

# Social Change, Ecology, and the Sixties Generation

By Steve Welzer

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Welcome to the Social Forum! It’s great to see so many young activists at this inspiring event. My own, gray cohort of sixties radicals tends to get nostalgic these days when we see the vitality of the up-and-coming greens, anarchists, locavores, communitarians, and other world-shakers!

We, of course, had aspirations of changing the world in our own youth. An appraisal of our efforts, as we now head toward completion of our “long march through the institutions,” might justifiably result in rather dour conclusions. Did the “revolutionary” ferment spawned by the sit-ins, strikes, and protests forty years ago amount to *anything*, in the long run?

I think the answer is: In some respects, yes. Some doors are open wider now for groups that have been historically oppressed or marginalized. Arguably, international human rights standards are somewhat higher now. Certainly cultural expression is more diverse, tolerant, and permissive. But when it comes to the most *fundamental* social and political issues, no revolution is evident. Disparities of wealth and income persist; the military budget is no less obscene now than it was forty years ago; corporate domination is no less pervasive. Peace, egalitarianism, participatory democracy, and environmental sanity still appear to be very distant goals. A skeptic could hardly be faulted for suggesting that our generation failed to accomplish much of lasting significance.

## Who were we . . . the sixties radicals?

The *majority* of the members of my generation were not activists, of course, as is the case with any generation. An unusually large minority, though, did see themselves as world changers in the sense that they contributed to or at least identified with the New Left or the counterculture. Most of those were members of a particular cohort: the post-war baby boom affluent suburban progeny.

How is it that such relatively privileged youth chose to become radicals or refuseniks or dropouts? This phenomenon baffled “the establishment” and the media back in the sixties. I always felt that an understanding of our dissent required an appreciation for the wide divergence between the expectations set out for us and the reality that we encountered. We were given the impression that our generation was going to be the one to fully realize the American Dream, that our opportunities would be almost limitless within the context of a prosperous and sophisticated post-industrial modernity.

The ongoing wars and crises of the American military-industrial-financial juggernaut first disillusioned us, then enraged us, and ultimately radicalized a large number of us. We became vociferous in regard to our grievances: The polity was not democratic; the economy was not equitable; the culture was spiritually impoverished. But when it came to solutions, we didn’t have as much to say. Early on, our ideas for change were tentative and inchoate, at best.

## Why the failure to effectuate change?

The sixties was a time during which the theoretical underpinning of the social change movement was in enormous flux. A prior generation of radicals had grounded their praxis in one or another labor-centric variant of Marxism, anarchism, or social democracy. After the disappointing failures of the Communist, Socialist, and Labor regimes in Europe during the middle decades of the century, all the old ideologies became fodder for deconstruction and rethinking.

Marxism and other forms of socialism had embraced the common worldview that perceives industrial technology as liberatory; growth as desirable; mechanization, concentration, and consolidation as efficient; and the trajectory of history as progressive. The questioning of that worldview and the idea that we had entered more complicated theoretical territory started to be recognized as early as the 1940s (see: Dwight MacDonald, “The Root Is Man” in *Politics* 3, July 1946). During the Berkeley Free Speech Movement of 1964, Mario Savio talked about “throwing our bodies upon the gears to stop the machine.”

The critique of old ideas and the searching for new pathways eventually led to the development of a fundamentally altered paradigm of social change based on a new way of thinking about the human condition. But this dramatic shift of perspective took some time. It entailed a deep questioning of the notion of progress, and it suggested a re-appreciation of things that had been forgotten in the mad rush toward urban-industrial development.

What had been forgotten? Nature, community, limits, balances . . . in other words: the subject matter of ecology.

## Ecology points in a very different direction

Instead of the idea that radicalism was about taking us to the “next higher stage” of development, the discourse of ecology pointed in a very different direction — toward things like decentralization, recovery of the human scale, recovery of an intimate and healthy relationship with nature. In place of grandiose technocratic delusions, the watchwords of the movement became: simplification, relocalization, and the greening of society.

1970, the year of the first Earth Day, saw the publication of *The Greening of America* by Charles Reich. This was by no means a work of high theory, but its popularity did give widespread attention to the new paradigm ideas about social change that were in the air: “America is dealing death, not only to people in other lands, but to its own people . . . We think of ourselves as an incredibly rich country, but we are beginning to realize that we are also a desperately poor country — poor in most of the things that throughout history have been cherished as riches. [And so] there is a revolution coming. It will not be like revolutions of the past. Its ultimate creation will be a new and enduring wholeness and beauty — a renewed relationship to the Self, to society, to nature, and to the land.”

During the following decades these and other similar ideas started finding *political* expression through the founding of Green parties in one country after another. And linked with the emergence of the politics of ecology was a transition of radical theory . . . from “red” to “green.” Some key texts of the mid-eighties are indicative: *Green Politics* by Spretnak and Capra, published in 1984; *From Red to Green* by Rudolf Bahro, 1984; *Deep Ecology* by Sessions and Devall, 1985; *Dwellers in the Land, a Bioregional Manifesto* by Kirkpatrick Sale, 1985.

Another text, less celebrated but equally enlightening, was produced right here in Detroit in 1983. I'm referring to Fredy Perlman's *Against His-story, Against Leviathan*, published by Black and Red Press. In that book Perlman refutes the idea that modern civilization is the culmination of an historical process of progressive development. Rather, the building up of the technosphere over the course of millennia has been primarily a misbegotten process of despoliation and depletion through the grinding of nature into commodities. The "march of civilization" has destroyed human and natural communities, benefitting privileged groups and power elites while consigning the vast majority to a treadmill existence.

Fredy Perlman was associated with the *Fifth Estate* — which started out as Detroit's underground countercultural newspaper back in the sixties, but which, by 1980, became a central forum for the greening of theory (and which, to their credit, is still being published today, more than forty years later). The *Fifth Estate* collective was early to recognize what was problematic when the old radicalism contemplated socializing the industrial means of production — and what was liberatory when the new radicalism talked about "throwing our bodies upon the gears to stop the machine." *Fifth Estate* developed a trenchant critique of hypermodernity in both its capitalist and socialist manifestations; and they were insightful in broadening the array of our sources of inspiration, showing an appreciation for Thoreau, Gandhi, and Mumford as well as Marx, Bakunin, and Kropotkin. Some of the best social change writing of our generation has appeared in the pages of *Fifth Estate*, so bringing radicalism home to Detroit under the auspices of the USSF this year is especially appropriate.

### **Our legacy to future generations**

The efforts of our generation of activists did not, in the end, change the world concretely to anywhere near a degree commensurate with our early aspirations. Nonetheless, I think history will recognize a very significant turning point associated with the theoretical breakthroughs we made in the process of greening the movement.

The new discourse that we fostered — and continue to foster in the pages of *Green Horizon* — has proven to be broadly appealing: ecological responsibility, renewal of community, grassroots democracy, sustainability ... I believe these concepts, and the related ideas and values they stand for, show the way forward for future activists as they struggle to accomplish the momentous changes that are so desperately needed.

We understand now that there will be no "revolution" or "final conflict." The problematic trajectories of our civilization date back many thousands of years and the "turning of the ship" will inevitably take a good deal of time. We understand now how culture must be transformed in addition to politics, and how lifeways must be gradually altered. And we understand now that the new "forward" is very multi-dimensional, containing within it an element of return, of preservation, of recovery. These hard-gained insights constitute the significant legacy of our generation.