

Anthony Barnett

It Was More Than 12 Months

ABSTRACT

‘1968’ was a contradictory turning point. A new era was born. But right-wing, free market economic supremacy emerged out of the left-wing assault on post-war paternalism. It called for peace but was very violent. It was a macho moment of male-dominated revolutionaries but this provoked the modern feminist movement—the year’s most lasting progressive achievement came about in opposition to it. The central demand was for open, democratic people power. Everywhere this was pushed back. Yet its call has never been extinguished and remains the challenge of our time.

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What Was ‘1968’ About?

I put ‘1968’ in quote marks. The political ’68 was a ‘long ’68’. It begins in mid-1967. With: in Germany, the June demonstration against the Shah of Iran. In Vietnam, the decision to launch the Tet Offensive. In the United Kingdom (UK), the Dialects of Liberation conference in July. In China, the ‘Cultural Revolution’ tearing the country apart. In the Middle East, the Six Day War in June. In Poland, the regime-instigated expulsion of Jews. In Czechoslovakia, the radical writers statement of June. In the United States (U.S.), the race riots of the summer that burn Detroit then Washington. In France, the Nanterre occupation of November stirred up by the Situationists and the publication of *The Society of the Spectacle* in December.

In the West, ‘1968’ was a year of emancipation. Here, it broke the unquestioned grip and exposed the hypocrisy of the post-1945 social, cultural and political order: its paternalism, its presumption of knowing best, its authority, racism and militarism. It did so in the most startling, defiant fashion and was the political expression of ‘the sixties’. This is why it remains a ‘revolutionary moment’ for us even though all these things still carry on. It was a conscious moment of freedom (rather than liberty) when we asserted that we can define ourselves rather than accept ‘our place’. Individualism replaced the deference of the wartime order.

‘1968’ was driven by Vietnam, which triggered both Mao’s ‘Cultural Revolution’ against a Sino-Soviet alliance that would have undermined his rule, and the anti-war movement in the U.S. Across Europe, occupations inspired occupations. We told our-

selves nothing like it had been seen since 1848—and this inspired the famous *Black Dwarf* front page written by my friend and comrade Fred Halliday. Typically, red does not show when printed on black! WE shall fight WE shall win PARIS LONDON ROME BERLIN.

But the contagion began in Asia and then went round the world. Every continent was inspired and affected in its own way, including Africa (or at least South Africa). The massacre of young people at Tlatelolco, Mexico, in October '68 is little remembered yet overshadows all West-European confrontations. Militants proclaimed a new internationalism. But we can see now it was the birth of something very different: *globalisation*; and that generated its would-be nemesis, the environmental movements.

The Vietnam War exploded with the Tet Offensive in January 1968. Half a million Americans had been fighting there since 1965, after John F. Kennedy's assassination led to Lyndon B. Johnson's escalation. Viet Cong suspects were being taken up in helicopters and one was thrown out to make the others talk. U.S. soldiers draped body parts around themselves like jewellery. Only those who did not want to know did not know (they were many, of course). It was enraging and insupportable: this was how 'the West' defended its values. The importance of Tet was that Vietnamese nationalism exposed the fact of U.S. aggression.

Vietnam framed the violence of the period. It was marked out in the U.S. by the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy. It was also personal. Many killed themselves unable to deal with the psychological stresses (three of my close friends). This violent, disintegrative aspect of '68 is worth stressing given the image of the sixties as hippy joy, high fashion and liberation. Of course, it was not all doom and gloom—it was also a great time, funny and glorious. Yet an often pathological sectarianism was to lead to the Red Brigade, the Black Panthers, the Weathermen, Baader-Meinhoff. Che Guevara prefigured the fate of a long and terrible legacy... but was idolised for it. The photo of his corpse went round the world in October '67.

Underlying the intense disruption in the West was the generational rupture. Unless from elite families, as children our parents did not experience premarital sexual relationships or higher education or even running water. They had no music like rock and roll, few consumer goods, no television. A U.S. website tells us that the "word 'teenager' first appears after World War II which was the first time the concept got into full swing".¹ In Western Europe the first generation of real teenagers *become* the generation of '68. It meant children and parents were foreigners to one another. In a hilarious aside to his brilliant polemic, *The Beginning of the End*, Tom Nairn said the

1 Sara Matthews: In Which Century Did the Word Teenager First Appear? (published on 24 February 2015), at: <https://www.quora.com/In-which-century-did-the-word-teenager-first-appear> (accessed on 2 January 2020).

human species only began in 1950, everything before then was prehistory.² “Father, I want to kill you”, sang Jim Morrison of *The Doors*, the poet of ‘1968’. His father was the commander of a nuclear-armed aircraft carrier.

‘1968’ released hair from oily control and stiffener. But in the first instance it and ‘the sixties’ cast aside the hypocrisy only to make real the oppressive superiority of men. Women were ‘chicks’ or ‘birds’. Liberation was a one-way street in which men took advantage of female contraception to enjoy license. But it also emancipated women to enjoy their sexuality. Feminism was born as they used this gain, and turned it into political demands, i. e. it came about *in reaction to* the sexism of the sixties.³ The force of ‘1968’ was responsible for this: its most lasting impact was a negation of its origin. The Leninist/Maoist/Trotskyist groups that moved in on the spontaneous political radicalism of ‘1968’ were to a man... chauvinist and resisted feminism. Today, Trump is a perfect embodiment of the reactionary side of the sixties: permissive, reckless, contrarian, self-indulgent and macho.

What Is the Legacy of 1968?

In 1987, I went to the Soviet Union at the beginning of Perestroika and wrote an account that argued that the sixties had come to the Soviet Union. Students there were for the “Three Nyets’: No to violence and the propaganda of violence; No to ideas of national or racial exclusiveness; No to claims of a monopoly of the truth in opposition to other peoples’ right to search for it themselves”.⁴ This was pure sixties, exactly the kind of desire expressed in numerous occupations and open-minded, high-energy disruptions of a suffocating system. Of course this young protest movement was raucous, urgent, undisciplined and naive. It was also full of enormous humanistic potential. This was crushed. Three processes on the left contributed to this and helped ensure that the outcome of ‘1968’ was the ascendancy of the right.⁵

- 2 See Tom Nairn/Angelo Quattrocchi: *The Beginning of the End*, London 1998 (1968), pp. 96f.
- 3 In the 1970s in the UK, three women—Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright—tried to move beyond them to a different kind of politics with *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism*, London 1979. For a detailed discussion of the relationship between 1968 and women’s liberation see also Mica Nava’s contribution in this publication.
- 4 Anthony Barnett: *Soviet Freedom*, London 1988, p. 270.
- 5 When looking at these three processes it should be stressed that underlying the defeat of the left was the transformation of class politics by technology, leading to the disappearance of the industrial proletariat. While semiconductors had been developed in the 1950s and automation was well underway, Intel was founded in 1968 and the application of digital computing can be said to have begun then. The ‘Mother of all Demonstrations’ in Decem-

For one, '1968' led to the end of Communism: most obviously in Czechoslovakia, where the Prague Spring, initiated by Dubcek in January 1968, was crushed by Soviet tanks in the summer. This ended any possible democratic reform of Communism and ensured the stultification of the Soviet bloc. The confrontation was stark too in France where the largest Communist Party in the West opposed the student uprising in May initiated by provocateurs like Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who went by the moniker Dany le Rouge or, in Britain, Danny the Red. Communism's claim on the future was vaporised by the anti-Stalinism of the days of May. The more creative Italian party developed Eurocommunism but fragmented. The spirit of the sixties was incompatible with rule by central committee. The latter was unable to reinvent itself and at the same time remain socialist—which is incompatible with a one-party state. The outcome was 1989: the fall of the Berlin Wall, the termination of Soviet Communism and the execution of Chinese democracy in Tiananmen Square—followed by the, admittedly inventive, creation of Central Committee Capitalism in China.

Secondly, 1968 entailed a failure of social democracy and the democrats. The greatest failure of '1968' in the West was that of the U.S. Democrats and the European Social Democrats refused to recognise that the energy, seriousness, peaceful desires and creativity of the political upsurge was something they should embrace and recruit, not repudiate. However, the paternalism, trade-union corporatism and Cold War dedication of the official left-of-centre parties, ensured their failure to renew themselves (unlike parties of the right). A key moment that symbolised the clash of cultures was the Democratic Party Convention of August 1968 in Chicago.

Arguably this led to Richard Nixon's election. But who was *more* to blame, the young, naive and impulsive protestors (far from blameless in their recklessness) or the canny and experienced politicians? More was to come in the years that followed. Under the banner of the Third Way, social democrats embraced neoliberal globalisation, led by Bill Clinton and Gerhard Schroeder—both quintessential products of '1968' who evaded its militancy but embraced its anti-politics and consumerism ("It's the economy, stupid") to turn their parties into vehicles for the 'anti-politics' of neoliberalism.

I was up close to Tony Blair's 'modernisation' of Britain and witnessed at first hand the way it repelled the spirit of the sixties as it embraced globalisation. But in London especially, the capitalist, consumerist, creative sixties was far more important than the political '1968'. Except for a few of us, the left's efforts at the time were theatrical. But the right began its path. In April 1968, Enoch Powell made his 'Rivers of Blood' speech against coloured immigrants and in October, a rare woman MP (member of parliament) smelt the zeitgeist and denounced the role of the over-mighty state at the

ber 1968 introduced the fundamentals of what was to become the personal computing that is now the platform for societies everywhere; it was arguably the year's single, most revolutionary moment.

Tory Party conference. Her name was Margaret Thatcher (she would later build an alliance with the then recently elected Governor of California, Ronald Reagan). Powell and Thatcher begot the makers of 'Brexit'.

The third process was the sectarian takeover of the militancy of '1968'. When a new, inchoate energy is unleashed it is all too easily prone to be exploited by already existing 'answers' eager to be refreshed. The Leninist/Maoist/Trotskyist *groupescules* that flourished after '1968' fertilised themselves on its energy but also extinguished it. This is a fascinating if marginal story. Northern Ireland, one part of my country, and Cambodia on the edge of Vietnam, were especially exposed to the consequences. In Northern Ireland, a classic sixties civil rights movement was pure '1968' and led straight to a confrontation with Protestant supremacy and then the British state, with the result that its call for change was appropriated by the Provisional IRA (Irish Republican Army) which rose, Lazarus-like, from the dead. As well as being repelled by the official, governing left from without, the spirit of the sixties was destroyed by the hard left from within; the sectarianism of the IRA is an example. Yet, there is no grimmer example than the fate of Cambodia. A Chinese supported anti-Vietnamese Communist Party appropriated the energetic leaders who rebelled against the suffocating grip of Prince Sihanouk and disposed of them—the best, Hou Youn, was killed and thrown into the Mekong before Pol Pot captured and emptied Phom Penh. Hu Nim was soon to be interrogated and 'crushed to death' in the regime's prison and extermination centre, Tuol Sleng.

'1968' and the Next 50 Years

This is for discussion. My thesis is that '1968' was a leftist moment at the beginning of a long, global capitalist boom and technological transformation that resulted in a right-wing domination, culminating in where we are today. But today, the rightist moment we are living through will lead to a left-wing world. The sixties initiated the defeat of collectivism and its replacement by individualism. Today, we are witnessing the start of a process that will see *not* the revival of collectivism but the replacement of individualism by networkism. Not least in response to the insecurity, inequality and precarity of today's world, ultra-capitalism is no longer seen as normal by the new generation. A different kind of socialisation to the state-centred politics of the old left is being born. It began with the *indignados* in Spain, inspired by Tahřır square. Manuel Castells rightly recognised the Spanish experience of May 2011 as equal to 1968.⁶ It led into the Occupy movement, the exposure of the economic realities of the one

6 See, for instance, Manuel Castells: *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*, Cambridge 2015 ('2012), pp. xiv-xv.

per cent and now the #MeToo movement. But at present all this is dominated by the push back: the adamant hostility of the hard right to a threat they sense all too well. They will be with us for some time. Putin (1952), Xi (1953) and Erdogan (1954) were born within 18 months of each other. They share the fate of being post-‘1968’. They entered their twenties with its defeat and the rise of feminism, which in their different ways they all oppose, viscerally. At the same time, Trump represents everything about ‘1968’ that they hate: its arbitrary, self-indulgent, permissive and unpredictable character. Where they are joined at the hip is with shared hatred of human rights and the rule of law (meaning the effective prohibition of corruption). This tradition was also marginalised in the sixties and ‘1968’ and was born again in the seventies (another story). There can be no progressive revival without it.

Anthony Barnett is the Co-Founder of openDemocracy. He was an editor of the Black Dwarf. He is an author and activist. His most recent long article is *Out of the Belly of Hell: COVID-19 and the Humanisation of Globalisation*. His most recent book is *The Lure of Greatness: England’s Brexit and America’s Trump*.