

1968: Results and Prospects — Introduction to Critique Issue on 1968

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1968 occurred at a nodal point in the political economy of postwar capitalism. The old forces controlling and disciplining the workforce and the economy were less and less effective. The younger generation rejected the authority of Stalinism and social democracy, being less scarred by fascism, the depression and the Second World War. They openly turned against both capitalism and Stalinism. Their aims—to achieve a genuine socialist society—were clear but their means of getting there were not. The revolutionaries of 1968 were not able to achieve common ground between those from Stalinist countries and those from the West, in large part because neither had a sufficient understanding of Stalinism itself, let alone capitalism. Because of the strength of Stalinism, there was never any hope of overthrowing capitalism in France or Stalinism in Czechoslovakia, but 1968 changed the course of history nonetheless. The change of the strategy of capital towards finance capital is an indirect tribute to 1968 and its sequel in the 1970s.

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Introduction

The 40th anniversary of the events of 1968 has been sufficiently described, celebrated and commented on to allow this issue to present a number of particular descriptions of events by younger researchers but also by a number of older participants. The articles in this issue are not a comprehensive or even selected collection of essays on 1968. They represent contemporary writing on an event which is part of history, and which can be described and theorised in a series of different ways from different viewpoints. This issue does not discuss the changes in music and the arts, or the growth of a counterculture, all of which were important and remain with us. It confines itself to politics and political economy. 1968 was par excellence the time of the *groupuscules*, who played a crucial but sometimes downplayed role in the political life of a series of countries for a period of time, and their modern counterparts have written their viewpoint on the nature and

influence of 1968.¹ This issue of *Critique* does not duplicate their efforts. Further articles will appear in the next issue of *Critique*.

This article tries to analyse, to a limited degree, the political events and climate of the time and consider its causes and its subsequent influence. Savas Matsas has a more detailed analysis of the times.

The importance of the year 1968 may be superficially gauged by the much-quoted remark of French President Nicholas Sarkozy, to the effect that it was time to put an end to the inheritance of the events of 1968. The fact that it was the president of France, rather than the chief of state of any other country, demonstrates the rather obvious fact that the importance of 1968 centres very largely on what happened in France. It was also, very obviously, a backhanded compliment to the enormous influence of the events of 1968.

One of its participants, Chris Hitchens, who has now moved decisively to the right, graphically describes the way 1968 could be felt:

As 1967 ended, Guevara's body had just been exposed to the cameras by the CIA, Isaac Deutscher had died, the Vietnamese revolution was getting under swing, you felt the world was undergoing a convulsion. All through 1968 you woke up to something new. The Tet offensive, Martin Luther King is shot. Then De Gaulle is nearly overthrown, then Robert Kennedy is shot, the tanks roll into Prague. Then there's the Mexico Olympics-students shot down in the streets, Black Panthers on the podium- and Northern Ireland blows up. You felt, if you were a member of a rather eccentric Trotskyist-Luxemburgist organisation ... that you were part of something.²

The demands put forward were both of universal application and contingent on the time and place. An end to the Vietnam War was the usual slogan in the West, but there was a general demand for control from below. The demand for self-management, *autogestion*, coming most often from modern social anarchism, was widely popular. In the universities this meant student power over the life of the university. Hierarchical structures were questioned and there was a call for their demolition. In Poland and Czechoslovakia this involved an end to the various aspects of the police state, the influence of the USSR, and a call for democracy and the market.

There were, of course, various forms of action, over the world, as indicated above, against the Vietnam War, for civil rights, against capitalism, against Stalinism in various parts of the world, but it was only in France that the government and the capitalist system were actually threatened with replacement by a socialist system, of whatever kind. In Czechoslovakia, the Dubcek government was not socialist and the theoreticians of the Prague Spring were in favour of the market. Jan Kavan, in this issue of *Critique*, describes the more left-wing attitudes among students, but they had

¹ For a clear and detailed account of the politics of the workers' struggles in Paris in May 2008 see, for instance, Matt Perry, 'May 1968 Across the Decades', *International Socialism*, 118 (April 2008), pp. 53–69.

² Alexander Linklater, 'Christopher Hitchens, Journey of a 1968er', *Prospect*, May 2008, pp. 49–50.

a limited impact, even if they were both influential and practical internationalists. Nonetheless, the Czech events were an important step on the road towards the disintegration of the Stalinist system.

East and West

For the Stalinist countries, the ferment in Czechoslovakia, and to a degree in Poland, as well as the later developments in Hungary, were the last chance that there might have been a shift to the left in those countries. As Jan Kavan and others have recounted, there were extensive contacts with the left in Czechoslovakia and in Western Europe but there was little meeting of minds. The left in the West could not imagine the brutality, the atomisation, the real oppression and exploitation in Eastern Europe. This was a result of a combination of Stalinist influence and a lack of knowledge. It led to a wholly inadequate theorising of the nature of those societies. On the one hand, leftists in the West stood firmly against bureaucratic controls and police states but on the other, they regarded the struggle as a uniform march to socialism. Their demand was the overthrow of capitalism and so the market, whereas in the East the overthrow of the state was often posed as the primary goal. Although this did lead to some support for anarchists, the demand itself was not anarchist. It was a necessary aim, where the society had a state so pulverising that it was unique in human history. While a hypothetical East European Marxist would have opposed capitalism and so the market, such a Marxist would also have had to argue that the society itself was not planned, in any Marxist sense, or for that matter in any real sense. Its replacement, therefore, would have had to take on a transitional form in which genuine planning would be introduced. Given the backwardness of these societies, however, aspects of the market would have had to be re-introduced on a temporary basis until the society was wealthy enough to eliminate them.

This was a complex argument, which neither side understood. Unfortunately, the groups in the West remained wedded to dogmatic conceptions of what existed in the East, influenced by decades of Stalinism. The works of such as Ernest Mandel³ and Tony Cliff⁴ had considerable influence in spite of the fact that neither had either lived in those countries or studied them in any great detail. The pictures of the Soviet Union and by extension, those of the other East European countries, were ones which were similar those of the West, except that they were ruled by bureaucrats using a police-state apparatus. Those who added the designation of degenerate workers' state argued that the society was planned, with nationalised property, and was therefore an advance on capitalism, even though it was a police state ruled by a privileged social group. The mindset, however, of one world with workers having similar concerns, remained. For the proponents of the view that the Stalinist controlled countries were 'workers' states', there tended to be a certain worship of the societies, even though

³ Ernest Mandel wrote extensively on the subject. His last work, which provides a representative sample, was *Beyond Perestroika: The Future of Gorbachev's USSR* (London: Verso, 1989).

⁴ Tony Cliff, 'Russia: A Marxist Analysis', *International Socialism*, 1970.

they recognised the existence of political oppression. There was no Marxist theory of the nature of exploitation in the Soviet Union that could be used by leftists in the East or understood by the left in the West.

Different Groups for a More Just Society

The result was that there could be no common cause, beyond a shared sympathy for a more just society. The fact was that the nature of Stalinist society made Marxist analyses or for that matter, any analysis of their society from within the society impossible. The burden, therefore, rested on the Western left and it failed because its leaders did not recognise the nature of the task and preferred to rely on a shallow interpretation of Trotsky's works or an equally shallow negative version of his analysis. The Maoist analysis, it has to be said, was closer to mumbo jumbo than anything else.⁵ The anarchist analysis remains mired in the problems of all anarchist analyses in that its stress on the state and the individual is short on a political economy to provide the limits to capitalism.

There was, in reality, no chance that the left could have succeeded either in France or in any other country. That was because Stalinism remained too strongly implanted in the institutions of the working class in Western Europe, and the Soviet Union was sufficiently strong to prevent revolution or significant reform succeeding in either Eastern Europe or Western Europe. De Gaulle had the support of the army, but if the Communist Party-controlled trade unions had supported change, the army would have been faced with direct confrontation with the mass ranks of the working class. Any shooting would have been the spark to start a real conflagration. Any ruling class victory would have been short term, as the conflict spread through Europe. Even if such an insurrection were suppressed, its memory would have been such that the ruling class would have been gravely weakened. However, this scenario was never on the cards, although it might have been in the minds of participants at the time. In the event, the Soviet Union struck a deal with De Gaulle, as Savas Matsas recounts in his essay.

Nonetheless, 1968 ranks with the failed revolutions of 1848, 1871 and 1919 because it posed the question of socialism, genuine socialism as opposed to Stalinism, whether consciously or unconsciously. It captured the minds of the students and the youth of the time. Some argue that it was not a question of generations, but it was the young students and workers who were to the fore in the movements calling for social and political change. It was true that many, if not most, people sympathised, so that it was not just a question of generations. There was no question of one generation opposing another. Yet, the older generation had accepted the Bretton Woods

⁵ It was this issue, as described in this paragraph, which led to the founding of *Critique*: the attempt to analyse the nature of the Soviet Union and therefore, *mutatis mutandis*, the nature of Stalinist society as it had evolved. The idea of the journal was proposed by students who had been active in 1968 in more than one country and who were taking my course in the Institute of Soviet and East European Studies at the University of Glasgow.

agreement. It had endorsed the de facto post war social contract in which the ruling class went for growth and full employment, with its accompanying rise in the standard of living, in exchange for the acceptance of the status quo.

Causation

The fundamental reason for 1968 lies in the fact that it became a nodal point in the history of capitalism. The populations of the countries rocked by 1968 protests had been disciplined by a combination of factors, partly enshrined in the postwar settlement. They had been through a depression, fascism and the Second World War, which had taken their toll, the memory of all of which lay heavy on the minds and spirits of working-class families. In effect, it acted as a means of discipline in the immediate postwar period, especially given the alternative to the earlier period, which was full employment, the welfare state and economic growth. The standard of living in Western Europe and the United States grew rapidly. By the early 1960s students and young workers did not have the same history and they took the new economic conditions for granted. In spite of the Korean and Vietnam wars, it looked to some as if capitalism would continue in its new more enlightened phase for some time, if not forever. For a young student or worker, the manifest conflict between talk of justice, the rule of law and opportunities for all, with the reality of authoritarian rule and exploitation in the universities and workplaces, demanded some form of action. This was particularly the case where the future of an essentially routine, boring job with a secure but low salary or wage was fundamentally unattractive.

For most workers, the trade unions and social democratic parties acted as a form of discipline channelling and preventing action. In countries where Stalinism played an important role in working life, as in France, it was more direct in preventing spontaneous action. By 1968, Stalinism was waning and social democracy had lost much of its support. Wildcat strikes and student protest movements had showed themselves. In short, the old forms of control were dying. They were decaying in all aspects of society, with the result that a series of independent movements emerged, from feminism to flower power.

The period 1945–1968 saw a series of colonial wars in which Britain, France and Holland tried to re-impose colonial rule but were ultimately forced to cede independence to their Asian and African colonies. The Vietnam War was the last struggle of its kind. The struggle for independence had begun with the withdrawal of the Japanese occupiers. French occupation forces were replaced by those of the United States. The Vietnamese forces were fighting for independence under the leadership of a Stalinist party. Both the USSR and China tried to avoid supporting the Vietnamese; eventually, the Chinese actually fought a short war against the Vietnamese. The USSR gave lukewarm but real support to the Vietnamese Communist Party. The US government justified its invasion in part on the grounds that all of South-East Asia, if not East Asia, would go communist if Vietnam fell.

Subsequent events have shown this view to have been wrong, in that Stalinism advanced no further than Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. Furthermore, the Vietnamese Communist Party supports capitalism today, calling into question the whole rationale of US intervention. Any honest analyst, right or left, could see that the Vietnamese struggle was largely nationalist. Apart from the obvious nationalist demands for a united independent Vietnam, the Stalinist nature of the Vietnamese Communist Party meant that it supported the nationalist doctrine of building socialism in one country. It had shown its nature when it massacred the Trotskyist forces in Vietnam immediately after the Second World War. In fact, the US and the UK were obsessed by the need to prevent Stalinism spreading, so much so that their international policy became counterproductive, forcing the Vietnamese to the left, and leading the latter to appeal to non-Stalinist left forces in Europe and the United States. The rising new left responded with a series of movements and mass demonstrations, most particularly in 1968. The left had taken part in a series of anti-colonial struggles in the postwar period, most particularly in 1956, with the invasion of Suez in Egypt. In France, the nationalist struggle lasted through the 1950s and only ended in the 1960s when De Gaulle accepted Algerian independence and dealt with the French irredentists. Left-wing activists were veterans of the war for Algerian independence, witnessing and suffering from the brutality and torture of the French army. De Gaulle himself had come to power as a result of the *coup d'état* of 1958 consequent in part on the war in Algeria.

Clarity and Confusion

The mixed heritage of 1968 explains its clarity and its confusion. The revolutionaries wanted a genuine socialism, whether they were anarchist, Trotskyist, Maoist or New Leftist. That was the clarity of the goal. No one, however, knew the path to socialism and every current had a different analysis of the present and past. They opposed the war in Vietnam, but there were marches in which Ho Chi Minh was supported, even though he was a classical Stalinist. The dissident Stalinists produced a host of different currents, some of which still exist in one form or another. The Maoists, the Althusserians, the Gramscians, the Lukascians, the supporters of an early Marx continue to have followers, or more correctly, descendants of those intellectual currents. For the anarchists like Cohn-Bendit, Castoriades with his rejection of his earlier Marxism and so Trotskyism and stress on 'autogestion' was an important influence.

One of its participants, now a French celebrity philosopher, Alain Badiou, quoted by Savas Matsas in another context, in this issue, had this to say:

At first sight there may seem something strange about the new President's insistence that the solution to the country's moral crisis, the goal of his 'renewal' process, was 'to do away with May 68, once and for all'. Most of us were under the impression that it was long gone anyway. What is haunting the regime, under the name of May 68? We can only assume that it is the 'spectre of communism', in one

of its last real manifestations. He would say (to give a Sarkozian prosopopoeia): ‘We refuse to be haunted by anything at all. It is not enough that empirical communism has disappeared. We want all possible forms of it banished. Even the hypothesis of communism—generic name of our defeat—must become unmentionable.’⁶

He makes this point:

Marxism, the workers’ movement, mass democracy, Leninism, the party of the proletariat, the socialist state—all the inventions of the 20th century—are not really useful to us any more. At the theoretical level they certainly deserve further study and consideration; but at the level of practical politics they have become unworkable. The second sequence is over and it is pointless to try to restore it.⁷

In fact, this viewpoint is common among former Stalinists of various kinds today. The present is seen as a period of counter-revolution. Clearly if one regarded the USSR as containing some socialist content, then its demise is part of a world retreat. If, on the contrary, we regard the USSR as a reactionary force, then its end could only be welcomed as bringing an anti-revolutionary period to an end. The forces of 1968 embraced both viewpoints, sometimes in one person, one group and, occasionally, at the same time, in one person. Their confusion was understandable and probably inevitable. On the one hand, the left was battling against capitalism and on the other it was opposing bureaucracy and the dead hand of ancient authority. It was not always clear what was what, given the absence of a defined and widely accepted socialist movement. Stalinism and social democracy had clearly failed but the analysis of their failure was limited, even among the far left.

It is worth noting that Castoriades,⁸ the most influential anarchist philosopher, noted psychoanalyst and social anarchist theorist of the time, and a major influence in 1968, ended up arguing in the 1980s that the world had to be saved from an increasingly powerful and oppressive Soviet Union, just at the point at which it was disintegrating. Concentrating on the concept of bureaucracy and individual oppression, his political economy in general and of the Soviet Union in particular was too limited to understand the dynamics of the society.

The Far Left

The period led to the mushrooming of far left groups, that is, groups to the left of Stalinism and social democracy. Alexander Linklater brings this out in his article on Hitchens: ‘He had been recruited to his “eccentric” organization, the International

⁶ Alain Badiou, ‘The Communist Hypothesis’, *New Left Review* 49 (January–February 2008). <<http://www.newleftreview.org/?view=2705>>, accessed 21 April 2008.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ For a summary of his views see: Alex Callinicos, ‘4.3 Cornelius Castoriadis and the Triumph of the Will’, in *Trotskyism*, <http://www.marxists.de/trotism/callinicos/4-3_herxesies.htm>, accessed 4 May 2008; ‘Cornelius Castoriadis Dies at 75. Philosopher and Political Thinker Inspired May ’68 Rebellion in France’, <<http://www.agorainternational.org/about.html>>, accessed 4 May 2008. This site provides access to some of his works.

Socialists or IS in Oxford, shortly before he arrived at the university. . . . At the time, the Oxford IS had five members. By the end of 1968, there were around 300.⁹ The International Socialists changed their name later to the Socialist Workers Party and became by far the biggest group on the far left over time, eclipsing a number of other Trotskyist organizations. In the United Kingdom, Maoist groups were tiny, although a number of intellectuals joined or sympathized with them. Anarchist groups grew and with the downsizing of the far left became relatively more important, as in the case of the British organization Class War. Nonetheless, the far left in the United Kingdom has never been able to compete with the parliamentary parties in elections.

That does not mean that they have played no role in British politics. That role is still to be properly assessed but it is considerable, exercised less through the ballot box than through demonstrations, and various other forms of extra-parliamentary pressure. Two obvious examples are the large anti-poll tax demonstrations, led by the more parliamentary, Trotskyist, Militant group, and the massive anti-Iraq war march in London in 2003, which was led by the Socialist Workers Party. The campaign against the poll tax led to the fall of the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, and the withdrawal of the tax. The anti-war march of 2003 was the biggest in British history, with around two million people taking part. The government did not fall or alter its course as a result, but the march consolidated the general dissatisfaction with the war and with the government's policy. In fact, the Labour government received support from the Conservative Party opposition on the war and later on other issues, so permitting it to continue governing.

The far left in France was more important, since it had almost brought down De Gaulle. Over time, the three major Trotskyist groups became wholly dominant in the far left, particularly with the spectacular downfall of the one-time powerful Stalinist party, the Communist Party of France. They have become substantial players in elections, getting 11 per cent in the 2002 presidential elections. In some other countries, the far left continued to exist in a kind of afterlife, as in the United States, where paradoxically Stalinism still has an important hold on the far left.

Maoists played a considerable role in a number of countries. France, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Italy and the United States had substantial Maoist groups, even parties in some countries. Yet, Maoism was no more than a particular Chinese Stalinist variant, which rejected bureaucracy in the name of bureaucracy. Some Maoist groups still exist. The most influential Maoist journal was the New York-based *Monthly Review*, founded in 1949, which came to be translated into several European languages. The editors of *Monthly Review*, Paul Sweezy and Harry Magdoff, embraced Maoist doctrines with enthusiasm. This current is effectively played out even if it continues in its after-life.

At the time, however, Maoists were effectively a form of semi-anarchist militancy, nominally basing itself on Marxism. They inverted the base–superstructure metaphor of historical materialism but talked of ‘putting politics in command’ as Mao had

⁹ Linklater, op. cit., p. 50.

himself expressed it. Their militancy, combined with their allegiance to the most populous country in the world, provided them with a superficial appeal, which allowed them to develop considerable support.

The autonomists in Italy and elsewhere managed to attract some following for what amounts to a form of modern social anarchism, but the less radical evolution of their major theorist, Tony Negri, and the decline of mass activity has meant that they are more marginalize than in earlier periods.

While a full survey of the far left worldwide does not exist, it is clear that Trotskyism has been the major long-term beneficiary of 1968. It is true that Maoist groups or Maoist type groups have become major parties as in Nepal, Columbia and elsewhere. It is significant, however, that President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela sees himself as learning from Trotsky and that Fidel Castro has changed his view on Trotsky¹⁰ to one of approval. Neither country leader is, of course either a Marxist or a Trotskyist, but they are conforming to the times. 1968 was a definite rejection of Stalinism, clearer in its Trotskyist form than in its Maoist or anarchist articulations and ended the period in which communist parties worldwide could maintain a monopoly of the left. The disillusion was consolidated over time with Khrushchev's secret speech, then with the invasion of Hungary, and finally with the invasion of Czechoslovakia. 1968 clearly demonstrated that the Communist Party of France had been outflanked by the far left and that it was anti-revolutionary. The conservative role of Stalinism was less spectacular in other countries, but nonetheless more evident than in previous years. Stalinism had always played a counter-revolutionary role but that was not always so clear during the period of fascism, Second World War and the Cold War. 1968 marked a decisive break with those periods in this respect.

Marxist Thought

Stalinist 'intellectuals' came to be despised or less respected, and this process of rejecting Stalinist thought on the far left intensified with the years. This process cannot be overestimated. The communist parties did not disappear until the end of the Soviet Union, but they shrank and lost their intellectual dominance on the left, as shown by the sales of their journals and attendance at their conferences. Until this point, Marxist political economy was largely taught through the works of Soviet or Western Stalinist writers. Authors and academics such as Maurice Dobb, John Eaton, Sam Aaronowitz and Victor Perlo were widely read and used by study groups. *Monthly Review* was non-sectarian and more left-wing than the US Communist Party, but they continued to support the classic Stalinist doctrine of socialism in one country and Maoist China in particular, though they became very critical of the USSR. They benefited spectacularly from 1968 in that their sales went up several hundred per cent and they developed editions in a number of languages. Their

¹⁰ Fidel Castro, *My Life* (London: Penguin, 2007). He speaks of Trotsky being the more intellectual leader and criticises Stalin, while trying to argue that Stalin had positive points.

influence declined considerably with the death of Mao in 1976 and the change of policy in China, but their publications were a considerable advance on the older and more apologetic fare from the above authors. Paul Sweezy's Stalinist textbook of Marxist political economy, *The Theory of Capitalist Development*, written in 1942 before he became more critical of the USSR, had an enormous influence and was only really replaced after 1968 with the work of a number of authors but most particularly that of Ernest Mandel. Other fields of Marxist endeavour also saw a renaissance. Marxist theory has been widely used in most fields in arts and social sciences. The labour theory of value, for instance, has been explored across political economy, sociology and philosophy.

Before 1968, much of what passed for Marxism, written since the 1930s, can be described as a complex adaptation of history or theory to a pre-determined Stalinist schema at best, and mumbo jumbo at worst. Honest people and genuine intellectuals were repelled by what appeared to be Marxism. The few anti-Stalinist Marxists were so beleaguered that they spent most of their time analyzing the nature of their groups and rebuffing criticisms or direct attacks on their movements. They became frozen in time. 1968 altered that situation forever.

1968 opened the door, and it did lead to a flowering of Marxist journals, of which *Critique* was one. Many of these journals have ceased to exist, merged with others, changed their names and their philosophy but, like *Critique*, others have soldiered on. It cannot be said that Marxism has been entirely or even largely purged of its Stalinist accretions but the process towards that goal is continuing, greatly helped by the demise of the Soviet Union itself. Some, perhaps even much, of the Marxist writing is scholastic but that is to be expected in a world where academia rewards writing of that kind. Nonetheless, terms have been elucidated, technical problems solved and historical debates revisited. There may be more differences among Marxists today than among non-Marxists, as opposed to the rigid Stalinist so-called orthodoxy for most of the years from the 1930s down to 1968.

The Influence of 1968 Today: Continuation and Disillusion

David Edgar, the playwright, has written a trenchant article against the most recent defectors from the left, arguing that they are the 1968 equivalent of Dos Passos, Max Eastman, Arthur Koestler and Stephen Spender: 'Until very recently, almost everybody disillusioned with the far left felt there was still a viable near left they could call home. Now that appears to be changing.'¹¹ He instances the work of Nick Cohen, Andrew Anthony, Ed Husain and Melanie Phillips, and adds Martin Amis and Christopher Hitchens. He argues, 'Most people who leave the far left do so because of their experience with far left organizations: their authoritarianism and manipulation, their contempt for allies as "useful idiots", their insistence that the end justifies the means and that deceit is a class duty'. He quotes Stephen Spender saying

¹¹ David Edgar, 'With Friends Like These . . .', *The Observer* (London), 19 April 2004, Review, p. 4.

in effect that once the communist has joined the party he has to abandon the very reasoning that made him a communist.

Most of these reasons apply to the Stalinist parties but only the first reason—*authoritarianism and manipulation*—applies to contemporary left groups, most of which emerged in any size during and after 1968. However, he argues that the real reason for switching to the right lies much more with the disappointment of the intellectuals with the ‘poor’, by which he presumably means the working class. This could have been the case among members of Stalinist-type parties, which includes Maoists, and among social democrats, precisely because both tended to be workerist or populist. The statues of muscle-bound workers in the Soviet Union and social democracies were visible indications of the ‘ideology’. Social democrats and communists alike sneered at Trotskyists for being elitist and intellectual, not dirtying their hands, and so forth. Such parties used anti-intellectualism as a means of preventing their own members from criticizing their own doctrines and as a defence against the powerful critiques made of their policies and practices. Clearly if you worship workers rather than support the working class, as a class, you will be disappointed, assuming you are still honest. Remarkably, most of those defectors from communist parties were unable to ask the obvious question as to why the workers were not in command of the party, and why a small number of bureaucrats were not only in command but were able to constitute a social grouping exploiting the proletariat in the Stalinist countries. Since neither workerism nor exploitation of the workers is acceptable to Marxists, one has to ask why Koestler, Spender et al. found it expedient to abandon Marxism, particularly when such as Spender found that the practice of communism deviated from its ostensible aims.

1968 broke with this tradition. Intellectuals who would have been suppressed before the 1960s came to the fore as leftists, whether anarchists, dissident Stalinists, New Leftists or Marxists. As Edgar notes most of those prominent in 1968 have remained on the left, unlike the Stalinist defectors. Clearly, there could not be an equivalent of Koestler’s ‘God that failed’, given the absence of a substitute God, in the shape of the Stalinist bureaucracy. 1968 was inchoate, being a spontaneous coalition of numerous groups. Nonetheless, enough people of that generation did move rightwards, even if they did not cease to be on the left in some broad sense. Furthermore, the political groups that grew and remained ceased to inspire hope among the constituency that they sought to influence, partly for the reasons given by Edgar.

1968 did not come out of nowhere in that there was a gradual shift to the left for the previous decade or so in the non-Stalinist world, but it was largely the younger generation that moved. It was not a one-night affair and one would not expect people to become easily disillusioned, particularly as there have been no far left parties in power. Nicaragua, Venezuela and Cuba do not fit the bill. Socialism in one country has been discredited for most people. The failure or potential failure of these countries has not and will not disillusion most who are on the far left, even if, inevitably, there will be a few who worshipped this or that great leader.

However, there were a large number of people in 1968 who simply engaged in the marches, demonstrations, sit-ins and more militant forms of action because they were taken by some of the slogans, or because it was the popular thing to do. Many imbibed so-called New Leftism and various doctrines of the need for spontaneous action. Hippies, flower-power and so forth were part of the movement of the time, together with various mad doctrines involving direct military or violent action. There was a broad sweep of opinion demanding an end to authority based on wealth or heredity or both. Respect for authority itself was fatally undermined to the point that it has never been restored.

Political Economy of the 1968 Legacy

As argued above, 1968 was a nodal point because it broke with the past and challenged the old controls. This led to two results, the first being that the capitalist class decided to change its mode of control. It dropped the Keynesian strategy of growth and the welfare state and substituted a return to finance capital, with low growth and a more limited welfare state, declining over time. It took the capitalist class a decade or so to make the necessary political and economic reforms. In a sense, this was a defeat in victory for 1968.

The second change was permanent and a genuine victory. The old formal authoritarian structures were partially abandoned over time. In the universities students and staff gradually acquired greater control over their work. The content of subjects shifted, whether towards a greater understanding of the oppression and role of women and ethnic groups or towards a more radical and critical analysis of modern society. The changes went through most departments in the arts and social sciences, although this sometimes meant that new subjects were created rather than old subjects being revised. In economics for instance, development economics and comparative economic systems became more legitimate subjects and Marxist political economy was sometimes allowed. Economics, however, was the subject least prepared to change, and many economics departments remained hostile to any critique of the capitalist system, while insisting on their objectivity. The return of finance capital and the insistence on the right of the manager to manage, however, undid some of these changes. However, the right to manage and the stress on value for money can be content neutral and, as a result, less censorious than the old social democratic system.

For workers, initial victories in the 1970s were short-lived, in the Anglo-Saxon countries in particular. Unemployment was re-introduced, although official statistics always showed much lower figures, and casual labour became more common, with resulting insecurity and stress, accompanied by tighter controls over production. This was the automatic result of the need to raise profits ever higher to conform to the needs of finance capital. Trade unions that had played important roles in the 1960s and 1970s were downsized or ceased to exist in part because their industries were shifted to other countries and partly because they ceased to defend their members. Although anti-union legislation was blamed for the decline in unions, there was often

little reason to belong to a union which consistently compromised with the employer. In effect, the changes brought about by finance capital forced workers to choose between compliance and political action. Since the latter required considerable sacrifice as well as a political education, the working class preferred to wait its time. The result of the switch to finance capital induced by the revolt of 1968 was to raise the stakes to a direct confrontation between capital and labour. Given the long period of obfuscation and confusion, not to speak of direct repression since the 1920s, it requires time for the working class to re-acquire its own history and return to the fray. However, finance capital has removed the mediations that smoothed over the differences between labour and capital. The rich are getting richer, the poor poorer, and the middle class is disappearing as the professions become proletarianised and poorer. The increasing integration of workplaces both across countries and occupations has multiplied the power of small groups of workers to cause disruption over the globe.

1968, from this perspective, released the bonds over thought by helping to destroy Stalinism and social democracy. It set the stage for the same destructive work to the mediating mechanisms within capitalism which contained labour. It is only a matter of time before a new 1848 or 1968, stronger and more prepared, erupts.