

Has Anything Happened since the 1960s? Reflections of an Old-Timer

by **Gerald Martin** | University of Pittsburgh | gmmgmm@pitt.edu

Inevitably, I have space in this short essay only for generalizations, in other words, assertions. This is sometimes a good thing but it always needs to be explained and excused. This brief piece is focused on the professional—my interest in Latin American history including the history of its literary narrative—and the personal, my own perception of the passage of time and the unfolding of global history over the past 50 years. Somehow, I hope to bring the two topics together in one or two significant and perhaps provocative ways. (We all write, of course, in the aftermath of the 2016 Brexit referendum in the UK and the 2016 election of Donald Trump.)

Professionally, anyone involved with Latin American culture has to be struck by the lack of new movements, new styles and, indeed, new “great writers” in Latin American literature since the 1960s—in comparison, say, with the 50 years before (I will return to Latin American fiction toward the end). This would probably be the case with US and European literatures too. It is almost as if the 1960s, that incomparable “conjuncture” (a moment I’ve always viewed as Phase II of the avant-garde 1920s), and not Fukuyama’s 1990s, were “the end of history,” as if we were now living almost entirely in some kind of “present” time—but not “mindfully.”

The second topic departs from a literally “superficial” perception—one about the surface of the past and the passage of time, a reflection on my own experience as a prelude to a brief meditation on the history I have witnessed this past half century.

When one looked back in the 1960s, when I was a young man, at film of the 1910s or 1920s, the physical contrasts were obvious. People and things seemed entirely different: it all looked, in every way,

“a long time ago.” And even when, in 1960s London, I thought back from the then present to the 1940s (the decade when I was born), the physical and visual differences were also obvious; for one thing, there were horses in the streets routinely delivering bread, milk, coal, and beer; and people dressed and spoke differently and had completely different looks on their faces.

Whereas if I look back now, either in film or personal memory, from September of 2018 to the 1960s, the opposite is the case. All the young people (I stress that I am talking about the young people) look like I do now, which is much the same as my children and grandchildren look now. The 1960s young people were the people of the future. The men all wore jeans and could wear hair of any length they chose, the women too could wear whatever they liked—for the first time in history—and houses and automobiles looked much the same as now.

Sputnik and the Cuban Revolution had foreshadowed a new era of political revolution and technological transformation. When I flew to Bolivia in 1965, I traveled in a Boeing 707 jet, which flew at the same speed that jets do now. Photocopiers and contraceptive pills were in use down there in the world below me; computers already existed and personal versions were on the horizon. TV had caught up with the cinema so that the world was now in color. The electric guitar—drama, transformation, the future, the individual and the mass—was already the background to most young people’s lives and it is now the unnoticed background to almost everyone’s life. Third World revolution was well under way and colonialism in full retreat. Questions of race, gender, and sexuality were being vigorously debated and contested. By the beginning of the 1960s it was clear to

perceptive observers that everything was changing; and by the mid-60s almost everybody knew it. And young people, for the first time in history, enjoyed genuine agency, and they and their concerns, from popular culture to revolution, were attracting much of the world's attention.

And all this was rapidly becoming global. When I lived in Mexico in 1968 the young people of the Mexican middle and lower urban classes were simply leaping at globalization. There was a radio channel exclusively devoted to the Beatles, and it was easier to buy books by French intellectuals or international Marxists in Mexico City than in London. The so-called cosmopolitan global elites so despised by Donald Trump's supporters and by advocates of the UK Brexit decision all these years later—mainly the educated middle classes—were already in existence, but postwar social democratic and welfare policies had provided the cosmetic of a newly emergent classless society and the reality of a relatively supportive state, meaning that they had not yet been radically distanced, politically, from the working classes. And of course, as implied above, by the time the 1970s appeared it had become much more difficult to judge a person's class by their dress. This is still the case today.

I find these impressions surprisingly surprising. Much more surprising is how difficult it is to write the history of the past 50 years. Take another superficial observation. The great rock and pop stars who emerged in the 1960s, who drew upon the various forms of African American music since the jazz and blues eras, are still the greatest rock and pop personalities in history and many of them are alive, still performing and still, apparently, relevant (Bob Dylan, Rolling Stones, Paul McCartney, Pink Floyd, Santana, and, until her death during the composition of this text, Aretha Franklin). And the great writers, artists, and intellectuals we look to in "high" culture now are much the same as the great writers, artists, and intellectuals we looked to then because, to underline the point, in historical terms—in relative terms—astonishingly few truly "new" movements, whether political, cultural, or intellectual, and very few "great" figures have emerged in the last half century. In literature younger writers are finding it difficult to produce what used to be called an "oeuvre," a body of work

added to and unfolding over time—because it is not at all clear that time is unfolding in the same way, just as it is no longer clear that young people are truly protagonists of their time. Our lives are no longer lived as *Bildungsromans*. If I think of my own hermetic world of literary criticism it is impossible to think of anyone as significant today as Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva, Barthes, and their European poststructuralist contemporaries; or any artist as generationally significant as Warhol; or any filmmaker as impactful as Antonioni or Godard or Pasolini. What we have had, in almost all fields of cultural and intellectual endeavor, is variations upon a theme, a loss of most forms of radical newness, and a gradual loss of conviction and commitment.

As for me, now an old man, I have finally become a part of the history I have always talked about: as witness (for myself), case study (for my children), and specimen (for my grandchildren). I was 16 when the 1960s began and 26 when they ended. At the start of the decade I was a schoolboy with buddies and girlfriends, exhilarated by the Cuban Revolution and energized by rock and roll; by its end I was a married man about to become a father and teaching students on an area studies program. My area, of course, was Latin America. As a Londoner I watched my city evolve from decadent imperial capital to "swinging" center of cultural revolution during that decade. But also during the '60s I visited Paris at least seven or eight times—though not in 1968 (hélas!) because I was in Mexico. I visited Franco's Spain five times in the '60s and spent at least six months there, eventually traveling the entire country in a pickup truck. I spent a year in Bolivia and visited Peru, Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil by bus and train. During my year in Mexico I attended every student demonstration in the capital city except the last, at Tlatelolco. . . . That year I traveled from New York to Panama by bus (taking in much of the American South, including Tennessee, three months after the assassination of Martin Luther King) and visited not only Mexico but every country in Central America. On my way home in 1969 I watched the first moon landing aboard a transatlantic liner in the Panama Canal; and then discovered, a few days later, that all oceanic ships dumped their garbage behind them to float briefly on the surface and then sink forever into the watery

depths in an obscene and irresponsible spectacle I have never forgotten. ("There's plenty of room down there," a crewmember reassured me.) In my first term at university the Beatles and Rolling Stones had burst on to the scene (I attended their early concerts but missed Dylan's), and the world was transfixed by the Cuban missile crisis. The next year I was at a rock concert when JFK was assassinated. Jorge Luis Borges had come to my university in England to speak in 1963. In 1967 Miguel Angel Asturias, the man I was writing my literary PhD dissertation about, won the Nobel Prize; I met Mario Vargas Llosa, whose biography I am writing now, in Asturias's company in May of that year.

So much happening, so much to learn, so much to do. We wanted to be everywhere at once, as in the 1920s modernist novels by Joyce, Dos Passos, Faulkner, and Woolf. We assumed that history would continue to unfold with the same intensity, the same apparent meaningfulness. Now we have the internet.

Finally I spent 1971 to 1972 (the end of the "long 1960s" in the minds of many experts) in California, another of the great homes of the 1960s transformations, and started to look back, post-assassinations, post-Manson, on an era that we already knew was over, as the Vietnam war juddered to its tragic close and aftermath. Then came the vast conservative push-back: the rise of the so-called think tanks, the international oil crisis and consequent shift of attention to the Middle East, and, for members of LASA (founded in 1966), the devastating Latin American coups and counterrevolutions of the '70s and '80s, beginning of course with Chile's neoliberal putsch; and we started to discover that the newly liberated women of the West didn't just have the right to work but an imperative to do so because now it required two workers per household to live at the standard of a working-class North American family of the 1950s. Since then the gulf between the world's richest and poorest has attained late nineteenth-century dimensions; and the gulf between our increasingly miraculous technology and our ability to build suitable and satisfying societies is reaching literally apocalyptic levels—and not just with climate change. The '60s told us that we needed to achieve appropriate harmonizations between, on the one

hand, the individual and the community, and on the other, between the local and the global. And that it could be done. It is difficult not to conclude that we are further away than ever from these goals. Art, love, communalism, and the quest for a new spirituality, against business, consumerism, individualism, and physical conflict.

Did more things happen in the 1960s than in any other decade in living memory? For sure. Was there any going back? No way. Or rather, there was no way we would accept the loss of our new formal, civil, human, and legal rights; our newly developing cultural, ethnic, and gender identities; and our new idea that culture was, above all, entertainment and fun. As for "Liberty-Equality-Fraternity" all together in one package, well, that would have to wait a bit longer; maybe much longer, we reflected, as the 1990s came and went. The world is "real," right? At least, so Thatcher and Reagan told us. And so we had a completely unexpected and unpredicted return to capitalism's gilded age to undergo (or undertake, *según*), a partial revisiting of that first vertiginous moment of neoliberalism and globalization forged in the late nineteenth century by those uncomfortable cousins and allies, the United States and the United Kingdom (just look at them now . . .). And by the turn of the twenty-first century, following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of the USSR, that regression would be pretty much achieved—and celebrated by Fukuyama et al. Since then all of the history just sketched out has been available for investigation and clarification through the internet and the new social media (unless, of course, one concludes that they have mainly facilitated our historical amnesia, our global dementia); and the human genome has been established to demonstrate that mankind, now renamed "humanity," is unified under one microscopic banner. Those two phenomena—the internet and the genome and all that goes with them—seem to me the two most important developments of our era. Recent history makes it difficult to be optimistic that they will be used for human liberation. And artificial intelligence, robotics, and full-scale genetic engineering await us down the road. If we look up we can see them.

Let's be fair to Fukuyama. Contrary to popular belief, he has not been proved wrong; the market is still liberally regulating our affairs as he, subliminally, predicted. But whoever said that life was easy? (Or at least, whoever dared say that life was going to be easy again after we declared that it could be so during the 1960s?) It seems we will still be organized in the same way, politically and economically, when the arctic ice caps and mountaintops have melted and the oceans have expanded, when all the bees and frogs and rhinoceroses have departed, when every last inch of the planet has been "deregulated" and privatized, when the last utopian vestiges of socialism and social democracy have disappeared from our world, and the United States and the United Kingdom have been reorganized on the same much more practical basis as China and Russia for the smoother functioning of the global capitalist enterprise.

Sitting here in my 1960s-style jeans and this morning's clean T-shirt with its quirky, edgy, libertarian slogan ("fuck you" would be an approximate translation; we are all still rebels, with an electric guitar in our heads), I reflect that history has been moving very slowly, lavalike, since 1969 but also very determinedly, almost methodically; but most of us humans have not. Before Fukuyama was right about the end of history in the 1990s, Marshall McLuhan had been right about the future in the 1960s (about, among many other things, the end of "Gutenberg," the advent of the "global village," the annulment of the future, and the prophetic brilliance of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* in the late 1930s). Sometimes it seems as if we have just been working through the contradictory focusing of history that the 1960s big bang brought about, with all its (apparently utopian) hopes and all its (apparently inevitable) disappointments. In the 1960s we intuited that if there was to be a change it had to be a total (though preferably not a totalitarian) transformation, and our unevenly developing world, it transpired, was not ready. Fifty years later the need is clearer than ever, and now we seem to have no choice; but still we are not ready. It seems to be easier to stop thinking, to look down from the sky to our screens. Through a glass darkly.

As for Latin America, it has ceased being the continent of the future, a role it had played for almost half a millennium. Socialism, revolutions, guerrilla movements, individual dictators, military juntas, assassinations of major political figures, all of them are past or passing; liberalism, with or without "populism," remains, and continues to spread, as it does everywhere else (though the need for the assassination of ordinary people has expanded exponentially). The region has absolutely failed to become the western hemispheric Latin political and economic union many of us had envisaged and is in many respects newly deferential to Spain, which is superficially beneficial for authors who want to be published and publicized in Europe. Even so, a majority of its younger writers and intellectuals appear to hope in the medium term for some kind of assimilation of the entire Latin American continent into the USA. (See Jorge Volpi's seminal *El insomnio de Bolívar*, 2009.) On the other hand, its historic "quest for identity," a staple of its literature and its history of ideas since the late eighteenth century and the very heart and dynamic focus of the 1960s boom of the Latin American novel, has moved on from Latin America and infected the entire planet. If nostalgic nationalisms are currently sweeping the globe in the absence of any other sacred truths in which to believe, that is precisely because in the throes of the neoliberal cultural revolution even places like the United States and the United Kingdom, traditionally triumphalist and exceptionalist, have not only lost their way but their very identities and are now searching for them—vainly—anew.

As for that 1960s boom, focused, as every googler knows, on the figures of Julio Cortázar, Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, and Mario Vargas Llosa, Did it exist? It did. Did the 1960s exist? They did. Do they still exist? They do, they simply won't go away; they have been cryogenically frozen. At the moment Carlos Fuentes died in 2012 we had the extraordinary situation in which the three most prestigious and most widely covered Latin American writers of the twenty-first century were aged 85, 83, and 76. Today Vargas Llosa, at the age of 82, is by some distance the most influential writer-intellectual in the entire Hispanic world. Latin America is still full of interesting writing but less full of interesting writers; few of them

give the impression that they might turn into a García Márquez, Vargas Llosa, Cortázar, or Fuentes, still less into a Borges, Carpentier, Asturias, or Lispector, those decisive writers from the pre-*boom* generation who knew Latin America better than even the *boom* writers themselves ever would.

The only writer, male or female, from the post-*boom* generation who seems self-evidently important in a world-historical sense is Roberto Bolaño, whose death in 2003 was a tragedy for world letters; and it is striking that he is less popular in Latin America itself, or among other Latin American writers, than in other Western regions. Yet it seems to me that no writer anywhere speaks more eloquently about the post-1968 world, its lack of purchase, its lack of direction, and lack of any kind of end product, than Bolaño does. Much of his writing was on the frontier of science fiction. Therein, perhaps, lies the key to the enigma of our age.

If I were younger I would write a book about all this.

Postscript: I have avoided the postmodernism/postmodernity debate, which has been, when all is said and done, and in the absence of Marxism, the great debate of the post-1960s era. We have all been flattened beneath the weight of that debate. If postmodernity existed and exists—in other words, if it designates something that really happened, or can usefully be said to have happened—I would assert that its inauguration was in the 1960s and was signaled, in my neck of the literary woods, by Cortázar's *Rayuela* in 1963 and unveiled by García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* in 1967. //