

1968: A Global Perspective

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The Evolution of "Street Fighting Man"

The late great Ramparts, an actually glossy left-wing magazine, published a review essay in 1968 that pitted two new singles by the Beatles and Rolling Stones--"Revolution" and "Street Fighting Man," respectively--against each other. Ramparts, unsurprisingly, didn't care for John Lennon's apparent disdain for much of the New Left, and, surprisingly, praised the Stones' honesty in apparently opting out of any revolutionary stance, in the chorus "What can a poor boy do / Except to sing for a rock and roll band?"

I have a number of essentially unknown materials I wish to present besides the Ramparts essay. One is the bootlegged original version of "Street Fighting Man," titled "Pay Your Dues," which has something vaguely to do with a tribal chieftain. Another is photos of Mick Jagger arm-in-arm with fellow protestors at a massive demonstration in 1968 against the Vietnam War in front of the American Embassy in London's Grosvenor Square--after which "Pay Your Dues" became "Street Fighting Man." I also have the quickly banned cover art of the original American 45, featuring a demonstrator being beaten by police.

Over the years I've come to believe that "Street Fighting Man" is more ambiguous than Ramparts thought--that Jagger (for whom I have had no use since the '70s) decided that all he could do was sing for a rock and roll band because "street fighting" wasn't widespread enough. Depending on how much time these subjects take, I may also describe the Rolling Stones' remarkable transformation in the late '60s from darlings of British working-class youth--who felt betrayed by the album on which "Street Fighting Man" appeared, Beggars Banquet, now universally considered a classic--to the favorite band of the international student movement. Serious intellectuals considered them the leading example of the revolutionary potential of mass culture, laughable as that seems now.

The Situationist International and the May Revolution

Shortly after the events of May '68 in France, the avant-garde group known as the Situationist International (SI), since immortalized thanks to British punk rock, wrote that anyone who wondered about the extent of its influence had only to "look at the walls of Paris" and the graffiti scrawled on them. One of the best-known examples is "Under the paving stones"--ripped up for barricades--"the beach," or a real holiday from the torpor of everyday life. The remarkable thing is that the Situationists' critiques of everyday life leading up to '68 had emerged in treatises that refocused earlier, dense Marxist theories about labor, such as Georg Lukacs's History and Class Consciousness, on leisure time; the best-known of these works is Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle, published just a year before '68. And yet, as one of our French exchange visitors told me in the late '80s when I asked about the SI and the May Revolution, "Everyone knew who they were."

I propose to look, in fact, at graffiti from the walls of Paris; I have a number of books on the SI and May '68, collected in places like the Institute for Contemporary Arts in London, that an American audience will definitely not have seen. Explaining the Situationist program in 20 minutes isn't possible, so I will concentrate on explaining the ideas that seem of most relevance judging from that physical evidence, such as the SI's loathing of the very idea of vacations, implied by the line I've cited about the "beach."