

1968: A Global Perspective

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The Amish in 1968: Civil Order/Disorder in a Sectarian Society

The nation's cities and college campuses were not the only areas in America rattled by protests in 1968. During that tumultuous year, even places like New Glarus, Wisconsin—a picturesque and normally tranquil village populated by only a few thousand souls—experienced forms of civil unrest.

In August of 1968, oblivious to the social upheaval in Soviet occupied Prague or riot ridden Chicago, a small group of Amish families in southern Wisconsin set in motion a revolution of their own when they announced that they “would be breaking away from the public school system to ‘provide a less modern form of education’ for young members of their faith.” Whether owing to the modesty of their demands or the unassuming nature of their quietist presence, the outcome for the Amish of this uncompromising act of civil disobedience, unlike the failed outcomes in Prague and Chicago, led to a ground-breaking legal ruling which would not only transform the educational structure of Amish society but would significantly impact the landscape of education in the United States.

While the Amish challenge to authority resonates with the revolutionary spirit of 1968, it was driven by a desire not to change but to opt out of society. How, then, to explain its paradoxical consequence? This paper explores the intersection between sectarian separatism, state government, and special interests in the legal case which led to the Supreme Court ruling, in 1972, exempting Amish youth from compulsory education on the secondary level. Further, it examines the dual roles this ruling played: 1) within the Amish subculture in the maintenance of a discrete sectarian identity apart from mainstream American culture; and 2) within mainstream American culture in the emergence of the home-schooling movement.