

# The dream of a new society: why paul berman was right

[Society](#)



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The year 1968 and the immediately preceding years were one of the most tumultuous times of the twentieth century. There were protests and uprisings in all corners of the globe, for many different reasons: the Soviet Union was in its post-Stalin era and tensions with the United States were high. When the USSR placed nuclear missiles in Cuba in 1962, it raised the hairs on the neck of the US and ignited the Cuban Missile Crisis. China was in the midst of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (Duiker 269), where Mao Zedong struggled to keep balance in his Communist regime.

Czechoslovakia was making its way through Prague Spring, a short lived state of euphoria brought on by the diminished strictness of government ruling that led to a Soviet invasion (Duiker 198).

In the United States, the Civil Rights Movement was at its peak and students at universities across the nation were protesting the US government's decision to use Vietnam as a "muscle flexing" outlet to display its "manliness" (Suri 318). Not only in the United States, but around the world, university students made clear their dissatisfaction with the way contemporary leaders were shaping the world. Jeremi Suri's *The Global Revolutions of 1968* detail all of these events, but also provide three different interpretations of all of these events: Paul Berman's *The Dream of a New Society*, Arthur Marwick's *The Consummation of a Cultural Revolution*, and Suri's own *Power and Protest*. Marwick focuses more on the cultural aspect of the revolutions, how the protests of 1968 reshaped the world culturally. I found this to be somewhat credible, but his theory had flaws. Suri blames the protests of 1968 on "contradiction between idealistic claims and stagnant politics among state

leaders” (Suri 316). While there is some truth to this, I do not see that as the sole cause of the worldwide political unrest.

It was Berman’s ideology that there were four different (though related) revolutions that did not produce considerable change at the time, but laid the framework for later change, that I found to be the most convincing interpretation of the revolutions of 1968. According to Berman, “ four enormous revolutions were roiling the world at that one moment, each of those revolutions different in nature and purpose from the others, each of them far too huge and unprecedented for anyone, no matter how old and experienced, to comprehend at the time” (Berman 302). These four revolutions were a revolt against communist regimes, a revolt against western imperialism, student protests (anti-war, civil rights), and a spiritual movement. The first revolution, or as Berman calls them “ the student uprisings” (Berman 302) was essentially a battle between old and new, “... the insurrections that were sexual, feminist, and gay... the noisy entrance of the first mass group of African-American students into the previously segregated American universities, the slightly crazy effort to raise insubordination into a culture, to eat, dress, smoke, dance differently” (Berman 302). Berman refers to the second revolution as a cousin of the first, as it deals with the spiritual uprising that took place around the country. In today’s time we recognize this as the time of the hippie. This revolution took all the idea of challenging the norm and applied it to a more spiritual level, mixing Buddhism, poetry, transcendentalism, folklore, psychedelic mind expansions (drugs), and “ God knows what else” (Berman 302).

This wave of change was not solely contained to philosophy, but even made its mark (significantly) on the music scene as well. In this instance, the word spiritual does not solely apply to the new bohemian lifestyle. This spiritual revolution shone light into many, many more aspects of the world than just the university towns; it was large enough to even shake the establishment of the Catholic Church. Revolutions three and four are described as “ strictly this-worldly” (Berman 303). The first was the revolution against Western imperialism, and was coming to a peak in 1968. Communism was spreading like wildfire throughout the corners of the world and there was nothing that the free West could do to stop it; it had finally met its match. As they say, drastic times call for drastic measures, and that is the approach the West (primarily the United States) took to stop what was seen as an impending doom to the free world.

This did not sit well with these new found bohemians and intellectuals, a conflict of interest that sparked Berman’s third revolution. The final revolution is one on the other side of the looking glass from the third revolution; those under communist rule desired leftist governments without the inconvenience of Soviet Communism. With the brief taste of freedom received during the Prague Spring, Communism’s defeat, for the first time, seemed very possible. This all seems immensely large, when you think about it. But Berman describes the sensation of these revolutions to a tee (in my opinion): It was the new society coming into being. That was the source of our exhilaration... For something useful was bound to come of those many uprisings. Maybe not a revolution in the major sense; but a revolution in the minor sense.

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Maybe not an entirely new society; but not the rickety old social system that already existed, either. Such was the spirit of 1968. It led to a very peculiar aftermath, visible and invisible, during the next decades (Berman 305). In short, it would certainly be incorrect to say that these revolutions were irrelevant in their time; they shook the world in ways it had never been shaken before. But, Berman's point is that although it was shaken, or exhilarated, the effects and consequences of what happened in 1968 would not fully be seen or understood until the following decades. It is this very reason that convinced me that Berman's interpretation was the most convincing: logic leads me to think that every action has a reaction, but to also keep in mind that these reactions are not always instant and clear. Berman's concept of the revolutions implies that the full effect of 1968 is finally felt twenty years later (Berman 308).

If we take a broad look at that immediate time period, the most obvious and major event that occurred was the dissolution of the Soviet Union. What events that took place in 1968 directly led to this conclusion? In section I of *The Global Revolutions of 1968*, we find the 20th Party Congress Speech given by Nikita Khrushchev in 1956. Although he was the immediate successor of Josef Stalin, who had built the Soviet Empire on fear and terror, Khrushchev was quick to distance himself from that light (Suri 1). In the 20th Party Congress Speech, Khrushchev openly denounced Stalin's crimes. This speech, which was intended to be secret, was quickly publicized and led to a new and never-before-seen forthrightness of the people to criticize Stalin and his wandering from true communism. Khrushchev acknowledges the use of force against the U. S.

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S. R's own people on behalf of Lenin and Stalin, but regards it as useless, "Stalin... used extreme methods and mass repressions at a time when the revolution was already victorious, when the Soviet state was strengthened, when the exploiting classes were already liquidated..." (Suri 7). By publicly recognizing the slighting of his own people, and allowing this to be common knowledge, Khrushchev opened a door of dissent that would never fully be able to be closed in the minds of the Russian people. This would be mirrored thirty years later when Mikhail Gorbachev would be selected to lead the Soviets. He would gradually begin to realize the need for reform for his country, and even witnessed himself farmers in Canada working hard on their own initiative (Duiker 202), something that was utterly unthinkable in his homeland. When a government doubts themselves, they leave their people no choice but to doubt them as well, and what is a nation without its people? This lack of social reform, along with the lack of political and economic reform ultimately led to the disintegration of the Soviet Empire, and it all began with the seed planted by Nikita Khrushchev in 1956. The student protest and spiritual revolutions played a significant role in the United States and the rest of the world in 1968.

Today it is known as the time of free love, great music, and picket signs. These are just words to describe the mental images conjured when thinking about the era of the hippie, but that is not all it created; these two revolutions in combined to form a social awakening for the young people (students) of this world, making it not only social acceptable to be aware, but encouraged. The Restless Youth report conducted by the CIA boldly states that " Student rebelliousness is not a recent phenomenon" (Suri 221), and it <https://assignbuster.com/the-dream-of-a-new-society-why-paul-berman-was-right/>

did not cease to be a phenomenon. Citing past worldly examples of student dissent such as English students burning down lecture halls in the 13th century all the way up to the 1960s, where students led the frontline for the Civil Rights Movement, the CIA report foreshadows what is to come for many more years: Students are an elite and volatile group—to a great degree imbued with an almost mystical faith in the ability of an aroused “people” to generate reform and with a marked distrust of governmental bureaucracy. They have a knack for being among the first to espouse unpopular causes and have been quick to call society to account for its shortcomings. (Suri 220) A prime example of this student rebellion is the protest at Tiananmen Square in Beijing, China. Wanting the government to “reduce the level of official corruption and enact democratic reforms, opening the political process to the Chinese people”, thousands of students gathered in the square to provide moral support to their many peers who had gone on hunger strikes (Duiker 258).

The excitement and self-power brought to the protesting students of 1968 all around the world, set the example (and will continue to) for the following generations and even more generations to come. Already having discussed the revolutions of spirit, protest, and anticommunism, we are left with the one most pertinent to us: the global struggle against Western imperialism. In this context, I believe Western imperialism to not only be the monopolization of land, but also the manipulation of emotion and global ties to promote the will of the West, and by the West I mean the United States. In 1978, a woman named Freda Utey died, and US President Ronald Reagan used her death as a means to promote his anticommunist views in *Blind on the Left*. I

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am not saying that he did this out of disrespect, but he certainly uses the emotion of the circumstance to play on his passion for America. Regan recalls of Utley: ... a very remarkable woman in Washington, D. C.

died just a few days short of her 80th birthday. I would be impossible to count the lives she touched in England... in China, Japan, the Soviet U. & here in her adopted home in the U. S. She once described herself as a “ premature anti-communist. I told the truth about communism long before the world was prepared to hear it. ” And Freda Utley knew the truth about communism because as an idealistic woman in the 1920s she accepted communism... She had tried communism and learned its falsehood FALSENESS.

(Suri 283-284) This occurred somewhat between the two time periods that Berman speaks of, and I would consider it neither a cause nor effect, but more of an example. This is the idea of Western power that countless students all over the world were fighting. Who gave the United States the right to dictate to the world what is right and what is wrong? Despite the last six pages of argument on behalf of Paul Berman, I do find some verity in Arthur Marwick’s interpretation that the revolutions had mainly a cultural effect, and Jeremi Suri’s thoughts that contradictory thoughts and actions among governments and political leaders were the main cause of the unrest in 1968. The important part about both of those is that they can both be found within Paul Berman’s explanation. What is the culture of a people without a past, present and future? Sure, the revolutions had a cultural effect on many nations, some lasting and others not. And as I have previously



noted, political inconsistencies did account for significant events stemming from 1968. But, once again, both of those philosophies deal with the “ here and now”.

Paul Berman takes both of those ideologies and integrates them with his own personal experiences to apply all the different aspects of the tumultuous 1968 to explain even more incidents in the future. From analyzing the facts from his perspective, I've even added on to his train of thought to create one of my own. Even though I am a young student (not so different from the so-called revolutionary students described by Berman, Marwick and Suri) and 1968 seems like many lifetimes ago, it is still a very recent past in the overall scheme of things; not only did it mold the way for the following decades, but it will continue to do so well into the rest of my lifetime, and maybe even beyond. It is for that reason, which I was presented with facts and a firsthand account of the excitement and was able to build upon his interpretation, that I found Paul Berman's *The Dream of a New Society* to be the most convincing. Works Cited: Berman, Paul. " *The Dream of a New Society*. " *The Global Revolutions of 1968: a Norton Casebook in History*.

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