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Abstract
The fortieth anniversary celebrations of the Woodstock music festival have gone dangerously close to transforming it into another commodified spectacle. Yet the spirit of the original Woodstock lives on to remind us of another way of thinking about the world. The Woodstock Music and Art Fair in August 1969 featured a galaxy of performers who had contributed significantly to the alternative zeitgeist that spoke of peace and love in ways that may sound corny now. The peace and love of the Sixties was grounded in a strong antiwar sensibility and a sense of collective solidarity against the American war in Vietnam. When Joan Baez spoke about her husband – draft resister David Harris – introducing “The Ballad of Joe Hill”, the link between the struggles of the working class and the antiwar struggles of the day was apparent.

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Yet one does not think automatically of the working class in relation to Woodstock. Was not this an event for privileged and mostly white kids? At one level, of course. But there is another level, one where Woodstock transcended whiteness – not least, of course, the musicians. It posed an alternative vision of art, protest, community and everyday life. Similarly, middle class hippies did not cement their privileged upbringings but challenged them in various ways and sought to reconfigure human relationships and also the relations between humans and the land. This even involved hard work on rural communes. There is a poignant moment in the film Easy Rider when Peter Fonda gazes around a rather bleak and barren Taos commune and suggests that they will make it. We know they won’t and the film captures that moment when the counterculture appeared to have exhausted itself after an exhilarating few years. The
music lived on, of course, and in a fundamental sense so did a
countercultural sensibility and it is particularly evident in the
environmental movement and green politics today. The music
and the culture generally were and are vital because they buoy
the soul, renew the spirit and fire the imagination.

Acts of remembrance are not reducible to either
nostalgia or saleable commodities even though both may
be apparent features. So it is important to acknowledge the
positive contributions of major events like Woodstock or the
march on Washington. It is, indeed, a pity that the antiwar
movement does not keep alive its own rituals of remembrance.
Every year now there is a ceremony “remembering” the battle
of Long Tan and the supposedly heroic Australian soldiers.
Their story is pure mythology because massive American air
power has been written out of it. When it comes to Vietnam,
mythologies abound. How many time have you heard how our
veterans and the Americans were spat upon in the streets,
abused in the pubs, called “baby killers”, treated like scum,
no return home marches? This is pure mythology but has a
deep hold on the popular consciousness. It is not necessarily
the case that no spitting or abuse ever occurred but the idea
that it was a regular occurrence is complete invention and owes
a lot to Hollywood myth-making. The antiwar movement needs
its own acts of remembrance partly to counter such mythology.
The 1968 anniversaries around the world were important in
this regard and so, too, is Woodstock.

The strains of Hendrix’s wonderful “Star Spangled
Banner” still echo powerfully in the chambers where music
and politics conjoin: the napalm bombs, the screaming women
and children, the inner urban sirens and riots and explosions.
The war at home and the war abroad were never captured
more vividly. This is one of those moments from the 1960s
that resonates powerfully, as do Martin Luther King’s “I Have
a Dream” speech or Mario Savio’s “operation of the machine”
speech at the height of the Free Speech Movement. Such
moments still speak to us eloquently. Take Savio’s words:

There’s a time when the operation of the machine becomes
so odious, makes you so sick at heart that you can’t take
part, you can’t even passively take part and you’ve got to
put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon
the levers, upon all the apparatus and you've got to make it stop. And you've got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it that unless you're free the machine will be prevented from working at all.

Has the machine, whether it be the machine of war or the machine of financial exploitation or the machine of official politics ever been more in need of challenging or less open to genuine democratisation? Politics, as Tariq Ali once observed, has become little more than a game show, devoid of substance and passion and vision. Social democracy, in particular, has become a shadow of its former self and we live in a state of “inverted totalitarianism” or “managed democracy”, to use the words of Sheldon Wolin. Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s appointment of former Liberal Party treasurer and Deputy Prime Minister Peter Costello to the Future Fund reeks of the soulless politics of today. Present day Library Party leader Malcolm Turnbull is right – he is a hypocrite. All those words he wrote blasting neoliberalism were meaningless. In policy terms he is a neoliberal through and through and his appointments of other Liberals to sinecures testify to his determination to rid politics of ideology. It might sound nice but politics without ideology is also politics without ideas and all that remains is management. Forget the search for the good society, forget the dreams of a genuine social alternative. What the Labor Party has given us is bureaucratic control, soulless politics and a program for success just because it is success (or in the case of New South Wales, failure because the brain-dead party apparatchiks cannot distinguish between it and success). Woodstock is looking even better from the current vantage point because as the years grind on, its dreams as well as the dreams of labour activists and songwriters like Joe Hill, so wonderfully memorialized in Alfred Hayes and Earl Robinson’s tribute, call us again to fight the good fight.

Yet this is also the twentieth anniversary of the collapse of Eastern European communism and the beginning of the Soviet Union’s own collapse. 1989 witnessed not only the demolition of the Berlin Wall but also the revolutionary transformation of Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Romania (the latter generating the memorable execution of the tyrant Nicolae Ceausescu). For neoliberals, of course, this was their ultimate
vindications. Liberal market economies had triumphed and that was the end of the story and, indeed, for Frances Fukuyama, the end of history. What a paradox then that these days in Russia there is a remarkable degree of affection for the memory of Brezhnev, while the great Soviet reformer Gorbachev is held in somewhat less esteem. This does not mean that the Communist system has rehabilitated itself but rather that the “free” market has been found severely wanting and where Communism deprived them of valuable freedoms it guaranteed them others (for a long time) like employment and housing. The ideal of socialism and communism was, it goes without saying, far from being achieved in those Communist states. Leftist critics of the Communist state in Russia from its early days, like Emma Goldman, were acutely aware of the propensity of this system to betray its ideals. And that is the point – the system (and, of course, its human agents) betrayed the ideals; the ideals were not inherently corrupt, the dream not inherently authoritarian.

There was an interesting exchange between the visionary leader of the Prague Spring in 1968 Alexander Dubcek and the future Czech leader Vaclav Havel at a press conference in November 1989. Dubcek proposed a moderate socialism for the new state but Havel retorted: “Socialism’ is a word that has lost meaning in our society”. He had a point, of course. When socialism has been so bastardised by its association with a repressive regime, it tends to lose resonance. There is, however, nothing that automatically connects socialism to repressive regimes. It was Dubcek who in 1968 advocated “socialism with a human face”. And there are many varieties of socialism, some of which have been little more than, to use Bernard Henri-Levy’s telling phrase, “barbarism with a human face”. It is useful, in this context, to return to the sage advice offered in different forms by William Morris and Robert Michels. First Morris:

Men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name.

In his pathbreaking study of social democracy early last century, Robert Michels concluded with these words:
The democratic currents of history resemble successive waves. They break ever on the same shoal. They are ever renewed. This enduring spectacle is simultaneously encouraging and depressing. When democracies have gained a certain stage of development, they undergo a gradual transformation, adopting the aristocratic spirit, and in many cases also the aristocratic forms, against which at the outset they struggled so fiercely. Now new accusers rise to denounce the traitors; after an era of glorious combats and of inglorious power, they end by fusing with the old dominant class; whereupon once more they are in their turn attacked by fresh opponents who appeal to the name of democracy. It is probable that this cruel game will continue without end.

A brilliant diagnosis, certainly, but not an argument against dreams. Add to the insights of Morris and Michels the much later critical analysis of Herbert Marcuse and we have further reason to suspect that the socialist states would inevitably corrupt the vision of socialism. In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse argued that tendencies towards authoritarianism were built into our psychological structure. They were not innate tendencies but ones nurtured by authoritarian societies. That, he explained, is why every revolution is a betrayed revolution. So, if we accept Marcuse’s analysis, the very structure of our psychology and thought processes have to be confronted as well as the structure of society. It sounds like too much hard work or, as Oscar Wilde once quipped, “Socialism seems like a good idea but it would take too many evenings”.

Yet Marcuse was, in a sense, prescient and also prepared the way for the new radicalism. One of the things radicals in the Sixties tried to do, however incoherently, was forge a new sensibility, a new ethos and Marcuse wrote about this in his later *Essay on Liberation*. He noted that even a term like “flower power” challenged our assumptions about and understanding of power. And who can forget the wonderful image of the hippies sticking flowers in the bayonets of the national guard at the antiwar march on Washington in 1967? In these cynical times perhaps it is too much to expect people to dream of anything other than plasma televisions and other trappings of consumer comfort. Yet history speaks to us of possibilities as well as limitations, of our capacity to challenge the machines of power
and to sometimes, just sometimes, overcome. How fitting, then, that Joan Baez, who sang “We Shall Overcome” to the students during the Free Speech movement as well as at the march on Washington, was the one to remind us at Woodstock of the importance of struggle and, in particular, class struggle by singing about the IWW hero Joe Hill.

References


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