

1968 revolution: An impact too early to judge - These events have been stripped of their meaning

Tuesday 29 May 2018, by [BUDRAITSKIS Ilya](#) (Date first published: 17 May 2018).

Over the past decades, we constantly observe the phantasmagorical conversion of the values of 1968 into their polar opposites. The events of 1968 have been stripped of their meaning and are now more a symbol of capitulation than revolution. Accepting this is the first step to making its legacy relevant again.

The 50th anniversary of the events of 1968 has not provoked a welter of emotions. I have in mind, of course, not academic and cultural commemorations. Depoliticised, the spirit of 1968 still inspires art shows and academic conferences, which, however, reveal their utter powerlessness when it comes to politics. Unlike other great revolutions of the past, the spectre of 1968 is not reanimated in the struggles of our contemporaries, and its legacy not only lies unclaimed, but is even an embarrassment. Elites in the west view 1968 more as a point of consensus than a cause for concern, for these events have a unique capacity, despite our naïve presumptions, for confirming the old conservative truth that revolutions only strengthen the things they opposed.

Instead of putting an end to capitalism, 1968 instilled it with new force, ingenuity and the energy of individual rebellion. Successfully mastering the lingo of the youth protests that took place 50 years ago, today's pro-market ideology mounts ferocious attacks on the present's predictability and mundaneness in order to colonize the future creatively. In *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello mercilessly argued how the radical critique of the system had been used to renew it. The 1960s rebellion against post-war bureaucratised capitalism gave way to the triumph of the neoliberal "projective city", rooted in market deregulation and privatisation of the public sphere. The spirit of protest was transformed into a new "spirit" whose methods were even more soulless.

Over the past decades, we constantly observe the phantasmagorical conversion of the values of 1968 into their polar opposites. "Personal liberation" now denotes the unrestrained desire for individual success, whilst the creative transfiguration of life has been reduced to mere "creativity", the hottest commodity on the block. The very notion of revolution has been hollowed out, stripped of meaningful social change and reduced to the spin-doctored promotion of forces seeking to pass themselves off to disoriented voters as something "new" (recall Obama and Macron's recent electoral "revolutions"). The businessman used to be a gloomy figure who stood in the way of youth and imagination. Now he has been recast as the rebel of our day and age, a dreamer and utopian, as exemplified by Mark Zuckerberg and Pavel Durov.

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The New Left of distant 1968 regarded the liberation of consciousness as nothing more than the emancipation of life from the alienated society that had enslaved it. By challenging the all-powerful “circumstances” that define everyone’s existence, the individual ceases to be entangled in them. Practical revolutionaries should not only act decisively, but above all they should free themselves from illusions and, as it were, look at the world anew in order to finally cease to be complicit in its reproduction. The western New Left offered a wide variety of practices for liberating minds, from involvement in guerrilla campaigns to the non-alienated “psychogeographic” exploration of urban space, from collective self-education that rejected university hierarchies to experiments with LSD.

Even in the final example, the most vulnerable to criticism, we can clearly follow the transformation of a technique for resisting reality into a technique for reconciling oneself to it. I have in mind microdosing, the daily regulated consumption of narcotics that is currently widespread amongst Silicon Valley’s creative denizens. Microdosing is not just a lightweight variation on the original objective of narcotics consumption, but has fundamentally altered its meaning. Tame doses of LSD will not change your attitude to the world, but they will help you increase your individual competitiveness amidst the world’s current state.

The consumption of marijuana used to be deemed a challenge to the system and was firmly bound up with the 1960s and the hippy movement, and moves to legalise in the US superficially appear to be yet another decisive victory for liberated minds over the repressive puritanical and conservative mindset that has prevailed there. Paradoxically, however, the legalisation of marijuana today actually involves invoking traditional American free market values and the consumer’s individual responsibility. In this guise, it differs little from arguments in favour of the unrestricted sale of firearms and cigarettes.

Indeed, microdosing can serve as a metaphor for what has happened to most of the emancipatory ideas of the 1960s. The struggle of minorities for recognition [1], which was inextricably bound up with the demand for overall social and political progress, has led, in its microdosed variation, to the formal and hypocritical consolidation of so-called political correctness. Instead of destroying the boundaries between majorities and minorities, as generated by the system, political correctness merely fortified them by making the command of politically correct, non-oppressive language the privilege of a minority of educated and enlightened people. Not everyone was admitted into the world of liberated minds. The revolution seemingly came true in the universities and the cultural realm while completely bypassing the lower classes.

It has been cultural distinctions, amplified by the microdosed spirit of 1968, that have enabled today’s European right-wing populists to attack multiculturalism and political correctness on behalf of the common people, for these notions now stand for nothing except justification of the status quo, thus causing growing dissatisfaction at the grassroots.

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Despite the fact that 1968 has left almost no traces in today’s Russia, its normalising role has been quite successfully played by the nostalgic cult generated by Khrushchev’s Thaw [2], which has been prevalent in Russian culture for several decades. The modern myth of the Thaw paradoxically combines anti-Soviet (modernism, personal freedom, cosmopolitanism, anti-Stalinism, and the triumph of individuality) and Soviet (Gagarin’s space flight, superpower status) elements. The current Russian regime seemingly functions as a vehicle for this synthesis, by making it possible for the so-called patriotic majority [3] and the educated classes to coexist comfortably.

The Thaw’s reconciling myth also encourages the liberal intelligentsia’s cherished dream of

reforming society not politically, but biologically, naturally. The transition from the horrors of Stalinism to the kingdom of youth and freedom, as the Soviet 1960s are portrayed in numerous contemporary films and exhibitions, occurs naturally, like a change of generations or seasons of the year.

Now, during the 50th anniversary of 1968, we might imagine its prevalent spirit stood for nothing other than capitulation, hypocritically passing itself off as victory. This pessimistic state of affairs, however, cannot serve as grounds for a final verdict. The legacy of 1968 — from Paris to Warsaw, from Prague to Islamabad, from Rome to Mexico City — is tangled up in revolutions whose aftermaths are too early to judge. For the displaced, authentic revolution of 1968 — the fight against the subjugation of human life to the mirages of success and productivity — to regain its relevance amongst the new generation, however, we must accept the tragedy of its historical defeat. Ultimately, shedding illusions is not a loss, but a gain.

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P.S.

* Open Democracy, 17 May 2018:

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/ilya-budraitskis/1968-revolution-too-early-to-judge>

Russian original:

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/ilya-budraitskis/1968-revolution-slishkom-rano-sudit>

Translated by Thomas H. Campbell.

Footnotes

[1] <http://socialistreview.org.uk/369/immigrants-and-intellectuals>

[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khrushchev_Thaw

[3] ESSF (article 44551), [Russia: Putinism, conservative rhetoric, Russian capitalism, dissent](#).