

# 1968 in Retrospect

**Hugo Radice**

In 2008, the media in Britain made much of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 1968, with TV documentaries, articles in the broadsheets and the weeklies, and interviews with luminaries of the left. The consensus was that 1968 was an uprising of middle-class students with muddled if honourable ideas about making the world a better place. We were right, they conceded, about Vietnam, civil rights, gender and racial inequality and the environment, but we were naïve about communism and about how to realise social change. And of course, what we were *really* interested in was sex, drugs and rock'n'roll.

Well, I was happy to enjoy all three (when I could actually get them), but that wasn't how I remembered 1968. For me, 1968 represents the period in my life when my eyes were opened about the injustices of the world West, East and South, and I realised that an alternative was possible – an alternative called socialism, rooted in the daily lives of working people. So while the media was reflecting on the excesses of student radicals, I remembered the tenacious struggle of the Vietnamese people, the vigour of rank-and-file labour movements, the factory occupations in France, and the heroic efforts of the Czechs and Slovaks to defend the gains of the Prague Spring. And I remembered how our engagement with these movements drove us to rediscover

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Editor Jonathan.Pugh@ncl.ac.uk

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socialist ideas and values that had been frozen out by the Cold War and the complacencies of the postwar boom.

Looking back from the present, as the economic crisis continues and the usual suspects dump the costs on the poor and the powerless, those ideas and values seem to me to be more vital and necessary than ever; but also even more distant in terms of their realisation. This inevitably leads to the question: what the hell happened in the meantime? Communism vanished in 1989; social democracy converted to neoliberalism about the same time; US imperial hegemony seemed more entrenched than ever; and the idea of socialism..... had pretty much vanished, as all too many of those who had espoused it either renounced their earlier views (probably alas the majority option), or retreated into the bizarre world of sectarian micro-parties.

Nevertheless, millions of people, it seems to me, still share a fundamental commitment to the ideals of 1968, as they opposed the Iraq war and continued to battle for the self-same causes of equality, justice and a better world. Somehow the problem lies in the gulf between our passions and our ideals on the one hand, and the way we organise ourselves – in short, our politics – on the other. The twentieth century saw the development of the socialist movement into two all-too-often opposing wings – social democrats arguing for reform, and communists arguing for revolution. The remaining fragments of the left pretty much had to accommodate their efforts to the small spaces left by these two giants. So my enquiry starts with them: why did *they* fail?

Social democracy, in a sense, can be set aside, since long before 1968 that political philosophy had abandoned any ambition to do more than mitigate the worst aspects of capitalism. But what happened to revolutionary socialism? For me, the answer to this question begins and ends with the utter failure of Leninism (or Bolshevism, Marxism-Leninism or whatever) as a political idea and a political movement. I can't swallow the usual explanations deployed in defence of the Russian Revolution – that it was betrayed by Stalin, or that (in effect) the workers were not worthy of their leaders. The fault lay, rather, in the degeneration of ideals in the face of intense opposition from capital and the capitalist Great Powers: in essence, a retreat from the ideal of the democratic free association of producers that Marx had envisaged, to the élite cadre-party that would abrogate all power to itself in the name of 'history'.

Two elements stand out in this degeneration, which are basically the theory and the practice of Leninism. The theory can best be summarised as the reduction of Marx's analysis to a mechanical theory of historical change. Capitalism would decay from the competitive vigour of its youth to its imperialist-state-monopoly-capitalist senility through the working-out of ineluctable economic laws. And the practice proclaimed the revolutionary vanguard party in place of "the masses" as the agent of transformation. For all the endless debate about where it all went wrong – where exactly, when and by whom "the revolution was betrayed" - a simple proposition emerges: actually-existing communism never was a revolutionary socialist movement of the working classes. It placed in power a radical bourgeois intelligentsia which quite successfully completed primitive accumulation, and eventually after 70-odd years transformed itself into a capitalist class.

And it is no surprise, looking back, that the demise of communism broadly coincided with the rise of neoliberalism. For neoliberalism is assuredly not just an economic affair: it is founded upon a social doctrine that at its core wrenches apart the historical relation of humankind to nature, by separating politics from economics and enshrining property rights above and beyond human rights and democratic principles. In neoliberalism, the party-state élites of the Soviet bloc and China recognised a far more effective way to reproduce their dominion over society.

So where does that leave us? I think we need to go back to basics. As Orwell put it so well in *Homage to Catalonia*, “the mystique of Socialism is the idea of equality; to the vast majority of people Socialism means a classless society, or it means nothing”. If we reflect on this sentence, the two concepts we need to unpick are *class* and *equality*.

The idea of class in capitalism is surely straightforward enough: the capitalist class is made up of those who own the means of production, while the working class does not and is therefore obliged to sell its labour-power in order to live. The famous middle classes, as every crisis most clearly reveals, are nothing more nor less than the upper layers of the working class, regularly seduced by the possibility of recruitment to the ranks of their oppressors and of acting as controllers of the masses on their behalf.

As for equality, it is high time to end all prevarication. If it just means “equality of opportunity”, then it’s nothing more than precisely the recruitment mechanism for ensuring the perpetuation of the *status quo*. Equality *means just that*: absolute equality of material condition, and of participation in the direction of society. No ifs or buts: if we don’t now add equality and solidarity to liberty, then the revolution

against absolutism will never be completed. Chou En-lai was right: when asked whether he thought that the French Revolution had been successful, he is supposed to have said it was too soon to tell.

But if we know what direction to take, how do we once more set out on the journey, and this time with better prospects of success? With the world heading for environmental catastrophe, we really don't have much time: more than ever we face the choice of socialism or barbarism. I start here: we have to forget about parties and fancy programmes, and recall instead the hidden histories of struggles from below, above all in the workplaces where we, the people, produce the goods and services upon which our lives depend, and in the communities in which we live those lives. Within what Marx called the "hidden abode of production", and despite all the efforts of so-called scientific management to reduce us to robots at the service of the bosses, the collective worker actually exists, lives, breathes and thinks – and *really* produces. Every working day we work together in direct relation to each other, unmediated by the market or the state. We need to harness those collective powers to a much more ambitious endeavour, by breaking down the barriers that separate workplace from society.

If you want historical precedents in the form of ideas with names, look to syndicalism, guild socialism, to councils and communes. Look at what ordinary working people have achieved in those moments when bourgeois society loses its grip – the Paris Commune, Petrograd 1917, Barcelona 1937, the liberated zones of Europe and Asia in 1944-8, Budapest 1956, through to Buenos Aires 2002.

And if you want concrete programmes, they are all around us in the demands and the aspirations of working people: for meaningful work, for a sustainable environment, for peace and fellowship. At their heart – as Tony Blair, ironically, expressed so well - it's about education, education, education. Here we are in a university, and many of us work (or have worked, or will work) in universities; but the university is in no sense worthy of its pretended universality. Educational resources should be redistributed radically to ensure that all people – and I mean all – reach adulthood with an equal capacity to create with hand and brain, to produce and also to direct. This would enable a genuine participatory and egalitarian democracy to be realised: workers with such skills and ideals could not be patronised by a power elite, or misled by demagogues and charlatans. A movement built from below, on this basis, could challenge the rights of private property, and build instead a socialist republic founded on the solidarity of collective work. This would truly reflect the spirit of 1968.

*The above is the text of a talk given at the Left Forum at Pace University in New York, April 17<sup>th</sup> 2009. It is based on an essay which was jointly awarded the Daniel Singer Memorial Prize for 2008. The original essay, "1968 and the idea of socialism", can be downloaded from [www.danielsinger.org](http://www.danielsinger.org). A longer version with notes and bibliography has appeared as "The idea of socialism: from 1968 to the present-day crisis", Antipode: a Radical Journal of Geography, vol.41 no.S1, 2009, pp 27-49.*

*Hugo Radice is Life Fellow, School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds; for further information see*

<http://www.polis.leeds.ac.uk/about/staff/radice/>.

*Comments to*

[h.k.radice@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:h.k.radice@leeds.ac.uk).