



HOW FAR WILL THE

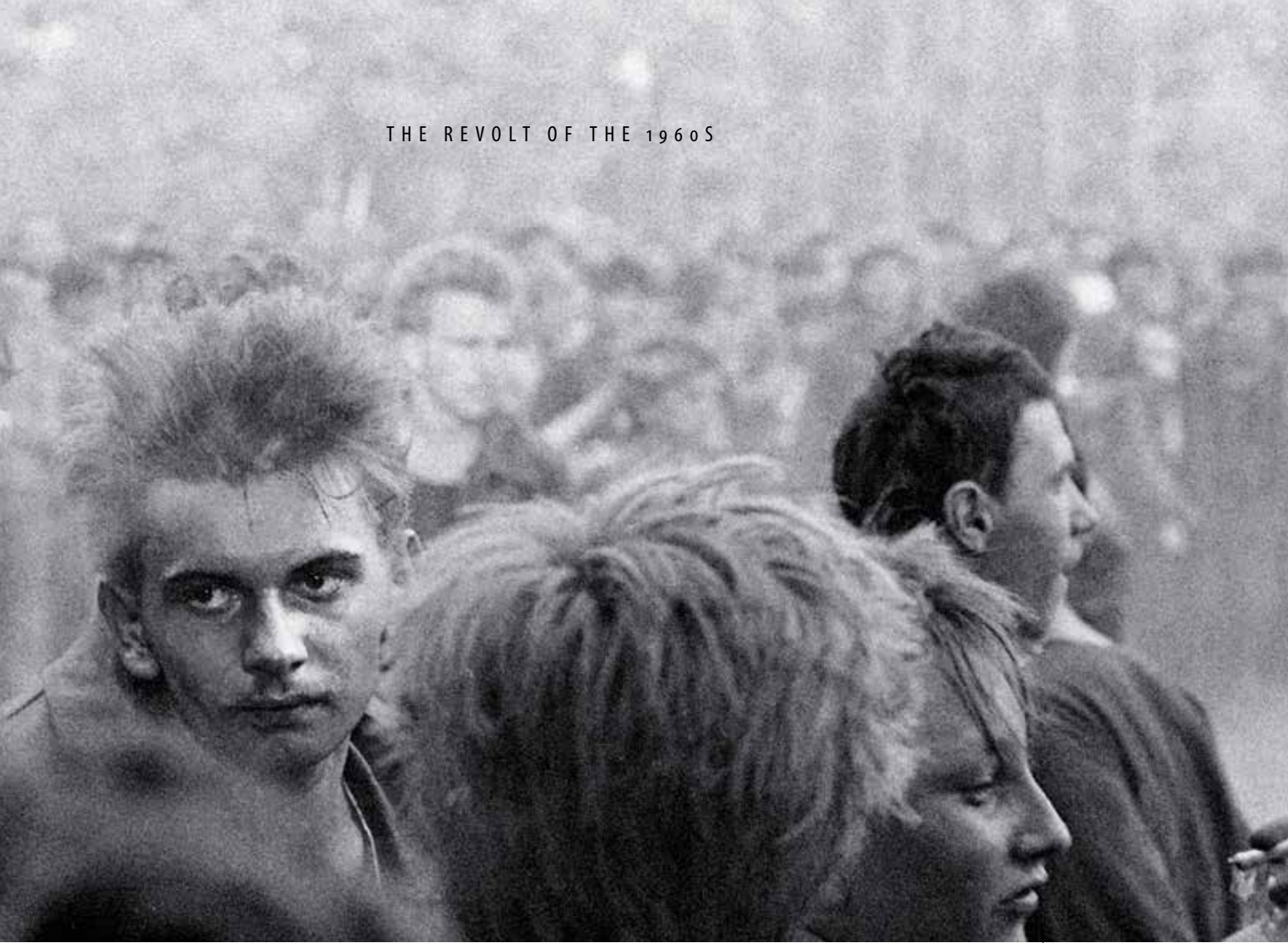
Prof. Wojciech Burszta from the PAS Institute of Slavic Studies discusses what has remained of the ideals of the cultural revolution that took place in the 1960s.

ACADEMIA: Back in the 1960s, people wanted to unlock the door to liberty. What type of liberty did they want?

WOJCIECH BURSZTA: The British philosopher and historian of ideas Isaiah Berlin postulated two concepts of liberty: negative liberty, or “freedom from,” and positive liberty, which means “freedom to.” The former pertains to the extent of the constraints that the state, the law, and other people impose on an individual’s freedom to pursue behaviors related to personal liberty. In other words, as much freedom as is allowed in the broader context. The latter concept holds that everyone has the right to be free, not only because they are not slaves or they are pressured to behave in certain ways, but also because as citizens they have

the right to individual, autonomous personality and selfhood. The margin of freedom should be therefore as broad as possible.

These two types of liberty are constantly in conflict. As yet, no one has come up with a way to resolve it. Such antagonism became very visible in the 1960s – what is called the “long 1960s,” which means the period until 1974, the oil crisis and the onset of the collapse of the welfare state. It could be observed both in the West and on the other side of the Iron Curtain, including in the Polish People’s Republic. Of course, those two worlds were incomparably different, but the problem remained exactly the same: to what degree can the boundaries of personal liberty and democracy be extended when it comes to the functioning



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of society, understood not as those subjected to the authority of the central government but as a self-organizing system.

When we think of that period, two concepts come to mind, namely “contestation” and “counterculture.”

In this specific context, I’d understand the former as passive resistance. Contesting means refusing to accept, forming alternative groups, proposing alternative lifestyles, becoming detached from society. The American philosopher and psychologist Timothy Leary argued that it was possible to do just that and build something different on the margins of a bad system. Counterculture, in turn, means activism, action aimed at either revising the existing capitalist and transforming it into a system “for people” or overthrowing it. Today, many of the alternatives proposed back then seem naïve, but this only demonstrates their potential and proves over how many things people fought.

What did they fight over in particular?

Freedom, in all aspects of life at that. It wouldn’t be an overstatement to say that practically all the movements that currently exist, for example antiracism or those campaigning for environmental protection, human rights, the rights of sexual minorities, even healthy eating, had their origins in that period. The purpose was to free people from the shackles of what was referred to as capitalist enslavement, from what the philosopher and sociologist Herbert Marcuse called repressive tolerance. Back then, young people thought they lived in an oppressive society. They wanted greater freedom and various self-fulfillment options, they did not want to be held captive by various capitalist institutions.

We should remember, though, that when those young people protested, full employment was inherent in capitalism. These days, it is natural that 10% or 15% of the population may be out of work. Consequently, they enjoyed a kind of comfort that today’s young people don’t have. Simply put, they didn’t want

The music festival in Jarocin (shown here in 1984) and the punk movement were the most distinctive manifestations of counterculture in Poland in the 1970s and the 1980s.



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to live the lives of their parents, they didn't want to be passive consumers. They even wanted to revolutionize the media. One could say that the counterculture of that period was defined by excess: people wanted to change practically everything. The French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard called it an orgy.

What caused that situation?

That's exactly the greatest mystery. Nothing in the late 1950s signaled that young people might be on the verge of a revolution. Some attribute it to the fact that millions of people, entire masses, went to university.

The post-war baby boom.

Exactly. Such masses simply had to enforce certain changes in the conservative and elitist system of education. Everything that ensued was a consequence of that fact.

Others claim that the situation resulted from the new, permissive style of parenting that became popular after the war. After all, if you give kids too much freedom, they tend to allow themselves too much.

Irving Kristol, one of the most prominent conservative American intellectuals, explained that the way culture works is that every generation is marked by a trend towards challenging the status quo, replacing one orthodoxy with another. He argued that the rigid, post-war industrial capitalism had started to exhaust itself, being replaced by a new and more flexible system, and the demands voiced by young people fit that trend perfectly. They did not feel well in the iron cage of what was in fact a 19th century system, so they provided an impulse for change. This was best demonstrated by the fact that many of those revolutionaries

did very well at IBM or other companies that we would now describe as startups.

Consequently, that phenomenon is impossible to explain, most certainly because those events took on global dimensions, which is something we currently forget about. We talk about the United States, the UK, and France, sometimes also Italy. But it occurred also in Tehran, Tokyo, and the cities of South America. There was no Internet or satellite television, but the events that unfolded were very similar everywhere, which proves that news traveled around the world at the speed of light. Of course, we talk about the free, democratic world, or at least the regions that aspired to join it.

What about the countries that remained under Soviet influence?

Young people in the West, focused on themselves and on capitalism, were indeed barely aware of what was happening in that region of the world. Maybe there were some mentions of Prague, but no one, with few exceptions, was interested in this region of the world. The British and American historian Tony Judt admitted that years later: we dealt with everything, but we missed the most important thing – right under our noses, people were living in an oppressive system, fighting for completely different things, and had completely different problems. The only people who were aware of that and maintained contacts with people from this region, also with the Poles, were members of the Situationist International, including in particular Guy Debord. They were the only ones who wrote that it was necessary to address what was happening in this region, too.

Consequently, we could say that the division of the world and the significance of the Iron Curtain were confirmed also in counterculture. Of course, some of those young people were fascinated by communism, Maoism, and Trotskyism.

They were intrigued, because they had no experience with those ideologies.

Yes, there was a great deal of naivety in that potential. Mistakes were made, too. We must not forget that the counterculture in the United States transformed in its final years into an armed struggle. In other words, attempts were made to influence the existing system through the use of force. We must take into account this aspect of the heritage, too.

What did that revolution look like in Poland?

In Poland, of course, everything started off with politics. We must not forget about the anti-Jewish sentiments. Even so, I think that the significance of those years is much broader. They culminated in what I called the process of osmosis: after World War II, especially after the fall of Stalinism, young people and

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intelligentsia groups soaked up Western values that had found their way to Poland through various channels. Those groups were the bastions of resistance as well as the utopian hope that it was possible to create something in this country other than the socialist happiness. Consequently, the Polish variant of the cultural revolution simply involved opening up to various Western values to the greatest degree possible. It was no coincidence that psychologists and psychiatrists played such a major role there, for example by soaking up humanistic psychology, which was all the rage in the world and was linked to self-fulfillment and optimism about who a person could be. Indeed, those groups appealed to many people who pursued the science of counterculture, which involved absorbing certain contents and distributing “*samizdat*” books, which were not translated into Polish. These psychologists were treated like gurus by those hippie groups. Aldona Jawłowska, a deceased participant of that movement, admitted that everything would arrive with delay and was limited to specific groups, but that osmosis had its significance.

That stir continued for more than a decade. What did it lead to?

It brought a moral and cultural revolution, in a sense also a political revolution – after all, the whole of counterculture had clear left-wing and liberal undertones. Conservative and right-wing groups now believe that that was when counterculture established its grip on institutions. Above all, universities changed. We should bear in mind that when the revolution began, university programs were not coeducational everywhere. Curricula were altered from very conservative ones to what we know today: that was the beginning of multiculturalism and anthropological sensitivity, especially in the United States, a country of immigrants. Universities became a lot more critical of their own society and the mechanisms of capitalism. That was also a period of heated scientific debates in humanities and the emergence of new theories such as structuralism, post-structuralism, structural Marxism, and Lacanianism.

Theater and fashion also underwent a revolution, as did the moral and religious sphere, with all the consequences it brought. The problems of sexual minorities were introduced into the mainstream, as were the problems of other groups who felt they belonged to a different category, which also means ethnic groups. Also, that was when the disability rights movement came into existence.

What about the sexual revolution?

It also took place. The concept of male and female sexuality started to change, for better or for worse. Slowly, the realization sank in that sex was a sphere of pleasure and should be separated from procreation. As a re-

sult of that, the traditional monogamous family model no longer the only one model of family, though still the dominant one. There are patchwork families and same-sex relationships. The related change pertained to women’s rights. Of course, it is sometimes argued that counterculture was represented chiefly by men, who treated women as objects. However, we can’t look at that reality from the perspective of today’s awareness and sensitivity to language issues. That era gave women weapons: they were given a choice in terms of their reproductive rights. A morally difficult choice, but a choice nonetheless.

The list of changes that took place back then is indeed very long. Simply put, people noticed problems that had been marginalized or even passed over in silence until the 1960s. There was a great explosion of energy that has not been repeated ever since.

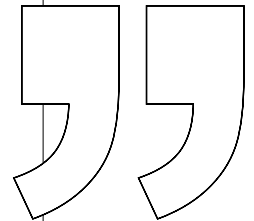
Many of the alternatives proposed in the 1960s now seem naïve, but this only serves to prove that people fought over many things at that time.

From today’s perspective, however, the results were not of a lasting nature.

Well, one example is the anti-racist heritage, which later transformed into the concept of multiculturalism in the United States. The purpose was not only to notice minority cultures but also to promote them, to enable those who lived in ghettos to leave them, to become Americans while remaining proud of their heritage. Hence the presence of ethnic literature in university curricula. Those were years of great hope that America would become open to everyone. Of course, such an America exists, and the concept of multiculturalism has not so much become bankrupt as simply resulted in even greater ethnic divisions. The minorities have not joined forces and created a united front. One of the results is Donald Trump and his idea of returning to the concept of the melting pot, the complete assimilation of different cultures. The US president says: either you are the same kind of American as I am, or you are free to leave. He adds that not everyone is suited for that. For example, the Mexicans aren’t.

Also, there was a revolt against consumerism, which paradoxically resulted in even greater consumerism.

As for political issues, this unfortunately appeared to be the beginning of the end of clearly defined left-



wing thought. Daniel Cohn-Bendit, one of the leaders of the student movement in France and now a member of the European Parliament, and his generation came into prominence. But people like him have no students. After 1973, there was a shift away from the concept of the welfare state: it had exhausted its potential, despite leading to the most rapid development of society in history. Capitalism entered what we now call the neo-liberal stage, personified by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Since that time, or since the early 1980s, neither the traditional left nor any of the new movements have presented a sensible counterproposal to maximum privatization, free entrepreneurship, and the concept “do it yourself,” or the belief that if you fail, it’s your fault, and society has nothing to do with it. We additionally live in the times of various crises of neoliberal society.

Nevertheless, new movements continue to emerge.

Yes, the alter-globalists, Occupy Wall Street, Direct Action, and so on. Unfortunately, these movements are more reminiscent of flash mobs.

was made. As an anthropologist, I warned more than a decade ago that although neoliberalism was initially efficient, it was bad in the long run, because it was devoid of social sensitivity. In neoliberalism, people do not matter, only business interests and corporations. Unfortunately, all the governments since 2015 have taken absolutely no interest in those who didn’t benefit from the changes or those who were willing, even if they were satisfied with what had happened, to return to the deeply entrenched models of identity and self-determination.

However, many young people are conservative.

We have created no opportunities for them, we have offered them no educational incentives to be open-minded, so what were those young people supposed to refer to? They have adopted a clear message: I don’t know who I am or what the future has in store for me, but I know one thing for sure – I’m not without roots. Conservatism and thinking in terms of identity and nationalism are coming back in various ways, all over the world at that. In his last book, Zygmunt Bauman referred to this situation as “retrotopia,” or the reaffirmation of one’s own identity through a shift towards what was certain, a certain idealized myth that nonetheless provided actual support. What does Trump say? Let’s make America great again by focusing above all on ourselves.

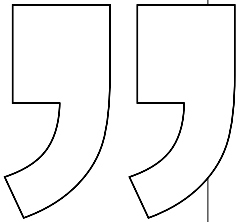
Is America rising from its knees?

We can see the same thing in Europe, on a wider scale. For example, we can see the rebirth of political disputes over history. Twenty years ago, we talked about common European history textbooks, we discussed controversial issues, and we tried to work things out. Today, when we look at education systems anywhere, we can see a return to stories that highlight monogamy, monoculturalism, and tribalism.

Does tribalism mean that we are renouncing our freedom?

No, it simply refers to negative liberty. On the one hand, we don’t want anyone to constantly breathe down our necks and control what we do, so we value our independence. On the other hand, most of us know that absolute freedom, which is referred to as rational egoism in neoliberalism, means that we should focus on ourselves, instead of worrying about the external world. Consequently, we lose touch with other people and become lonely. And no one wants to be lonely.

Every day, we are therefore torn between the need for autonomy and the need to belong to a broader community. So we want to choose what community we belong to. But that may be very painful, because it may turn out that this community doesn’t want us or the community we have imagined doesn’t exist.



Today’s young people have adopted a clear message – I don’t know who I am or what the future will bring, but I know one thing – I’m not without roots.

In Poland, in turn, the society is to a large degree so deeply conservative as if no revolution had taken place.

Of course, I would not like to attribute this situation only to the selection of a certain path of economic development, but this issue is definitely of primary importance. After 1989, Poland followed the path set by the economist Leszek Balcerowicz: the best way to recover from a complete collapse was the adoption of a tough neoliberal policy, which had already been contested in the West. Many experts now claim that things should have been done differently. Back then, people deeply believed that this was the way to overcome the ongoing crisis, enable the state to function and, above all, to unlock initiative. People were given a fishing rod, which means various options. Despite the fact that those options were tempting to a relatively narrow group of people, despite the glaring injustice, despite the impoverishment of many social groups who were denied participation in that success, it nonetheless lasted and worked. After that, however, a mistake

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We then choose another scenario, namely we come to believe that we can pursue our freedom only within a community, so we cede this right to the community. That's when the community starts defining the boundaries of our freedom. It also communicates the following message: "If you belong to a national community, for example the Polish community, you put into effect the slogans of freedom on behalf of yourself, your ancestors, and the future generations; you are fighting for the autonomy and freedom of your nation."

Since the beginning of the concept of the rational individual, we have known that personal liberty is not necessarily linked to democracy. Isaiah Berlin, the British historian of ideas and philosophy, wrote that it could be beautifully implemented also in totalitarian, authoritarian regimes, depending on how we define it, and there are currently over 300 definitions. People are starting to come to terms with this, they are willing to give up many individual freedoms for the benefit of community values.

This may be because they have difficulty making decisions and being held accountable for their consequences, which means two things that are inseparably linked to freedom.

Yes, because this requires adequate knowledge and the conviction that human beings can behave in a rational and responsible way. I don't think many people share this conviction, so they conclude it's better to rely on something else. In the past, they relied on those who were considered authorities. Today, they rely on legal regulations and the government. They are reliant on being told what is good and what is bad, what is worth doing, and why we should restrict ourselves in certain spheres.

This sounds gloomy.

That's what this looks like. If look at the humanities, sociology and anthropology, from this angle, we'll see that they have never addressed the issue of liberty. Instead, they have examined how freedom is restricted and why it must be restricted to allow people to function in society as normal and accepted individuals. Freedom has always defied any systemic social theories. Attempts were once made to find the perfect form of freedom in tribal and primitive communities. Anthropologists studied such groups and immediately warned that this was not the way to go. In such societies, there is no room for personal liberty.

Does this mean that the history of the cultural revolution of the 1960s was a story of anger and disappointment? Why do we return to what we know, instead of trying to find something new?

Do we lack imagination or the will to do so?

We lack hope. We still live times of pessimism and peculiar helplessness. People are increasingly con-

vinced that the future may only bring a change for the worse, despite being mistrustful of dystopias. Utopias have very bad connotations, too. That's hardly surprising, because it's difficult to find any ideas for the future in the times of crisis. That is what Zygmunt Bauman's last book was about. Neo-conservatives are making use of this fact and doing everything to restore society to its previous, allegedly moral state. Hence the return to religiousness, not necessarily the institutional church, but to a form that guarantees certain moral choices. Certain attempts to influence popular culture are also headed in this direction. Why should it not be linked to religion, if it surely has religious potential?

But we know all too well how xenophobia and nationalism end.

Paradoxically, that's what some people like. They ask why they shouldn't be led to the barricades again. In turn, those who are more responsible explain that we should learn from the past – everything has already happened, and we will only choose what is good.

Many people conclude it's better to rely on something else: legal regulations, the government. They're reliant on being told what is good and what is bad.

Just take a look at the cover of *wSieni Historii* 3/2017: a young girl wearing armor and holding a sword and a shield with an eagle, and the caption "Proud and beautiful, Poland remains unbowed throughout centuries." That is the exact illustration of retrotopia.

The world is taking a major step back, away from what the ideologues of counterculture built, namely cosmopolitan awareness, despite the fact that they wanted people to define their identity chiefly at the level of humanity. It will be interesting to see how far the pendulum will swing.

Could it be stopped?

For now, I can see no chance of that happening. I believe that the pendulum will have to reach the end of its swing. What will be the ultimate outcome? I don't know.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAKUB OSTAŁOWSKI

