

## Nostalgia for Nihilism

The BBC is enjoying one of its periodic spasms of second childhood as it relives for a new generation the events of 1968. In that famous Prague Spring there were student protests against the communist dictatorship and these were rapidly put down by the tanks and guns. The Czech students, denied even the little freedoms we take for granted, had plenty to be rebellious about. I spoke recently with the manager of a hotel in Wenceslas Square. She said, “It was a police state built on lies and coercion. My husband was a history lecturer at the university. He knew that the syllabus he was compelled to teach was the lying propaganda of the Party – in effect of the Soviets.

“The students also knew they were being lied to and they wrote lies in their essays and examination papers. It was the only way they could pass the exams. Any attempt to question the official line meant arrest and imprisonment. My children were at the junior school and when they arrived in class in the mornings the teachers would ask them, ‘Did your parents have anyone round for supper last night? ‘Did you hear what they were talking about?’”

It took a further twenty years before freedom came to Prague and to the other Soviet satellite states: twenty years in which workers and students and housewives met secretly in one another’s houses and read smuggled copies of *Animal Farm* and *1984*. I met some of these people too. One told me, “You could expect to be beaten up – or worse – if the police caught you reading such books. We had secret visits from British and American academics, philosophers such as Roger Scruton and Paul Helm, who introduced us to Edmund Burke and Michael Oakeshott and encouraged us to keep believing freedom would come, against all the appearances. And we prayed together.”

There were protest marches and sit-ins in Paris and London too, but despite the BBC’s nostalgia for flower power, fornication and pop stars drugged up to the eyes, these disturbances were only the fits and follies of pampered and self-indulgent middle class youth. The protestors might claim they were campaigning for an end to the Vietnam war or for the liberty to take the same illegal substances being swallowed so enthusiastically by their pop star heroes. But really these were only pretexts. Anything could be an excuse for a demo.

I was at Liverpool university where long-haired and denimed idiots chanted the names of Ho Chi Min and Chairman Mao: well-off kids from the leafy suburbs playing at radical chic, financed by generous Local Education Authority grants and daddy’s largesse. Liverpool wasn’t Prague but there was a lot that was Kafkaesque about it. For example, the mob would shout and scream and occupy the senate, disrupting university business and neglecting their studies. When asked by the Vice Chancellor why they were protesting, they answered, “Because you’re keeping secret files on us!”

The Vice Chancellor replied truthfully that there were no such files. They didn’t believe him. So he invited a group of the ringleaders to search his offices and show where the alleged files were being kept. Of course they found nothing, but carried on with their protest, taking refuge in the identity of indiscernibles: “We knew we wouldn’t find the files – they’re secret!”

The mob pretended that occupying the senate was also occupying the high moral ground. There was nothing moral about it. It was privileged youth in a fit of agreeable frenzy. It had about as much ethical substance as a gang of football hooligans ripping through the town centre after the match. The motivation was merely the thrill of naughtiness – like Chesterton’s “...nothing quite so exhilarating as knocking off a policeman’s hat.” Those student demonstrators were juvenile delinquents. In Paris events took a nastier turn and in the American universities people were shot dead. “All you need is love” had suddenly turned murderous.

Although it is just pretentious and silly to suggest there was ever an ideology behind the troubles, there was the whiff of *Zeitgeist*. This was a sort of debauched libertarianism. A sizeable proportion of youth got it into its head that it could do as it damn well liked: a caricature Rousseauism, the chains falling off everywhere. Except of course the chains were all imaginary.

Although the demonstrations were mindless, there were minds of a sort not far behind them. Georg Lukacs, for example, who declared, “I saw the revolutionary destruction of society as the one and only solution” – where the solution was the overthrow of Western capitalism. But no one noticed that there was no actual problem requiring a solution. The most privileged, affluent and indulged generation ever ranted and raved about how it was deprived, dispossessed and enslaved.

Lukacs saw the necessity for the destruction of Christian civilisation and he advocated “demonic ideas” in the spread of “cultural terrorism”. Of course the kids loved it. Lukacs was Hungarian, an agent of the Comintern and he set up a schools programme in which children were instructed in free love, and sexual intercourse while being taught that the family was an outdated institution along with monogamy and all manifestations of religion. His aim was to undermine the family by promoting licentiousness among women and children and so weaken the basis of Christian living. The *Zeitgeist* was nihilistic.

Another of these cultural revolutionaries and nihilistic iconoclasts was the Italian Communist, Antonio Gramsci who noticed that the Russian people had not been converted to Communism: rather, they hated it. Gramsci called for “a long march through the institutions” – the arts, the cinema, education, theological seminaries, the mass media and the new medium of radio. Gramsci became fashionable among the soixantehuitards, among them Charles Reich who revealed Gramsci’s influence on him in his best-selling, *The Greening of America*:

“There is a revolution coming. It will not be like revolutions of the past. It will originate with the individual and with culture, and it will change the political structure only as its final act. It will not require violence to succeed and it cannot be successfully resisted with violence. It is now spreading with amazing rapidity and already our laws, institutions and social structures are changing in consequence.”

Victory in the culture wars was guaranteed once Christianity had died in the soul of Western man. This was happening at a speed which the revolutionaries could hardly have imagined in their most febrile moments. The method of the nihilists was an ideology of perpetual change, the human spirit the subject and victim of endless malleability. This method found its rationale in the doctrine of “absolute historicism”

– which meant that all morals, values and standards were products of the age. They claimed that there are no absolute moral standards and morality itself should be seen as something which is only “socially constructed”.

The revolutionaries could hardly have expected support from leading churchmen and theologians but that is what they got, and plenty of it. John Robinson, the Anglican Bishop of Woolwich, had already published his paperback bestseller *Honest to God* telling us that “Our image of God must go” and included a chapter of advice on sexual morality which abandoned scriptural norms for something called “situation ethics” which meant “doing the loving thing in the situation” – not much different from making it up as you went along.

But *Honest to God* and the other debunking popular theological books were only the mild beginnings of a process of iconoclasm which became ever more ruthless and extreme. In a series of books such as Harvey Cox’s *The Secular City* and Paul Van Buren’s *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, we were urged to adopt “Religionless Christianity”. There was even a title *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* by Thomas J.J. Altizer. The churches seemed to be exchanging *Heilige Geist* for *Zeitgeist*, the Holy Spirit for the spirit of the age. Many clergy enthusiastically supported the liberalisation of the laws on homosexuality, abortion and divorce.

The leading light – or rather the misleading darkness – of the 1960s revolution was Herbert Marcuse. He became the intellectual hero of the revolting students, as their political heroes were Che Guevara and Mao Tse Tung. Marcuse invented Critical Theory whose supporters repeated over and over again the slogans that Western societies are racist, sexist, xenophobic, homophobic, anti-Semitic, fascist and Nazi. The fundamental ambition of Critical Theory was the mass inculcation of “cultural pessimism” and “alienation” wherein a people prosperous and free comes to see its society and country as oppressive, evil and unworthy of loyalty and devotion

Marcuse knew that past revolutions had prospered by the use of rallying oratory and persuasive books, but he believed drugs and sex were better weapons. In his book *Eros and Civilisation* he called for the universal embrace of the Pleasure Principle – derived of course from Freud – and the creation of a world of “polymorphous perversity”. It was like the trumpet call of the pagans and bacchanalians who stirred the Israelites to the licentiousness of the Golden Calf while Moses was up the mountain talking with God. Marcuse’s famous slogan caught on worldwide; “Make love, not war.”

Marcuse’s colleague, Wilhelm Reich produced a hugely successful pornographic movie *WR The Mysteries of the Organism* which argued “There is no political revolution without first a sexual revolution”. The sexual revolution was simply the abolition of traditional Christian morality and the family. The universities were suddenly full of antinomian gurus, radical chic professional people who used their respected positions in society to undermine society. These included Timothy Leary, the anti-psychologist who preached the virtues of the psychedelic drug LSD and nihilism. He said,

“My advice to people today is as follows: If you take the game of life seriously, if you take your nervous system seriously, if you take your sense organs seriously, if you

take the energy process seriously, you must turn on, tune in, and drop out. That is to say, life, beyond the pleasure principle, is meaningless.”

This was not, as the phrase had it, “the new morality.” It was only the old immorality in psychobabble. The youngsters of course lapped it up.

This was also the origin of the therapeutic state, in which sin was redefined as illness, crime was only aberrant behaviour and psychoanalysis and even the anti-psychiatry of such as Thomas Szasz and Wilhelm Reich became intellectually fashionable and culturally influential. In a revaluation of all values, the movies and TV discovered new heroes and new villains. William Lind of the Free Congress Foundation commented:

“The entertainment industry has wholly absorbed the ideology of cultural Marxism and preaches it endlessly not just in sermons but in parables: strong women beating up weak men; children wiser than their parents; corrupt clergymen thwarted by carping drifters; upper class blacks confronting the violence of lower class whites; manly homosexuals who lead normal lives. It is all fable, an inversion of reality, but the entertainment industry made it seem more real than the world that lies just beyond the front door.”

Roger Kimball wrote recently in *New Criterion*:

“The long march through the institutions signified in the words of Marcuse, ‘working against the established institutions while working in them’. By this means – by insinuation and infiltration rather than by confrontation – the counter-cultural dreams of radicals like Marcuse have triumphed.”

Traditional Christian culture is now, in Gertude Himmelfarb’s words, only “a dissident culture”.

The prevailing mood was extremely relativistic and just as irrational. The notion that “everyone is free to make up their (*sic*) own mind” came to mean that any opinion is as valid as any other. Somehow this institutionalised anarchy was thought to be conducive to democracy, a supposition so insane that it produces in many thoughtful people a spirit of desperation bordering on incredulity – such a man is Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O’Connor who asked in his 2007 Corbishley Lecture, “What kind of culture are we developing which wants increasingly to divorce religion from the public forum?” And he warned, “Religious freedom is not a by-product of democracy but a driving force of it.”

The Cardinal explains exactly why the attempt to base democracy on absolute relativism is a contradiction in terms:

“Relativism takes its stand on a desire for equal treatment of different beliefs in the conviction that these beliefs are relative. Yet in contradictory fashion it does so because of a belief in human equality and human dignity which are not relative values. Relativism is no friend of true democracy. By banishing religion from the public realm in the name of equality, it discounts religious perspectives from debate, banishes truth to a private sphere, labels it ‘religious’ and infers it to be irrational. But

in fact truth is not something we construct. It is something we seek together. And there can only be a democratic discussion when truth is a matter of universal concern.”

What began in the 1960s, symbolised and represented by the riots and demonstrations of 1968, was the eruption of a counter culture. Of course there have always been provocative movements, pockets of rebelliousness, mavericks and oddballs of all sorts and conditions. But the phenomenon of 1968 was new. This was when real culture was replaced by the counter culture. As the saying goes, it was when the lunatics took over the asylum. Not only have they been running the place ever since, they have become more extreme, crazier and more ruthless over the intervening forty years.

We could always put up with a bit of nonsense here and there because we knew the difference between sense and nonsense. Nowadays it is widely believed that there is no difference. We are not mere neurotics who build castles in the air: we are psychotics and living in them. Aberration has become the norm. Sane men feared Nietzsche because he prophesied a revaluation of all values. What we now inhabit is worse: the devaluation of all values.

How long before I am carted from the pulpit and thrown into jail for preaching that Christian marriage is not the moral equivalent of sodomy? Don't laugh – not when you read of how the Bishop of Hereford was fined £47,000 and sent on a re-education course because he refused to employ a practising homosexual in work with children in his diocese. Politicians and clergy who were appointed to defend what is of value in our common life deny and denigrate these things. The very system of honour is corrupt and vile: what other words are left to describe it when pop-stars who advertise their regular use of illegal drugs are rewarded with knighthoods?

The high points of art and culture are derided. Old J.S. Bach is reckoned no better than the latest raucous jingle on the ipod – and if you dare to take issue with this cultural blasphemy you will be dismissed as “elitist.” In the world of the “installation” anything is a work of art so long as someone says it is. And this just means there is no longer such a thing as art. According to deconstructionist critics such as Jacques Derrida, “Texts do not have meanings.” But if that's true, Jacques, then the statement that texts do not have meanings is itself (being a text) meaningless. In this way even the possibility of meaning itself is denied. The nihilists are all-conquering.

The greatest scandal is that we refuse to pass on to our children – the ones we have not aborted – the values that can truly nourish them. They too are taught that what was once a mortal sin is now only a lifestyle choice. Educationists damn Shakespeare because he is not sufficiently politically-correct, and in any case what business has anyone telling our children that the bard is better than a lifestyle magazine? History consists in teaching the young to revile and despise the civilisation which has formed us and to turn instead to themes which are entirely secular and often utopian, chief among them the paranoid fantasy of global warming.

Forty years on, we are left to ask what if anything can be done, to echo Eliot's 1922 cry, “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow out of this stony rubbish?” The remedy is to be found in his poetic evocations of the truth of the Christian Faith.

Eliot told us that we cannot throw out Christianity yet expect all the other good things about our way of life to continue:

“Do you need to be told that even such modest attainments as you can boast in the way of polite society will hardly survive the Faith to which they owe their significance?”

The antidote to the results of the nihilistic iconoclasm which began a generation ago and which now engulf us is the re-Christianisation of the West. This is what the Cardinal told us in his Corbishley lecture. It is what the Holy Father tells us every day and it is what is being preached by a few clear heads and devout spirits in the other Christian churches – such as the Bishops of Rochester and London.

Brethren, pray.