

We Are Not Selfish

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1968 Now: Revolution

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The era of 1968 is regarded as a failure by some, and an incredible success by others. Regardless if the entire era will ever be given a definitive thumbs-up or thumbs-down, 1968 was an incredibly powerful moment for the human being. Protests and riots brought power into the hands of the people - a power strengthened by new ideals and blossoming philosophies of a radically changing time. In this short analysis I hope to outline how such a power was made possible by a radically new conception of people as compassionate beings. In stark contrast to centuries of self-interest, the era of 1968 demonstrated humanity's neglected inner capacity for compassion; through a cumulative analysis of the media, music, philosophy, and psychedelia of the time I will trace this thread of empathy and try to gesture as to why it was so strong in 68. I hope to conclude with a demonstration of why we so desperately need that compassion today, and why it is vitally important to remember that we are not selfish.

Briefly, it is commonly held that people are inherently selfish. Concepts of egoism<sup>i</sup> have been debated since Plato, yet it seems that current culture leans heavily on the side of self-interest. Our current capitalist economy, based largely off the writings of Adam Smith, functions with this self-interest as a defining principle: "it is vain for [man] to expect [help] from benevolence only" since men act of their "own self interest."<sup>ii</sup> In our economy, we presuppose self-interest in order to function, and that presupposition has permeated our culture to a striking degree (as has much of economic theory). With these current norms in mind, a look into the radically different era of 68 will hopefully reveal that such conceptions of selfishness lack an understanding of compassion that is inherently necessary for our society to continue.

The first area of consideration will be the media. In '68, there were only three TV stations: CBS, NBC, ABC. As such, every person in America with a television was receiving the same news. The TV set became transformed into a national window, a universal gathering place,

where people would all watch the news as fellow countrymen. News anchors were icons, with Walter Cronkite being dubbed “The Most Trusted Man in America” due to his presence as a national symbol for reputable information. In addition, during the Vietnam War coverage, this sensation of being connected through the television only increased. The ‘war in your living room’ had unmatched freedom for the press, where reporters were given access wherever they wanted<sup>iii</sup>. As such, [graphic images](#) and [disturbing scenes](#) led to feelings of total immersion in the war. Suddenly, someone watching TV was sharing in the trauma of a soldier in Vietnam, just as they were feeling the same trauma as all their neighbors watching the same thing.

In *Medium is the Massage*, one can see how this perception of shared experience seems to lead to a sense of connection. McLuhan writes how, “The Family Circle has Widened...Our new environment compels commitment and participation. We have become irrevocably involved with, and responsible for, each other.”<sup>iv</sup> People felt so connected to what they saw on their televisions they felt compelled to react – this new medium seemed to demand participation. This incredible sense of responsibility and connection to others can be understood perfectly with the Whole Earth Catalog. With it, everyone was given a concrete, visual indication that we all share the same planet. People could now quite literally *see* the [world in its entirety](#), a sight prior known only to God. Through their national window, viewers were able to see one another. In total, it becomes clear that the visual media at the time promoted and enabled these feelings of interconnectedness; feelings which would only become exponentiated by the blossoming ideologies carried by those on the TV sets.

Philosophy during this era truly left the confines of the page and exploded with revolutionary spirit into the streets. People were reading Marx, reading his final words of “Workers of the World, Unite!”. People were reading Foucault, reading his analysis of subjected

knowledge and his criticism of modern norms and disciplines. People were reading Sartre, appreciating his existentialism, and engaging with his defense that such philosophy is humanist. These philosophies were purposefully engaging, directed towards and for action. Philosophers stood on soap boxes [in the streets](#) with the people, [protesting](#); they were literally bringing their ideas into the world. Beyond the purely intellectual, there were concrete fragments of these ideas scattered through the revolutionary population. People carried Mao's *Little Red Book* in their pockets next to their copies of *Death of the Author*; [protest poster](#) after [protest poster](#) was displayed and distributed in incredible quantity. The ideology was tangible. All this unifying ideology had a definite impact on those engaging in their revolutions; Borg writes how "many participants later recalled how liberating it had been to talk to strangers in the street, where the rules of everyday life were suspended".<sup>v</sup> In those famous cobblestone beaches, "people found themselves talking openly with others, addressing groups, debating, speaking up as they never had before"<sup>vi</sup>. People were [engaged](#), they were [protesting](#), they were [occupying spaces](#) they weren't allowed to occupy – and through it all, people felt connected in their ideas.

This connection was only reinforced by the music of that era. For a total of two and a half years, The Beatles were on the top of the Billboard charts – to say they were dominant would be a suitable lesson in understatement. And during their reign over the music industry, the Beatles only furthered these ideas of connection, compassion, and love. This was abundantly clear in [their performance of All You Need Is Love](#), where they repeat their call for compassion, surrounded by flowers and symbols of peace and unity. The Beatles wrote "[Revolution](#)", and expressed their uncertainty over the revolutionary tactics, but still expressed sympathy with the desires for change. Other artists noted this incredible surge of unified revolution, such as [John Phillips](#) writing "All across the nation / Such a strange vibration / People in motion / There's a

whole generation / With a new explanation / People in motion” or [Bob Dylan](#) noting how the “times are a-changin”. Along with these messages, there was a call for action., such as [Country Joe](#) directly attacking the US in Vietnam or [Thunderclap Newton](#) writing how “We've got to get together sooner or later / Because the revolution's here, and you know it's right.” To quote Little-John, “the summer of 1967 became a high point in this movement where the social-cultural theme of [Love](#) countered the madness of consumerism, materialism, war, racism and aggressions of every sort.” Love, compassion, interconnection, empathy – whatever words are used to describe it, it’s clear that this era was one where the dominance of self-interest was challenged.

What’s incredible about ’68 is that with this media, philosophy, and music all culminating into this sensation of connection, there was suddenly a widespread drug that directly made this sensation incredibly visceral: LSD. Along with psilocybin and mescaline, this era of psychedelics emphasized the human capacity for compassion on a scale never equaled. In one aspect, the poetry read by the psychedelicers (my term for those who used these drugs) demonstrated this sense of utter connection to everything; Ginsberg and Whitman are notable examples. When Ginsberg writes, “We’re going to teach people to stop hating...start a peace and love movement” after his experience with Mushrooms, one can see this idea of love and connection through psychedelics<sup>vii</sup>. Whitman’s descriptions of how “For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” was embraced by the psychedelicers for the same reasons – he wrote with a transcendental vision where everyone is connected<sup>viii</sup>. When one thinks of LSD users in ’68, one invariably thinks of ‘hippies’, people who espoused love and peace. It’s clear that these drugs fostered sensations of compassion and connection to all – but why?

One explanation is that these drugs remove the idea of a mind-body distinction; through the psychedelic experience, one can experience the world in a new consciousness: a

consciousness of the physical body.<sup>ix</sup> This resonates well with Whitman and anyone who has taken these drugs – physical senses are heightened, and one suddenly feels (not just sees) the world differently. Alan Watts wrote on this in his *Joyous Cosmology*, where he describes the mind-body distinction as a “superstition,” and emphasizes the way that the drugs work to remove such self-constructed barriers in one’s consciousness. One realizes one does not *have* an arm, but that one *is* their arm.<sup>x</sup> Merleau-Ponty agrees with his emphasis on the “body-subject.” Why, one may ask, would a ‘consciousness of the body’ lend itself to compassion? The answer is rather simple: touch. One cannot touch another without being touched themselves; unlike vision, one becomes connected to what they are touching through the act of touch itself. There is an “ontology of the flesh [which] enables us to comprehend Being as something which gives to us...at the same time it is given by us...[in] a reciprocal intertwining of the one in the other”.<sup>xi</sup> If LSD and the like truly make one conscious of the physical body, then it makes sense that one would feel ‘connected’, since one would be aware of the inherent reciprocation that touch encompasses. Merleau-Ponty notes how “I cannot conceive myself as nothing but a bit of the world”, writing his philosophies with this emphasis on touch as a means of recognizing one’s connection to things.<sup>xii</sup> As Kearney succinctly wrote, “the rediscovery of the primacy of the body-subject permits us to ... [return] to the original unity of consciousness and world”.<sup>xiii</sup> In total, one can see that psychedelics seem to offer a lens into the consciousness of touch, a consciousness that inherently carries with it a sense of reciprocation, and a sense of compassion.

In total, one is painted a striking picture: the media creates a sense of unity via shared experience, reinforced by new images of the Earth that emphasize humanity as connected (physically tied to the same ground); icons of thought espouse the same messages of collective responsibility and connection to one’s fellow person, and encourage and engage in protests that

support their writings; music reinforces these ideas, calling for love and compassion, reflecting on how people are changing the way they view/feel the world; and finally, psychedelics give one a visceral experience of the connection all people share, and solidifies the notion that people are connected to, and empathetic towards, others. We can be selfish, yes. But we can also be selfless.

Now, things are diametrically opposite to that era of compassion. Our media is not singular or unified but boils with intense feelings of disconnect between various media outlets. Our President [regularly attacks](#) and [criticizes](#) the [media](#), calls news the ‘[enemy of the people](#)’, [restricts press access](#), [encourages violence](#) against reporters, and regularly spews out [blatant propaganda](#) in order to support his ideas. The era of Fake News has eroded trust in journalism, and the country is far from regarding any news anchor or journalist as the “Most Trusted” in America. Rather than view the world as whole, we view ourselves as distant from others. The technology espoused by McLuhan as connecting us all has separated us. Technology is not a grand force for unity, but has evolved into a means of insulation. As Edward R. Murrow forewarned:

“If we go on as we are, we are protecting the mind of the American public from any real contact with the menacing world that squeezes in upon us...For surely we shall pay for using this most powerful instrument of communication to insulate the citizenry from the hard and demanding realities which must indeed be faced if we are to survive.”<sup>xiv</sup>

What before shocked a nation to the point of protest is now simply lost under the onslaught of constant negative information. Mindless media (I’m looking at you, TLC) creates a space to insulate from this barrage through [mystifyingly idiotic programming](#). When the President [supported blatant sexual assault](#), when a Washington Post journalist was [brutally murdered](#), when [China created forced labor camps for Muslims](#), or when a [damning and frightening climate change report was released](#), the news cycle merely continued. Reality TV carried on. None of the issues were *immediate*. Without any unity or trust in the media, and with

the constant barrage of terrible headlines and gossip, everything becomes equally meaningless, and one feels utterly disconnected.

The dire consequence of this total lack of connection can be perfectly understood via one critical issue: global climate change. Despite widespread recognition from [protests in London](#) to an [encyclical by the Pope](#), despite alarming studies showing that [60% of wildlife since 1960 has been wiped out](#) and that we [require unprecedented change](#) to keep temperatures from rising above 1.5°C, still the focus remains individualized. One's profits from tax returns, one's party affiliation, [one's investments in fossil fuels](#) – these all take priority over the globe.

Disinformation and desensitizing media make it easy for people to simply *not* be compassionate. It's safer and easier to only focus on the steps below one's feet, to reject the tide of opposition and partisanship, become blind to negativity and numb to superficiality, and envision oneself as above the fray. Yet, we are not separate. As the Blue Marble shows, we are on the same Earth. As one senses in a psychedelic experience, we are in relationship to one another. As protests in the 60s have shown, this connection has a real and drastic power when acted upon.

There is incredible change that is required in the years and decades to come, change that will be unique in our history. The realist in me knows that there will be those who will act for greed, act for short-term profit, act for themselves. But there will be those who will act with compassion. There will be those who recognize that we are not inseparable from our peers. As 1968 briefly revealed, we are not born narcissists. We can act with empathy. We can act with humanity.

We are not selfish.

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- <sup>i</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychological\\_egoism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychological_egoism)
- <sup>ii</sup> Smith, Adam. *Wealth of Nations*, p169
- <sup>iii</sup> Greenway said this in class, describes their ability to ride any helicopter anywhere
- <sup>iv</sup> McLuhan, *Medium is the Massage*
- <sup>v</sup> Borg, *From Revolution to Ethics (pdf)*, p4
- <sup>vi</sup> Borg, *From Revolution to Ethics (pdf)*, p22
- <sup>vii</sup> Pollen, Michael. *How to Change you Mind (pdf)*, p7
- <sup>viii</sup> Whitman, Walt. *Song of Myself*, (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45477/song-of-myself-1892-version>)
- <sup>ix</sup> Fialho, Luis. *Corporeality of Consciousness*
- <sup>x</sup> Watts, Alan. *Joyous Cosmology*, p5
- <sup>xi</sup> Kearney, Richard, *Modern Movements in European Philosophy*, p88
- <sup>xii</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice *Modern Movements in European Philosophy*, p76
- <sup>xiii</sup> Kearney, *Modern*, p77
- <sup>xiv</sup> Murrow, *Radio-Television News Directors Association Convention Address*, 1958

All links are either to: [images/media that were present in the presentation from the era](#) or [documents/articles about topics mentioned](#)