

The 1968 years seen from Britain

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None of the key events of 1968 happened in Britain, but they impacted dramatically on the configuration of the Left. One socialist journal said it was “the year the ice cracked”. [1] But more realistically it was the culmination of a process of left political renewal started in 1956 when the near-simultaneous Hungarian revolution and the British-French-Israeli invasion of Egypt shook the British Left to its core, resulting in the emergence of the “first” New Left. [2]

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Revolutionary Renaissance

In the early- and mid-1960s this first New Left had played a key role in the renewal of radicalisation, ideologically through journals like New Left Review and organisationally through the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, which in turn had a spin off in strengthening the anti-apartheid movement and other left-wing campaigns. One of the first significant student occupations was at the prestigious London School of Economics in 1967, over the suspension of student union officials campaigning against the appointment of a college director with strong links to Ian Smith's Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), a strong ally of apartheid South Africa.

Because of the global interests of British capital, Britain is a focus of international news gathering, but the mass media is particularly focused on the Anglophone countries, centrally of course the United States. So the TV news bulletins on the evening of January 31 were full of the Tet offensive and the invasion of the United States' Vietnam embassy compound in Saigon by fighters from the National Liberation Front. The NLF-North Vietnamese offensive was like a thunder clap, and for the Left immediately seemed like a vindication of its contention that the US was losing the war, despite the vast firepower of the American military machine wreaking havoc in the villages of South Vietnam and raining death on towns and cities in North Vietnam. As we now know the insurgents suffered grievous losses but inflicted a heavy political defeat on the United States and its South Vietnamese allies, the beginning of the end for the US war effort. [3]

The Tet offensive was the first of three major events that seemed to give concrete life to aspects of the revolutionary socialist programme – the other events of course being the May-June general strike in France and the crushing of the “Prague Spring” of Czech reform communism, by the Russian invasion in August. These three events together seemed to confirm the idea of ‘three sectors’ of the world revolution. or at least were easily interpreted as such by the Fourth International. [4] This conjunction helped to open up a whole new audience for the revolutionary left, especially among students.

But another process and series of events had a profound impact on the consciousness of left leaning or liberal-minded young people in Britain – the intensification and radicalisation of the struggle for Black civil rights in the United States, and the apparent descent into crisis and turmoil in that country, symbolised by the assassination of Martin Luther King (4 April) and the Black uprising that followed it; the assassination of Robert Kennedy (5 June); and brutal police attacks on protestors at the Democratic Party national convention in Chicago (August 26-9).

May Events in France

Probably the process that had the most impact on the Left was the student uprising followed by the almost two weeks of general strike in France. Revolt in the “third world” was ongoing and reform communist revolt and repression in the Stalinist states had happened in the relatively recent past. But a month-long general strike, the biggest in world history was something unique. The revolutionary role of the working class, and the conservative role of the official Communist parties seemed to be dramatically confirmed. The dominant discourse on the revolutionary left – that there was potentially a revolutionary situation betrayed by the French Communist Party (PCF) was a bit simplistic. For example, the sight of Georges Seguy, leader of the Communist-led CGT union, being shouted down by a mass meeting at the Renault-Billancourt factory when reporting negotiations with the employers, gave rise to highly optimistic interpretations in the UK. In fact he was shouted down with chants of ‘gouvernement populaire’, the PCF’s own governmental slogan – a popular front government. It signified the strikers’ wish to take the struggle onto the governmental plane, to be done with the hated authoritarian Gaullist regime, not exactly the demand for immediate socialist revolution. Of course, the PCF wanted to restrict the movement to demands about pay and conditions, and precisely not to generalise it politically. No one can tell how far the movement would have gone if the PCF had taken a different course.

In fact two of the most widely-read analyses of the events in Britain, France – “The Struggle Goes On” by Tony Cliff and Ian Birchall of the International Socialists (later SWP), and Ernest Mandel’s “The Lessons of May ’68” both had much more nuanced interpretations than presenting the possibility of immediate socialist revolution. [5], In any case the key point was the conservative role played by the PCF, which handed the revolutionary left everywhere a polemical gold mine. The IS held meetings all over Britain on the theme of the Cliff/Birchall pamphlet.

Vietnam Solidarity Campaign

The Tet offensive gave a spur to the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC), helping to make it the centre of the Vietnam protest movement, marginalising the Communist Party-backed British Council for Peace in Vietnam (BCPV). VSC was politically dominated by the International Marxist Group, which had founded the campaign and also the International Socialists. Its theme was “solidarity” with those doing the fighting and for the US to leave Vietnam, not just a call for negotiations, the key demand of the BCPV. Despite differences of interpretation over the nature of the NLF and North

Vietnamese regime, the British revolutionary left benefited from appearance that the NLF was involved in something more than a struggle for national unity and independence, but ultimately some kind of revolution.

There were other ideological effects of the May events on the British left. Above all was a key “lesson” from France: that students can in some circumstances detonate a political crisis but only when the working class moves into action can there be any chance of a progressive or revolutionary outcome. In Britain, Maoist, anarchist and libertarian currents were always weak. Those people, sometimes influenced by Herbert Marcuse and the Frankfurt school, who doubted the revolutionary role of the working class, and instead pointed to students, third world peasants and different liberation movements as the revolutionary subjects, were pushed to one side by the reception of the French events in Britain. From then on, the need to build an organisation capable of intervening among workers became a primary concern among revolutionary and socialist-minded students. This often took a crude “workerist” form, ignoring or downplaying the struggles of the specially oppressed, particularly among supporters of the International Socialists. Nonetheless it was the dominant mood among students.

Students and Workers

In truth, there never was a mass student movement in Britain on a scale comparable to Germany, Japan, the United States and Italy. In fact, student radicalism was always a minority and never dominant on the campuses, although by its organisation and energy it could politically dominate key universities and colleges. In Germany, Japan and the USA the student radicalisation had generated huge radical or left organisations that were quasi-hegemonic among radicals - in Germany, the Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund (SDS), in Japan the Zengakuren and in the United States, Students for a Democratic Society (also SDS) respectively. A self-conscious effort was made in 1968 to copy these international examples, through launching the Revolutionary Socialist Students Federation. Animated particularly by members of the New Left Review editorial board, it held a founding conference in June 1968 and another conference the next Spring. [6] But although supported by the IMG, and formally by the IS, it could not, outside a few locations, for any length of time supplant the established left wing organisations; and in any case the founding of a student organisation at a time when the best revolutionary students were looking for an avenue to the militant workers, was doomed to fail.

Rebellion in the Six Counties

In Northern Ireland the movement for civil rights for the oppressed nationalist minority - Catholics in the Six Counties suffered from notorious discrimination in jobs, housing and voting rights - was greatly inspired by the civil rights movement in the United States, and the non-violent civil disobedience politics of Martin Luther King.

The first civil rights marches were held in 1968, from Coalisland to Dungannon on 24 August and in Derry on 5 October. Both marches were confronted by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), and the latter violently attacked - the Nationalist member of parliament Gerry Fitt was one of the demonstrators clubbed to the ground.

The Derry march led directly to a mass meeting at Queens University Belfast on 9 October where a more radical action-based movement, People's Democracy, was formed, including as leaders people influenced by the revolutionary socialist tradition like Eammon McCann and Bernadette Devlin (later

McAliskey).

In January 1969, in imitation of Martin Luther King's Selma to Montgomery march, about 40 People's Democracy members held a four-day march between Belfast and Derry. The march was repeatedly attacked by loyalists along its route, most violently in an incident at Burntollet bridge on 4 January, where the marchers were assaulted by about 200 loyalists, including off-duty special constables, armed with iron bars, bottles and stones - while the RUC stood by and watched. These shocking events, and the anti-Catholic pogrom in Belfast in August 1969, led directly to the sending of British troops to the province, and the emergence of the Provisional IRA - and a 20-year war with the British state.

One thing that could easily be seen from Britain in 1968 was that the "stars" of the far left and insurgent movements - like Rudi Dutschke, Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Alain Krivine, were mainly men. The platform at the famous May 12 mass meeting organised by the JCR on the eve of the "night of the barricades" didn't include a single woman. [7] People like Bernadine Dohrn in the US SDS and Bernadette Devlin in PD were exceptions. [8]

The radical energy of 1968, and the movement before and after it, was creating a new cultural space in which not just radical socialists, but rebel mass movements of the oppressed, could organise, grow and announce themselves on a mass stage.

Popular Culture

That radical energy benefitted enormously from the general cultural upheaval of the 1960s, in which Britain and the United States were central participants. This was of course located mainly among young people and promoted counter-cultural thinking and lifestyles. These included fashion, music, film, drug taking and a freer attitude towards sexuality enabled by the widespread availability of the contraceptive pill. (That sexual freedom included huge chunks of misogyny and homophobia - the women's movement was just about to get going). In time the lifestyles promoted by the 'swinging sixties' were easily recuperated by capitalism, but at the time they helped to promote anti-authoritarianism, from which the left could mainly benefit, although revolutionary Marxists at the time were decidedly sniffy about the plague of anarchists 'spontaneists' and libertarians of all sorts, who complicated recruitment to Leninist organisations.

At the level of the mass media there were few direct crossovers from cultural to political revolution. Mick Jagger, influenced by the October 1968 Vietnam demo, sang 'the time is ripe for violent revolution', an attitude on his part that was fleeting. Socialist film director Ken Loach had made his first dramatic TV impact with 'Poor Cow' (about homelessness) in 1967 and was already working on his breakthrough film 'Kes'. French movie director Jean-Luc Godard collaborated with six others to make Far From Vietnam. The radical theatre group, the Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre (CAST), had been founded in 1967 and was much in evidence in 1968.

The one area where leftist politics intruded directly on popular culture was folk music - mainly American musicians inspired by the radical tradition of Woody Guthrie. The included Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Peggy Seeger and her more famous brother Pete, Tom Paxton and the most political of that generation, Phil Ochs. By the late 1960s Dylan had wandered off message, but the others mainly persisted.

Limited though the impact of leftist politics was on popular culture, the cultural revolution of the 1960s broke the stultifying conformism and abject respect for authority that the 1950s represented.

Women's Movement

Women's groups of different sorts had been emerging in Britain during the 1960s - in part from the influence of the growing movement in the US, but the focalising event was the Ford women workers' strike in June 1968. This led on the one hand to the formation of the National Joint Action Campaign Committee for Women's Equal Rights (NJACCWER) which called a national demonstration for equal pay in 1969; and on the other to the visit of the first woman Cabinet minister, Barbara Castle, who promised Equal Pay and subsequently introduced the Equal Pay Act in 1970. At the same time women in left and academic circles, notably the radical history movement, were organising, and after an overflowing workshop on writing women's history at the History Workshop in 1969 Sheila Rowbotham and others called for the first national women's liberation conference in Britain in February 1970 - itself originally called as conference on women's history. [9] While the influence of the US movement was clear - including an initiative at the Miss World of 1979 - the British movement was notable for the strong influence of historians in its founding members and closer ties with the trade-union movement. The TUC adopted its Working Women's Charter in 1974.

The Gay Liberation Front, Britain's first campaigning gay rights movement, was founded just a few months later and clearly inspired by the example of the women's movement.

Civil Rights

The civil rights movement in the United States and its follow-on Black Power movement generated enormous sympathy among the Left and liberals in Britain. In the uprising in dozens of US cities following the killing of Martin Luther King, upwards of 45 people were killed, and 2500 were injured - nearly all by the police, National Guard and regular army sent to crush them - and 15,000 people were arrested. In Britain there was no autonomous mass Black movement created, but anti-racism became a mass phenomenon and a linchpin of the activity of the British left from the 1970s onwards. One cloud on the horizon in 1968 was the mobilisation of hundreds of dockworkers and Smithfield meat market workers in London to support the anti-immigrant rantings of right wing Tory MP Enoch Powell. Security Service documents re-released 30 years later showed that these 'spontaneous' demonstrations were in fact organised by far-right activists. [10] Powell's views, considered extreme at the time, later became mainstream in the Conservative Party.

The rhythm of far-left mobilisation was strongly affected by the cycle of Vietnam demonstrations. In March the famous "Battle of Grosvenor Square" took place, where VSC's relatively small demonstration of 15,000-20,000 achieved massive publicity because of the fighting with the police protecting the American embassy. The evening before the demonstration, a meeting was held addressed by French revolutionary leader Alain Krivine, and interrupted by the noisy arrival of dozens of demonstrators from the SDS in Berlin chanting "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi-Minh".

The next scheduled VSC demonstration was in October 1968. Attended by more than 100,000 mainly young people, it was preceded by a clamorous press campaign claiming that the demonstrators planned an attempted "revolution" on that day. One indicator of the mood was a gigantic banner proclaiming "NLF-AEF" - AEF being the acronym of the Amalgamated Union of Engineering and Foundry Workers, the name that the giant engineering union AUEW was briefly known by. "NLF-AEF" was of course a fumbling attempt to indicate the unity of anti-imperialist struggles with that of the British working class. The October 1968 was the last mass Vietnam demonstration - after that the concerns of the audience of the far-left organisations had moved on.

A month after the start of the French May-June events, a new revolutionary left-inspired newspaper

edited by Tariq Ali was launched. Called the *Black Dwarf* after a radical newspaper in 19th century Britain, its front page proclaimed “We shall fight, we shall win, Paris, London, Rome Berlin”.

In truth most of the British far left outside the IMG didn't know very much about its comrades in the rest of Europe; but the IMG strongly promoted the role of the Fourth International-influenced Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire. The important role of JCR leaders like Alain Krivine, Henri Weber and Daniel Bensaid in the May-June events was an element of prestige attractive to the bigger milieu of sympathisers around *Black Dwarf*. And the same time the International Socialists advertised the role of “our comrades in Voix Ouvrière [11]”, an alliance without much staying power as it turned out.

Just as had happened after the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary, the decision by the Soviet Union's Politburo to intervene militarily in Czechoslovakia did immense damage to the prestige of the Communist Parties, including in Britain. The party's General Secretary John Gollan made mild criticism of the Soviet intervention and an immediate split was avoided. But it helped to mature the trends of thought that would eventually emerge as the party's Eurocommunist wing, ending ultimately in a disastrous split.

One notable blind spot in Britain was the relative lack of interest in Latin America. The death of Che Guevara in August did lead to a meeting of maybe 400 people, addressed by future MEP Ken Coates, IMG leader Pat Jordan and the founder of *Monthly Review*, the Marxist economist Paul Sweezy. However, the October 9 massacre of 400 student demonstrators in Mexico City's Plaza of the Three Cultures hardly raised a ripple of interest outside the revolutionary hard core.

World events up to and during 1968 had an immense effect of the British Left. Political organisations that were minuscule emerged after it with some force, particularly the International Socialists and the IMG. Part of a whole generation was radicalised, and part of that was won ideologically won to Marxism. Given the importance of English as the first language of international communication, that had important effects on the political Left and the academic Left in several countries for decades.

Phil Hearse

P.S.

* <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5482>

Footnotes

[1] From *International Socialism* (1st series), No.35, Winter 1968/69 [“1968: The Ice Cracks”](#).

[2] See Stuart Hall *New Left Review* 61, January-February 2010 [“Life and Times of the First New Left”](#).

[3] See Pierre Rousset,ESSF (article 43035), [L'année 68 débute au Vietnam - L'offensive du Têt, la solidarité internationale, la radicalité :](#)
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article43035>

[4] See [“The Dynamics of World Revolution Today”](#), text of the 7th World Congress of the Fourth International (1st after reunification). The authors of this text were Ernest Mandel and Joseph Hansen.

[5] See [“The Struggle Goes On”](#) and [“The Lessons of May ’68”](#).

[6] *The Guardian* [“From the archive, 15 June 1968: British students talk about a revolution”](#).

[7] The Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire was a revolutionary youth organisation not affiliated to the Fourth International but led by FI supporters. Speakers at the meeting included Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Henri Weber, Ernest Mandel, Alain Krivine and Daniel Bensaid. A photo of the platform can be seen at the beginning of this article: *Contretemps* 7 April 2018, “L’événement et la durée... Retour sur Mai 68”, available on ESSF (article 44374), [L’événement et la durée... Retour sur Mai – La JCR dans le tourbillon des années 68](#).

[8] Dohrn was the key leader of the ‘Mao-spontaneist’ Revolutionary Youth Movement wing of SDS, later known as ‘The Weathermen’. In the beginning characterised by ultra-left street tactics and puerile veneration of Stalinist dictators like Kim-Il Sung, it further degenerated into terrorist bombings, which resulted in self-inflicted deaths and long prison sentences. Dohrn lived ‘underground’ from 1970-80 before handing herself in, but was dealt with leniently, serving less than a year in jail. She inspired the lead character of the Marge Piercy novel *Vida*. Bernadette Devlin McAliskey came to prominence during the “Battle of Bogside” in October. She was elected to the Westminster parliament as an Independent, the youngest woman to have been so at that time, in 1969. She is a lifelong socialist, feminist, republican activist.

[9] See *New Left Review* 1966 Juliet Mitchell [Women – The Longest Revolution](#) and numerous works of Sheila Rowbotham.

[10] *The Guardian*, 1 January 1999, [“ Racism: Extremists led Powell marches”](#).

[11] Then name of the present Lutte Ouvrière