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Cambridge, 1968

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"We were right about the war. We were right about the environment. We were right about civil rights and women's issues. But we were wrong about drugs."[1] I still agree with singer David Crosby's judgments on sixties activism.

Past that, however, it's a matter of "Yes, but." However valid our protests, our thinking and tactics made sense *only* as protest. We reached out to nobody much different from ourselves and scorned "squares," "straight people," and "bourgeois liberals." Mistaking truculent rhetoric for program, we never proposed feasible alternatives to regnant institutions. Worse, in our cocksure impatience we undermined priceless civic and cultural traditions. In 1968, this "we" definitely included me. Far from the eyes and ears of home, I embraced New Left rebellion but almost immediately recoiled from its practice.

Newly graduated from Dartmouth College, I sailed in August 1967 on the *S.S. United States* to England, there to begin the year of further study granted by Selective Service. I had told my family I never would serve the immoral war effort in Vietnam and quarreled bitterly with my father, a proud veteran of World War II combat.

At Magdalene College, Cambridge, I fell in with fellow American graduate students, many of them proud veterans of the Free Speech Movement in Berkeley. They tutored me in both political and lifestyle radicalism, and by New Year's Eve I was far removed from the solemn, diligent "nice Jewish boy" I had been in September. (My daughter once peppered me with questions about

[1] David Crosby, quoted in Martin Torgoff, *Can't Find My Way Home: America in the Great Stoned Age, 1945–2000* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 462.

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my past and concluded, "So all you did before Cambridge was study and play baseball." Sternly I corrected her: in wintertime I played basketball.)

My memories of Cambridge in early 1968 center on feeling fully alive, in the best of company, and on the right side of history. The world was turning our way—in Greece, Czechoslovakia, France, Chile, China, the classroom, the bedroom. And the music! Music had never sounded so good or conveyed such meaning—*our* music, loud and brave and wise. When Allan Bloom opined that "rock music has one appeal only, a barbaric appeal, to sexual desire," he revealed his own closed mind and an ear like a foot.[2]

Two or three evenings each week, my new friends and I gathered for dinner and conversation. Long into the night we spun rhapsodies of post-revolutionary utopia, a world without passports, uniforms, poverty, or war.

New Left writings instructed and inspired us, foundational works such as C. Wright Mills's *The Power Elite* (1956), Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Régis Debray's *Revolution in the Revolution?* (1967), and especially Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (1964) and *An Essay on Liberation* (1969). Marcuse's critique went beyond considerations of wealth and power to how ugly and boring life had become under advanced capitalism. In just this spirit we were coming to see through The System, impervious to blandishments like consumer sovereignty—not the pampered children of postwar prosperity but thoughtful idealists out to liberate technology, education, and politics. To bring this vision to life at Cambridge, we marched, pamphleted, picketed, wrote letter after letter, and attended meeting after meeting.

Still, I had been through enough debates with others and in my own mind to appreciate complexity. Was I a pacifist in principle or just against this useless-and-worse war in Vietnam? I couldn't say, definitively. Were my objections to radical urban guerilla violence high-minded or just cowardly, a bourgeois affectation? Again, I couldn't say. I still expressed a high regard for excellence when equalization seemed to invite or even welcome a flat, deadening mediocrity. Others—radical British undergraduates in particular—dismissed this as elitist, meritocratic rot. Were they right? I wrestled hard with these matters, came at best to tentative truths, and knew I'd forever make a poor ideologue.

In early spring, I joined the huge antiwar demonstration in London. The march wound through city thoroughfares to the American Embassy, which British militants and the German Students for a Democratic Society talked of

[2]Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 73.

"storming." Under distinctive banners marched union collectives, anarchists, communists, pacifists, feminists, and third world students from across the UK and the Continent, a solid mile of partisans surging toward Grosvenor Square. I experienced a tingly confidence and irrational power walking in this throng of like-minded zealots.

On the sidelines, thousands of supporters echoed the chants issuing out of the pack:

One lone voice: "U.S. imperialism!"
Thousands in response: "OUT!"
The same voice again: "U.S. imperialism!"
Thousands again, louder: "OUT!!"
And a third time: "U.S. imperialism!"
"OUT! OUT! OUT!!!"
Then a second lone voice: "Workers socialism!"[3]
"IN!"
"Workers socialism!"
"IN!!"
"Workers socialism!"
"IN! IN! IN!!!"

Whenever the march stopped traffic at an intersection, we all chanted, "Leave your bus and march with us! Leave your bus and march with us!" Quite a few passengers did.

In my exhilaration, hours of parading passed in an instant. Finally the march's head reached the police line blocking Grosvenor Square. A scrum ensued, the line broke, and demonstrators crowded into the park across from the embassy. From there we could see at least a hundred armed officers of the Tactical Squad of the London Police Department commanding the embassy's steps and doors. Over a bullhorn, a police official ordered the crowd to disperse, saying in five minutes the area would be cleared. I remember thinking, "Sure, pal. Exactly how are you going to do *that*?"

I hadn't counted on horses being backed right through the crowd, breaking the mass into manageable units, then flying wedges of policemen driving these units one by one back across the street into the park, and then the infusing of

[3]In this context, "workers socialism" meant moving the Labour Party to a more "pure" and undiluted commitment to worker hegemony by taking control of factories away from owners and owner-appointed managers and putting it in the hands of workers' councils.

more officers to secure the reclaimed territory. The square was emptied in half an hour, and despite myself I was impressed.

By prearrangement my group met at the train station an hour later. On the way back to Cambridge, we shared observations and licked our wounds. How easily we had been routed by professionals trained to do just that!

At a large meeting the following week, Cambridge students and off-campus activists railed against the "police brutality" at Grosvenor Square and discussed plans to press legal and civil charges. I stood to dissent. We had instigated the confrontation, I insisted. The police had a mandate to prevent the trashing of the American Embassy, and they had moved us out with a minimum of force. We had challenged order and lost; to cry police brutality in the aftermath was dishonorable, beneath the dignity of our aims. During and after this speech, I was hissed and grandly harrumphed.

A few weeks later, the U.S. Ambassador to Great Britain, Walter Annenberg, came to Cambridge to deliver a major address. We determined that he should not be allowed to avoid the subject of the war in Vietnam. The topic would be forced on him, if necessary, by interrupting his prepared text. Such interference ran counter to the entire thrust of my classical education, but these were special times: Ambassador Annenberg had to be made to feel the urgency to end the war. No U.S. official should carry on as if we were not practicing immoral (and futile) militarism in Southeast Asia.

At the event, people organized to disrupt the speech spread throughout the auditorium. I sat by myself near the rear, ready and eager to participate. As Annenberg began to read his speech, a lone voice shouted, "How can you not be addressing the war in Vietnam?!" This call was picked up from a number of quarters in the hall, and hissing and shouting came from those defending the ambassador's right to speak as planned. I stood in my place and yelled toward the stage, "What are you doing to stop the killing?"

Immediately the young man sitting next to me grabbed me and struggled to pull me down to my chair, even as I resisted my antagonist and defended my outburst to him. All hell broke loose in the building, security rushed in, and I was identified as a disruptor and asked to leave, which I did. Others refused to leave and were arrested. The speech went on.

Long into the night, my mates and I rejoiced in having confronted the geezer. The next morning, though, I awoke feeling soiled for my involvement. Now I judge shouting down Walter Annenberg the most ill-considered political action I ever took.

Drugs did not rate as a problem within my Cambridge circle. We were dabblers, near-exclusively in hashish. Serious-minded scholars and activists,

we toked up and turned temporarily into giggling fools, taking inordinate pleasure in reading, conversing, eating, listening to music, gazing at stars, petting the cat, or touching each other. I had never enjoyed the company of drunks (I never would), but getting high with friends worked from the start. I'd speak for the group in saying it worked for each of us until it didn't, for whatever reason, and then we gave it up.

Far more threatening, I thought, was the dabbling in insanity, in each case a matter of going too far to cleanse oneself of unrevolutionary instinct. The guru here was Scottish psychologist R.D. Laing, author of such works as *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (1965) and *The Politics of Experience* (1967). With dangerous romanticism Laing characterized "normal" living in our crazed culture as itself crazed. To attain true mental health (*ennoia*), the intrepid will embrace insanity (*eknoia*) as "a perfectly rational adjustment to an insane world."[4] "Madness," Laing wrote, "need not be all breakdown. It may also be breakthrough."[5]

A few close Cambridge friends shocked me—and made me cry!—by following this path to off-the-map incoherence. These were my mentors, and my betters. Charismatic leaders and informed, incisive thinkers, they now were filthy and disheveled, babbling nonsense. The transition had been too abrupt and encompassing for them to preserve either emotional or epistemological connection. Like Allen Ginsberg a dozen years earlier, "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked…"[6] Soon I would think much the same of Weathermen and Symbionese Liberation Army members over-eager to remake themselves and in that ungrounded persona doing the otherwise impossibly stupid and destructive.

Late spring 1968 carried me to Paris, where student strikes now were supported by labor walkouts. Most visitors to the barricades were giddy; such a coalition between militant students and unionists had been their wildest fantasy. But I felt no connection in Paris—nothing in this romantic, dreamily Gallic city connected with eye-level reality—and I returned to Cambridge barely affected by what I had seen. Far more impressive in that season were two confrontations in New York City.

[4]Attributed to R.D. Laing, "What Is Schizophrenia?" *New Left Review* 1, no. 28 (November-December 1964): 3–68, quoted in Sverre Raffnsøe, Morten S. Thaning, and Marius Gudmand-Hoyer, *Michel Foucault: A Research Companion* (Basingstoke, UK, and New York: Palgrave Macmillan and St. Martin's Press, 2016), 134, 134n79.

[5]R.D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience* (1967; New York: Pantheon, 1983), 133.

[6]Allen Ginsberg, "Howl," in *Collected Poems 1947–1997* (New York: Harper, 2006), 134.

Arousing passionate support in Cambridge, Columbia University students mobilized to halt a gymnasium project threatening to displace hundreds of poor black families. After protestors took over administrative offices and whole school buildings, New York City police invaded the campus, drove out the squatters, and arrested many. A general student strike followed, prompting a long, bitter battle for control. Across the pond, we exulted over students' so boldly challenging the Columbia administration and uniting with local activists against what we called expansionist neo-imperialism.

The lone dissenter was Jeremy Cohen, a recent Columbia graduate. Jeremy pleaded for us to rethink our enthusiasm. His alma mater lay in tatters; how could that be *good*? As Jeremy saw it, universities are delicate, fragile institutions, their freedoms of thought, inquiry, and expression easily abrogated in the name of public order. By inciting the NYPD raid, radical students had done the reactionaries' work for them. Dire loss to higher education and the general causes of dissent, reform, and progress would ensue.

Others pooh-poohed Jeremy's words, laughed them off, but for me—apparently me alone—they had deep resonance. Like Jeremy, I *appreciated* humanistic higher education, however "establishment," as our bulwark against ignorance and anti-intellectualism. Blocking construction of the gym seemed spot-on, but taking over offices was a juvenile stunt ("Look at me, Dad, smoking a joint in President Kirk's office!"). I vowed to never again get caught up in splashy, self-gratifying political melodrama.

Far more challenging to my weakening New Leftism was the NYC teachers' strike against community-controlled schools. Acceding to the reality of *de facto* segregation, black parents in Harlem and Brooklyn claimed independent authority to run their own schools. Initially supportive of bypassing downtown bureaucracy, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) recoiled after finding its principles and interests affronted. As UFT membership was predominantly Jewish and socialist, the dispute portended historic fracture in the civil rights coalition.

The most vexing point of contention became the plan of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville (Brooklyn) community board to dismiss teachers without due process, a protection won after decades of union agitation. To replace seniority as a criterion for retention, the board proposed the teachers' support for community control itself, which the UFT likened to the loyalty oaths of the 1950s. Ultimately, there would be three strikes lasting until November, infuriating large segments of the black community, prompting hundreds of UFT members to break rank, severing the black-Jewish alliance, and mortally wounding the national campaign for school integration.

Rhody McCoy, unit administrator of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Demonstration School District, and Albert Shanker, president of the United Federation of Teachers, emerged as articulate, unyielding spokesmen for the two sides, and their positions were echoed at Cambridge. Bereft of race-baiting and anti-Semitism, our discussions regularly shed clear, sharp light on the teacher strike, and on us. United against blatant evils such as Southern segregation and the war in Vietnam, friends and allies discovered how far we disagreed on community control. We probed our differences in long, respectful exchanges that refined and expanded my thinking as no classroom lessons ever had.

Starting neutral, feeling solidarity with both parents and teachers, I ended up strongly supporting the union position. The central, dispositive point for me was public education's role in *broadening* intellectual vision, cultural exposure, and range of empathy. Partisan provincials, I came to think, cannot lead that effort, and "community self-determination" would always equate in practice to "community meddling."

I had grown up in Boston, a city of ethnic enclaves shaping their young into small-minded xenophobes. It was common knowledge citywide that "outsiders" in any community would be scorned, likely harassed, and not uncommonly beaten bloody. Across America, such boundary lines walled out those different, people "not from around here," not "one of our kind." How could *reinforcing* boundary walls be thought "progressive" or "liberatory"? How could it possibly contribute to preparing a farsighted, civically engaged polity—the central purpose of public education? However much the product of legitimate grievance, provincialism in Harlem or Ocean Hill-Brownsville held no loftier standing in my eyes than provincialism in lily-white suburbs or the Kansas hinterlands. I lost many friends for saying this.

Along with everything else, my career plans changed at Cambridge, influenced by the writings of Jonathan Kozol, Herbert Kohl, and Robert Coles. I determined to give up pursuing a Ph.D. in classics and instead aim to agitate for public schools that might produce curious, informed, critical thinkers, not the tractable functionaries these theorists argued the system aimed to create. I applied to five top U.S. schools of education, got into all five, and chose Harvard to study under two Marxist theorists of education there, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis.

The Master of Arts Program in Teaching Language Arts would start its summer session in late June. My plan was to show up, ride out the program until General Hershey came for me, and then resist induction. I expected at that point to spend jail time, return to movement activism when I got out, then finish

my Cambridge degree and continue the extensive traveling I had begun. Not one of these came to pass.

I was preparing to leave Cambridge on June 5, hanging around King's College saying goodbye to friends, when news came of Robert Kennedy's assassination. There was a television in a commons room nearby, and I rushed in to see the reports, feeling miserable already, linking this with the killings of JFK in 1963 and Dr. King in April of 1968, just a few months before the assassination of RFK.

A crowd had gathered, including undergraduates I knew from rallies and meetings. Their take on the assassination, put forth loudly, was that "another fookin' liberal" had been assassinated by a freedom fighter and the world was far better off without "Bobby Fookin' Kennedy" in it. I did not want to hear another word of *that*! Without a moment's planning or reflection I charged the chortling ringleader, a red-haired mop-top named Nigel, threw him to the floor, straddled him, slapped him hard, choked him, and screamed in his now-purple face that he knew nothing about Bobby Kennedy or anything else.

My last memory of Cambridge 1968 is of getting pulled off Nigel's sorry ass by four or five putative allies in the struggle for peace and justice.