★ RICHARD WOLIN ★

French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s

the wind from the east

The Wind from the East

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The Wind from the East

French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s

Richard Wolin

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For my students at the University of Paris
and the University of Nantes, 2005–2008

There are now two winds blowing in the world: the Wind from the East and the Wind from the West. According to a Chinese saying: either the Wind from the East will triumph over the Wind from the West, or the Wind from the West will triumph over the Wind from the East. In my opinion, the nature of the present situation is that the Wind from the East has triumphed over the Wind from the West.

—*Mao Tse-tung*

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Prologue

> If you can remember anything about the sixties,
> you weren't really there.
>
> —Paul Kantner, Jefferson Starship

According to an oft-cited maxim, all history is the history of the present. Try as they might, historians are incapable of abstracting from contemporary issues and concerns. In fact, were they to do so, their work would surely reek of antiquarian sterility. At best, historians can make their biases clear to ensure they do not exercise an overtly disfiguring influence on their presentations and findings.

The "presence of the past" is especially true of the 1960s. Analysts and commentators have heatedly debated their meaning and import, but nearly all agree that the decade was a watershed. Whatever their ultimate meaning, the 1960s were a caesura that signified the impossibility of returning to the status quo ante. Thus, today the 1960s remain an inescapable rite of passage for those who seek to fathom the nature of the political present. First, their range and extent was genuinely international. In an age of instantaneous, mass communication, virtually no corner of the globe could remain immune from their influence and legacy. Second, the decade's effects, rather than being confined to one specific manifestation or mode, were, to invoke French anthropologist Marcel Mauss, a "total social phenomenon." The 1960s and their aftereffects influenced—and left permanently transformed—the realms of politics, society, fashion, art, and music.

By the same token, it would be impossible to deny that the 1960s have also become historical. Thus the decade has provided fertile ground for interpreters who are seeking to distill and comprehend the

origins and bases of contemporary politics and society. Yet, as history, the 1960s—whose study threatens to metastasize into another academic growth industry—possess a temporality with a peculiar and profound bearing on the historical present. As such, as a cultural and political phenomenon, the decade remains a pivotal way station on the road toward comprehending who we are and what we would like to become. Hence, to contribute to the historicization of the 1960s is at the same time a method of coming to grips with the "history of the present."

According to one celebrated maxim, the 1960s are an "interpretation" in search of an "event." Indeed, a dizzying vortex of interpretations has emerged seeking to fathom and clarify what transpired and why. Having both studied these events and lived through them as a youth (although, admittedly, many memories remain enshrouded in a Hendrix-esque "purple haze"), at this point, when asked about their ultimate meaning, I am often tempted to fall back on Chinese premier Zhou En-lai's immortal response when asked to comment on the historical import of the French Revolution: "It's too soon to tell."

Yet, if pressed to define the "rational kernel" of the 1960s, I would say that it was quite simply the era that rediscovered the virtues of participatory politics. The 1950s had witnessed the triumph of political technocracy. At the time, it had become an intellectual commonplace that government by elites—in most cases, white, male elites—was preferable to the perils and risks of popular participation. Political mobilization from below was viewed as irrational and untrustworthy, a prelude to totalitarianism in either its "right" or "left" variant. The 1950s were a decade when the so-called welfare-warfare state was ascendant, culminating in the debacle of Vietnam and kindred foreign policy disasters that often resulted in massive and abhorrent human rights violations. (Sadly, in many cases, the promissory note on such violations remains past due.) In the United States and elsewhere, the 1960s signified an attempt to wrest control of "the political" from elites: to counter the ills of "technocratic liberalism" via recourse to logics of grassroots political engagement and thereby to restore confidence in basic democratic norms.

But the 1960s were also, significantly, the moment when the valence of the political itself underwent a significant transformation and expansion. Henceforth, politics no longer remained confined to the trappings

and rituals of electioneering: registering to vote, canvassing, mass rallies, "sound bites," televised debates, and the culminating, frequently anticlimactic, solitary act of the secret ballot. Instead, politics was redefined to incorporate *cultural politics*. Politics began to include acts of self-transformation and the search for personal authenticity. Citizens realized (and here, the American civil rights movement stands out as Exhibit A) that they were not cut from the same mould. Politics became part and parcel of a new quest for personal identity, a quest that is also reflected in much of the literature of the period, for in the modern world identities no longer arise preformed and ready-made. Instead, they must be created, fashioned, and nurtured. This development helps to account for the new proximity between culture and politics. Today, culture has become one of the primary vehicles of political self-affirmation and group self-expression. Thus, one of the 1960s' crucial legacies is the idea of cultural politics. The lesson we have learned is that the *cultural* is the *political*.

As such, I consider *The Wind from the East* foremost a political book. It is not—or I hope it is not—an exercise in what Nietzsche excoriated as "antiquarian history." Instead, it takes its methodological bearings from Walter Benjamin's recommendation that the historian, rather than seeking to portray the past "as it really was" (an unattainable ideal in any event), "actualize" the epoch or event, with an eye toward its actuality or contemporary relevance. In Benjamin's view, this recommendation meant that the historian interprets the past "in order to blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history—blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework." Benjamin utilized the notion of *Jetztzeit,* or "now-time," as his benchmark or criterion, which he associated with the theological idea of "a Messianic cessation of happening." As heirs to the spectacular failures of political messianism, our political criteria must conversely be immanent, secular, consensus oriented, and democratic.[1]

The Wind from the East represents a modest attempt to capture the meaning of the 1960s via "indirection": through attention to an exotic,

[1] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations,* trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 263.

alternately serious and playful political detour taken by French youth—or a prominent segment thereof—during the late 1960s and 1970s, the infatuation with Cultural Revolutionary China and, more generally, with what came to be known as Mao Tse-tung Thought. The Maoist fascination began as a marginal phenomenon. But soon, and in ways unforeseeable to the actors themselves, it transformed into a general cultural-political intoxication. At a certain point, it seemed that *le tout Paris* was in the grips of the Maoist contagion. By the time the dust had cleared, many of France's leading intellectuals—Michel Foucault, Jean-Paul Sartre, the *Tel Quel* group—had been swept up in this giddy, left-wing political vortex.

But, importantly, as it ran its course, the Maoist phenomenon underwent significant alterations and modifications. Ultimately, what began as an exercise in revolutionary dogmatism was transformed into a Dionysian celebration of cultural pluralism and the right to difference. At issue was a political learning process via which French youth cured itself of its infantile revolutionary longings in order to focus on more circumscribed tasks pertaining to the transformation of everyday life and the regeneration of civil society. Although French Maoism cannot take sole credit for this salutary redirection of political energies, it remains an integral part of the story. It also had a strangely beneficial effect on French intellectuals, curing this mandarin caste of its residual elitism and thereby helping to promote a new, more modest, and democratic cultural sensibility, for in the aftermath of the May revolt, when Maoism had reached its zenith, French intellectuals learned to *follow* as well as to *lead*. Much of this development was captured by Foucault's felicitous coinage: the *specific* intellectual had supplanted the *universal* intellectual. In a further nuance or twist, the *democratic* intellectual would replace the *vanguard* intellectual of the Jacobin-Bolshevik mould.

One of the most gratifying aspects of writing contemporary history is that many of the protagonists remain alive and often motivated to speak—at times, volubly—about their experiences. I have benefited immensely from conversations with Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Jean-Pierre Le Goff, former Situationist Mustapha Khayati, Tony Lévy (brother of the late Gauche prolétarienne leader Benny Lévy), Alain Touraine, as

well as numerous bystanders and foot soldiers of the May movement. Both Cohn-Bendit and Touraine composed on-the-spot analyses of the May events (*Obsolete Communism: The Left-Wing Alternative* and *The May Movement*, respectively) that, to this day, remain indispensable points of reference for anyone seeking to comprehend what happened and why. At one point, Cohn-Bendit vowed he had "nothing more to say" about May. I would like to thank him for generously ignoring this pledge. Touraine is one of the premier sociologists of our time. His theory of the "return of the actor" has drawn many of the right conclusions and insights from the May events. The course of history is not unalterable. "Events" happen and meaningful historical change occurs, something that the structuralist generation had denied. This change is initiated by people acting in concert who seek to reassert meaningful control over their lives and over the pace of historical change.

Chapter 7, "Foucault and the Maoists: Biopolitics and Engagement," was cowritten with Ron Haas, a former student and friend whose intimate knowledge of the French May and the corresponding *gauchiste* (leftist) milieus and *groupuscules* has never ceased to amaze me. Ron and I first began discussing these events ten years ago at Rice University. Since then, he has completed his own study of one of the relatively unsung heroes of the post-May era: the pioneer of homosexual liberation, Guy Hocquenghem. When published, Ron's study of Hocquenghem will undoubtedly add much to our overall grasp of the era and its significance.

During the last few years I have had the privilege of teaching in France, where I had the opportunity to discuss the ideas contained in this book with numerous French students and colleagues. I would like to thank my hosts Professors Emmanuel Faye (University of Paris X Nanterre) and Muriel Rouyer (University of Nantes) for their kind invitations—and for patiently enduring my unbeautiful, American-accented French. Professor Philippe Raynaud of University of Paris-II and the Institut universitaire de France added some extremely valuable insights during the final stages of writing. I would also like to thank my friend Ed Berenson, director of New York University's Institute of French Studies, for inviting me to present a preliminary version of my argument at that wonderful haven of francophone urbanity.

I would like to thank my colleagues at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York for their unfailing solidarity and sociability. In particular I would like to thank History Program Executive Officer Josh Freeman and President Bill Kelly for their unstinting support and encouragement. At the Graduate Center I have been blessed with the punctual aid of research assistants Ran Zwigenberg and Scott Johnson. The New York Area Seminar in Intellectual and Cultural History, which I co-convene with my friend and colleague Jerry Seigel, has proved to be a constant and welcome source of intellectual stimulation. I would also like to acknowledge the assistance of my former student Martin Woessner for helpful comments on an earlier version of the manuscript.

The revised version of the manuscript has benefited immeasurably from two very insightful anonymous readers' reports commissioned by Princeton University Press. Although at this point their identities have become somewhat less anonymous, I would like to publicly acknowledge how perspicacious their remarks have proved. At a crucial stage, Martin Jay (University of California, Berkeley) and Carolyn Dean (Brown University) read the chapter on *Tel Quel* with insight and discernment and helped me to reformulate my interpretation. My nonpareil editor at the Press, Brigitta van Rheinberg, provided a thoughtful and detailed, chapter-by-chapter (virtually line-by-line) commentary on an earlier manuscript draft. Without Brigitta's keen eye for intelligibility and coherence, the final version of this book would undoubtedly be infinitely poorer. At this point, she has selflessly and graciously edited three of my books. With any luck, she will be willing to edit three more.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my wonderful children, Emma, Seth, and Ethan, for being who they are—and for being so alive!

New York City
January 2009

The Wind from the East

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INTRODUCTION

The Maoist Temptation

> It is true enough: millions of people have jobs which offer no reason for living; neither production nor consumption can provide existence with meaning. . . . If the present phase of history can be defined in terms of ballistic missiles, thermo-nuclear weapons, the moon race and the arms race, should we be surprised that part of the student population wavers between the negation of the hippies, an aspiration towards redemptive violence, and escape towards a new utopia?
>
> —Raymond Aron, *La révolution introuvable*

It is a remarkable fact that some forty years later, the year 1968 remains an obligatory point of reference for contemporary politics. During the 2008 presidential election, one of Barack Obama's campaign pledges was that he would elevate American politics to a plateau of unity beyond the divisiveness of the 1960s. The John McCain campaign, for its part, tried repeatedly to tarnish Obama's luster by dramatizing his association during the early days of his political career with former 1960s radical William Ayers. Similarly, during the 2007 French presidential campaign, both main candidates felt compelled to take a stance on the heritage of May 1968. For the eventual winner, Nicolas Sarkozy, the May events served as a negative touchstone. Playing on the nation's insecurities following a series of riots in immigrant suburbs, Sarkozy labeled May 1968 as a turning point in French history when respect for authority declined and moral anarchy gained the upper hand. Conversely, the Socialist candidate Ségolène Royale made a point of holding her final election rally in the Charléty Stadium, which had been the site for one of the May revolt's largest political rallies.

In Germany, too, the 1960s have served as an important point of reference for making sense of contemporary politics. In 2001 photos surfaced showing Foreign Minister and ex-sixty-eighter Joschka Fischer angrily hurling a brick at a policeman during a 1973 demonstration. Among conservatives the image—depicting a confrontation that had occurred nearly thirty years earlier—provoked a flood of accusations alleging that Fischer was unfit for office. More generally, the episode gave rise to a groundswell of national soul-searching about how to historicize the unsettling political tumult of three decades earlier.

In many respects the year 1968 was an annus mirabilis with global political repercussions. The specter of revolution materialized in Peking, Mexico City, New York, Chicago, Berlin, Warsaw, and Prague, where, tragically, hopes for "socialism with a human face" were brutally crushed under the tread of Soviet tanks.

In France, however, events unfolded according to a somewhat different logic. As elsewhere, the revolt was begun by students. But one of the May uprising's unique aspects was that, within a fortnight, French workers decided to join forces with the student demonstrators. This potent student-worker alliance led to a massive general strike that paralyzed the central government and, at one point, compelled President Charles de Gaulle to flee. When the smoke had cleared, eight to nine million French men and women had joined in the strike. France had experienced its greatest social unrest since the 1930s.

The *Wind from the East* represents a modest contribution to making sense of these challenging and tumultuous events. By focusing on one of May 1968's neglected backstories—the wave of Sinophilia that crested in France later that decade—it seeks to illuminate the whole.

The story begins with a small group of *gauchistes*—political activists who had positioned themselves to the left of the French Communist Party—who were students of Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser at the prestigious Ecole normale supérieure. Fascinated and impassioned by political events that were transpiring nearly half a world away, they began to identify profoundly with Mao's China, which they came to perceive as a panacea for metropolitan France's own multifarious political ills.

None spoke Chinese, and reliable information about contemporary China was nearly impossible to come by, since Mao had basically forbidden access to outsiders. Little matter. The less these *normaliens* knew about contemporary China, the better it suited their purposes. Cultural Revolutionary China became a projection screen, a Rorschach test, for their innermost radical political hopes and fantasies, which in de Gaulle's France had been deprived of a real-world outlet. China became the embodiment of a "radiant utopian future." By "becoming Chinese," by assuming new identities as French incarnations of China's Red Guards, these dissident Althusserians sought to reinvent themselves wholesale. Thereby, they would rid themselves of their guilt both as the progeny of colonialists and, more generally, as bourgeois.

Increasingly, the "real" China ceased to matter. Instead, at issue were questions of political eschatology. The "successes" of Chinese communism—or its imagined successes—would magically compensate for the abysmal failures of the Communist experience elsewhere. The young gauchistes viewed themselves as *pur et dur*— true believers who refused to compromise with the sordid realities of contemporary France. In their eyes there could be no going back to the faded glories of French republicanism—a tradition that, in their view, had been fatally compromised by the legacies of colonialism and Gaullist authoritarianism. One senses that if the Cultural Revolution did not exist, the gauchistes would have had to invent it. Mao's China offered the students a way to perpetuate the intoxications of the French revolutionary tradition—the glories of the Bastille, of Valmy, and of the Paris Commune—in an era when the oppressive nature of "really existing socialism" had reached undeniably grotesque proportions.

The French Communist Party took pleasure in belittling the Maoists, owing to their small numbers, as a *groupuscule*—a little group. Were it not for the political maladroitness of the Pompidou government, which in the spring of 1970 abruptly arrested the Maoist leaders and banned their newspaper, their story, when set against the overall tapestry of the May events, would probably rate a minor footnote. But owing to the authorities' heavy-handedness, overnight the unheralded Maoists became a cause célèbre. None other than Jean-Paul Sartre took over the Maoist newspaper, in bold defiance of the government's

arbitrary and brutal political sweep. At one point the Rolling Stones' frontman, Mick Jagger, interrupted a concert at the Palais des Sports Stadium to plead for the imprisoned Maoists' release. Suddenly and unexpectedly, Maoism had acquired immense cachet as political chic. It began attracting prominent intellectuals—Michel Foucault as well as *Tel Quel* luminaries Philippe Sollers and Julia Kristeva—who perceived in Maoism a creative solution to France's excruciating political immobilism. After all, the Socialist Party was in total disarray. The Communists had become a "party of order." The Gaullists, with Pompidou now at the helm, pointedly refused to relinquish the reins of power. Yet, here was a left-wing groupuscule active in the Latin Quarter that in many respects had become the heir of May 1968's emancipatory quest.

As a result of the May events and their contact with the Maoists, French intellectuals bade adieu to the Jacobin-Leninist authoritarian political model of which they had formerly been so enamored. They ceased behaving like mandarins and internalized the virtues of democratic humility. In May's aftermath, they attuned themselves to new forms and modes of social struggle. Their post-May awareness concerning the injustices of top-down politics alerted them to the virtues of "society" and political struggle from below. In consequence, French intellectual life was wholly transformed. The Sartrean model of the engaged intellectual was upheld, but its content was totally reconfigured. Insight into the debilities of political vanguardism impelled French writers and thinkers to reevaluate the Dreyfusard legacy of the universal intellectual: the intellectual who shames the holders of power by flaunting timeless moral truths.

The Maoists' story is worth telling insofar as it represents a paradigmatic instance of a *constructive political learning process*. The Maoists started out as political dogmatists and true believers. But they soon found it impossible to reconcile their pro-Chinese ideological blinders with the emancipatory spirit of May. Once they ceased deluding themselves with revolutionary slogans, they began to understand politics in an entirely new light. The idea of cultural revolution was thereby wholly transformed. It ceased to be an exclusively Chinese point of reference. Instead it came to stand for an entirely new approach to thinking about

politics: an approach that abandoned the goal of seizing political power and instead sought to initiate a democratic revolution in mores, habitudes, sexuality, gender roles, and human sociability in general.

Ultimately, the gauchistes came to realize that human rights and the values of libertarian socialism, rather than operating at cross-purposes, were complementary. It was the French, after all, who back in 1789 had invented the rights of man and citizen. Under the more contemporary guise of human rights, it was to this legacy they would now return.

AN INTERPRETATION IN SEARCH OF AN EVENT

It has often been said, perhaps only half in jest, that May 1968 in France is an "interpretation" in search of an "event," so concertedly have historians, pundits, and politicians struggled to impose intellectual sense on a sequence of events that at every turn seemed to defy tidy conceptual coherence.

In both France and the United States, the idea that the 1960s were an unmitigated catastrophe has become a staple of conservative ideology. On this side of the Atlantic, one of the commonplaces of neoconservative history-writing is that the social disequilibrium of the postwar period—urban riots, drug use, accelerated divorce rates, and declining respect for authority—can uniformly be traced to the 1960s, purportedly one of the most disastrous decades in American history. Norman Podhoretz, one of neoconservatism's founding fathers, believes that the 1960s witnessed a process of irreversible cultural demise: "Auden's low dishonest decade, of course, was the 1930s; its clever hopes centered on the construction of a workers' paradise in the Soviet Union. Our counterpart was the 1960s, and its less clever hopes centered not on construction . . . but on destruction—the destruction of the institutions that made up the American way of life."[1] In the eyes of Newt Gingrich, American history possessed a 350-year narrative coherence until the

[1] Norman Podhoretz, "America at War: 'The One Thing Needful,' " Francis Boyer Lecture, American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, Washington, DC, February 13, 2002.

1960s, when, owing to the excesses of liberal elites and counterculture hedonism, everything unraveled.[2] Straussian political philosopher Allan Bloom takes this argument a step further, suggesting that the New Left was, in essence, Hitler Youth *redivivus*. "History always repeats itself," observes Bloom. "The American university of the 1960s was experiencing the same dismantling of the structure of rational inquiry as had the German university in the 1930s."[3] Bloom's account offers us disturbing images of universities besieged by violence-prone African American student groups. Typically, the liberal university administration spinelessly kowtows to their demands. The mass of students, like sheep or lemmings, spurred by irrational partisanship, simply go along for the ride. Meanwhile, the knowledgeable elite—Bloom and his compadres—possessing "right reason," are marginalized and shunned. Like the protagonist of Plato's cave allegory, they have seen the sunlight—they alone know where truth really lies—but the hoi polloi, blinded by passion, refuse to heed their counsel. However, when it comes to assessing the violence and depredations of the forces of order, Bloom's book is curiously silent.

Bloom's account conveniently abstracts from the excesses of the times: pervasive racism, the unresponsiveness of political elites, urban decay predominantly affecting minorities and the underclass, and, last but not least, an unjust war, fought by palpably immoral means: napalm, indiscriminate aerial bombardments, and ruthless search-and-destroy missions. In the course of the American drive to halt the spread of communism in Southeast Asia, some two million Vietnamese, most of whom were civilians, lost their lives. In neoconservative lore, the Vietnam conflict was ultimately a "good war." Yet the American will

[2] Quoted in "The Revenge of the Squares: Newt Gingrich and Pals Rewrite the 1960s," by Fred Barnes, *New Republic*, March 13, 1995, 23: "The Great Society messed everything up: don't work, don't eat. . . . From 1965 to 1994, we did strange and weird things as a country. Now we're done with that and we have to recover."

[3] Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 313. For a more detailed look at the neoconservative view of the 1960s, see Peter Steinfels, *The Neoconservatives: The Men Who Are Changing America's Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 44–48.

to fight was treacherously undermined by liberals, protesters, and draft dodgers. Ultimately, the generational war at home tragically and ineluctably sabotaged the war effort abroad, depriving America of victory against a godless and noxious geopolitical enemy.

If one seized the neoconservative "conventional wisdom" about the 1960s generation and stood it on its head, one would probably be much closer to the truth. Instead of being the fount of a proliferating immorality, the 1960s generation was in fact singularly moral. For many activists, the imperatives of social justice became an obsession, and "living in truth" a veritable credo. The neocon brotherhood overlooked the fact that it required profound wellsprings of civil courage to become a freedom rider in the Jim Crow South; to risk arrest for the sake of free speech or freedom of assembly; to demonstrate against an immoral war; to burn one's draft card as an act of conscience; and to voluntarily emigrate rather than kill innocent civilians, as the armed forces often required.

A BREAKDOWN OF CIVILIZATION?

In France rancor vis-à-vis the 1968 generation and its legacy has been equally widespread. As the May events reached their zenith, President Charles de Gaulle set the tone, lamenting: "Reform, yes; sheer disorder, no!" In the general's view, the student activists had set forth no discernible political goals. They had provoked an eruption of pure anarchy. The forces of order had completely lost control of the situation, resulting in a "breakdown of civilization" that only a draconian restoration of political authority could remedy. Among Gaullists, the idea of a global "crisis of civilization" gained popularity. In this view, it was not de Gaulle's trademark autocratic leadership that was to blame. Instead, France was the unfortunate victim of a more general planetary disorder. The rate of technological advance—the pace of "modernization"—had accelerated beyond citizens' capacities to adjust morally and psychologically. These adaptational difficulties resulted in various forms of anomic behavior: riots, protests, rebellion, and generalized social unrest. De Gaulle rued the unwillingness of French youth