

# The Sixties at 50 by Paul Starr

**E**ver since the 1960s, many of us have measured progress by how far America has gone in fulfilling the ideals of that era: guaranteeing equal rights, preventing unjust wars, safeguarding the earth, ending poverty. This issue of the *Prospect* includes one such effort to take stock—a special report on poverty commemorating the 50th anniversary

of Michael Harrington's *The Other America*.

In today's harsh political climate, the hopes of the '60s may seem unrealistic, even grandiose, but they remain central to liberal politics. For better or worse, we're still embroiled in the struggles that exploded in that decade. What is the campaign for same-sex marriage or the recent controversy over women's reproductive rights if not a continuation of both the civil-rights movement and the sexual revolution of the '60s? And what is today's social conservatism if not a backlash against the changes unleashed in that era?

The 1960s are a reference point for another reason. The span of human life makes the half-century mark a natural point of historical reflection. People who were young in the '60s now glimpse the closing phases of their own time and their generation's. Many of them once dreamed of leaving the world a better place and 50 years later face the question of whether they will. I am not sure anyone cares that this year is also the 100th anniversary of Woodrow Wilson's election as president and the high-water mark of early 20th-

century Progressivism. No one is alive who remembers that bright dawn and asks whether we are better off for it. The 1960s, however, are still a living memory, and the verdict on that decade continues to divide Americans as sharply as the next presidential election and along much the same lines.

Yet despite the continuities, the '60s seem strikingly different from the present

## For better or worse, we're still embroiled in the struggles that exploded in the 1960s.

because of what that era took for granted—sustained economic growth and shared prosperity. To be sure, prosperity wasn't shared widely enough; the poor, especially the minority poor, were left out. But by 1962, the distribution of income and wealth had improved modestly for two decades, the middle class was growing, unions were a powerful force, and even Republicans accepted the New Deal. The movements of the 1960s proceeded as if those issues were settled.

The '60s movements were not just intellectually unprepared for the slowdown in growth and rise in inequality that began in the mid-1970s; they were insti-

tutionally unprepared, too. The civil-rights, feminist, anti-war, and environmental movements—and others that came later—operated more or less on their own. They had particularly tense relations with the labor movement, which many of the new organizations saw as a bulwark of the status quo. On the left, solidarity was not forever. When Democrats had congressio-

nal majorities, they made no effort to repeal Taft-Hartley, the 1947 law that severely limited union organizing, or to adopt other measures that could have strengthened unions. They failed to appreciate how much their own concerns depended on the unions' role in mobilizing working-class support for progressive goals.

The social reforms of the Kennedy and Johnson years helped to ameliorate poverty and to buffer Americans against the economic downturns of later decades. But the idea of a war on poverty without strengthening the hand of labor was a great mistake. Not all progressives were hostile or indifferent to

the unions. Certainly Harrington wasn't. When Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, he was in Memphis to support a strike by sanitation workers. But too many liberals thought of poverty only as a policy problem, not as a reflection of the underlying distribution of power that politics could alter.

Today, with union membership reduced to 7 percent of the private-sector workforce, most working people have no organized voice at all. Meanwhile, the power of wealth has been fully unleashed by the Supreme Court. "In democracies, the rich protect their freedom

with wealth, and the people protect theirs with laws." So goes an adage that dates to Demosthenes in

ancient Athens, according to the political theorist John McCormick. But where the laws obey wealth, there is no just equilibrium.

Someday the 1960s will belong entirely to the historians, but we are not there yet. Same-sex marriage may well be the last of the old battles and the old victories. It is the kind of reform that law can deliver, the wealthy will not obstruct, and public opinion will ultimately not deny. Poverty is different because power is at the root of it, and if we are ever to deal with it effectively, we will have to harness the passions of the 1960s to a deeper realism. Let's hope we don't have to wait another 50 years. ☐