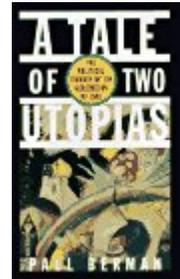


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Paul Berman. *A Tale of Two Utopias: The Political Journey of the Generation of 1968*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996. 351 pp. \$24.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-393-03927-6.

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Published on H-Pol (July, 1997)



## Recovering Sixties' Spirits

In this comparative study, Paul Berman examines what he calls the “generation of 1968” in four settings: student uprisings (largely political) in the United States, the “uprising in the zone of the spirit” (p. 8), the challenge to western imperialism, and finally the left-wing revolt against Communism, particularly in Czechoslovakia. Although at first blush this reads like a rather neat packaging of change in the late 1960s, Berman’s study is really much more than that. In the process of exploring these four revolutions, he ranges far and wide to focus on human behavior, the human spirit, and institutional change across a breadth of time far wider than 1968. In many ways, therefore, this is intellectual and cultural history at its broadest.

Having said that, however, one qualification immediately intrudes; that is, this is a study of protest on the Left. Yet, interestingly enough, Berman’s examination of the Left, especially abroad, brings him back to a consideration of why that Left often held as its ideal American culture and the spirit of liberal democracy—at the very moment that this same ethos found itself under attack from the Left in the United States. This is a perplexing conundrum, and one that Berman tackles in his last chapter. But let’s not jump ahead of his story.

Berman’s opening chapter, on the dream of a new society, is perhaps the most important for today’s audience. At a time when the spirit of the 1960s has been thoroughly reviled and held to exemplify the darker side of human nature by its conservative critics, Berman reminds us how optimistic we were then about the possi-

bilities of change and our ability to shape (with apologies to George Bush) a new world order. Direct democracy, participatory democracy, open debate: all seemed to promise revolutionary change and exemplified the conviction that we could master our own destiny.

This spirit, Berman notes, was infectious. It spread throughout the world. Even the CIA became interested, at the behest of President Lyndon Johnson. Although Berman fails to note this interest, it may be the best proof of his point. At Johnson’s order, the CIA launched a secret study of “Restless Youth.” Although LBJ insisted that the spread of these uprisings was Communist-inspired if not led, the CIA eventually had to tell him that they could find no evidence of conspiracy. The simultaneous revolts stemmed from grievances indigenous to particular countries. The CIA study also proves that Berman’s focus is on target. Despite some evidence of conservative revolts, the rebellions on the Left attracted the most popular support and triggered the greatest institutional concern from the ruling elites.

Berman examines, in turn, the moral history of the baby boom, the rise of gay liberation, and the cultural symbolism and political meaning of Frank Zappa and Vaclav Havel. He concludes with a look at what these revolts meant, in a comparative study of two theories of social change: Francis Fukuyama’s “corkscrew theory” and Andre Glucksmann’s “kaleidoscope theory.” The former argued that the end of Communism meant the end of history, while the latter concluded that to revolt from Communism was to re-enter history. Is the spread of freedom

and democracy irresistible and curative? Or is it turbulent and unpredictable? In his final pages, Berman concludes that both ideas may be correct. There is no reason to believe that the future will be without change.

In many ways, what Berman has written is a long, comparative critical essay rather than "history." Although he appends a brief note on sources, the volume is undocumented. Berman's undocumented generalizations emphasize the theoretical, and how it frequently conflicts with the existential. But read as an intellectual and critical study of the human spirit in motion, this volume is both provocative and compelling. He details a spirit of utopian optimism we have too quickly forgotten amid the malaise of the late twentieth century.

Along the way, he also demonstrates the importance of human action, indeed, its very centrality to the march of history. In 1968, anonymous individuals throughout the world took Mario Savio's advice and threw themselves into the gears of the machine. For an informed study from a lively mind, historians, sociologists and political scientists should seek out this volume.

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**Citation:** John Andrew. Review of Berman, Paul, *A Tale of Two Utopias: The Political Journey of the Generation of 1968*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. July, 1997.

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