that demography played a trick on the college seniors of 1968 in Paris and in the United States. We regarded ourselves as uniquely idealistic and public-spirited, as young people often do, but our idealism was coupled with an unusual sense of self-importance. This was the headiness of power acquired when young—in our case, of being the avant-garde of the baby-boom adults, before which our elders quaked even then. Our numbers gave us tremendous social and cultural influence, such that our youthful romanticism endured much longer than is typically the case or than Churchill's dictum allows. The Spirit of 1968 (not the view of all of us by any means, but certainly the class zeitgeist) was that we were destined to make the world afresh, all in our own image, unconstrained by whatever that was that had come before. Many of us held it like a talisman even as we grew into careers and families and encountered the real choices and disappointments of adulthood.

It was a trick because attitude gets you only so far. In the United States, radicalism marginalizes itself and ultimately fails on its own terms. The story of American liberalism is the progressive extension of freedom and equality to new groups and new circumstances. But freedom and equality are our country's formal, founding ideals, and many Americans are very patriotic. We have reformed ourselves not by turning the world upside down or rejecting our past but rather by reinterpreting and enlarging our past. The founders were practical revolutionaries, realistic rather than romantic about human nature and wary of the corruptions of power. Abe Lincoln freed the slaves by looking backward—elevating the Declaration to the status of constitutional charter and national imperative. The Women's Christian Temperance Union was far more effective in the suffrage movement than Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. The Progressive Era was launched by a Republican, the union movement was staunchly anti-socialist, the New Deal was to save capitalism from itself, and Martin Luther King Jr. made his base of operations the Bible itself.

In contrast, the student radicalism of the Sixties was finished as an effective political force within months of our graduation in June 1968. Although there is room for argument around the margins (aspects of environmentalism, local government in a few places), I would say that it has had essentially no even temporary influence on American politics. Sixties radicalism turned inward, so to speak, and has had a very large temporal influence within the academic world; but this, I believe, is already in steep decline. Deconstructionism in literature, philosophy, and social science is losing out to approaches that respect text, logic, and evidence; it will probably not survive as more than a footnote. Academic feminism has produced some interesting work but has become desiccated and insular. The current president of Harvard and her predecessor have both gone out of their way to say nice things about ROTC. To today's students, the Sixties is a distant and vaguely ridiculous era; John Lennon is a dead white male and not thought any less of for that.

But there is one area of the country's life where the distinctive contribution of the Sixties has been profound and actually heroic and will certainly endure. This has been in the progressive integration of women, blacks, and other minority groups into social life and institutions—including, lest we forget, Jews when we were much younger, and of course gays more recently. Here our great contributions were not in the political or academic realms (the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the work of our fuddy-duddy parents including the hated LBJ) but rather in private, commercial, and professional life. Social and legal equality was to us a simple imperative—we simply insisted on it, sometimes at significant personal cost. Especially in our marriages, we made some big mistakes in assuming that the two-career marriages and families that we pioneered would be natural and obvious and unproblematic. Those who have come after us have been more realistic and more successful: they have learned from our examples and are in our debt. We also fell pray to some nasty racial politics, but now the racialism of Sharpton is being supplanted by the Age of Obama. When young friends of mine role their eyes at the antics of their aging hippy professors, I am amused and gratified; but when they roll their eyes at my generation's preoccupation with issues of race and gender, I give them a little lecture about Mississippi and Bedford-Stuyvesant in the 1960s, and my Radcliffe classmates who, I later learned, secretly took lunch from their book bags in toilet stalls in Harvard classroom buildings.

Ours was the Normandy Landing of social equality. We took a lot of hits and we sometimes got disoriented and made wrong turns, but it never occurred to us to turn back, and through sheer mass we ended up securing and civilizing immense fields of life. I won't pause to acknowledge the remaining imperfections: we have through innumerable personal deeds help to build, just in our lifetimes, the most successfully diverse society there has ever been. In this respect our country is a much better place then we found it. We would be right to take some generational pride in that achievement.