



# The limits of Student power

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The wave of student rebellions in 1968 was largely a US, Western European and Japanese phenomenon. The parallel events in Vietnam (the Tet Offensive) and Eastern Europe (the Prague Spring) were important events in their own right but they were part of a different process of development.

However, the events in Vietnam and Eastern Europe most certainly acted as triggers which ignited the events of 1968. It was the heroic struggle of the Vietnamese people against the unbridled savagery of the USA at the peak of its power, that 'ignited' the massive student upheavals. In turn this upheaval was briefly connected with, and (especially in France) stimulated, working class resistance in 1968 and in the years that followed. As such the events of the year played an important part in blowing away the conservative consensus of the post war boom and cold war.

The struggles of 1968 did not come out of the blue. They were prepared by the contradictions that were slowly but surely sharpening throughout the early 1960s. Nor did the struggle disappear on New Years Day in 1969. If 1968 failed to achieve not only its wilder utopian goals but also most of its immediate demands, it was nevertheless a turning point one of the leaps from quantitative to qualitative change. The year was a demarcation line between one period and another.

The upheavals of 1968 in the USA had their roots in the Civil Rights Movement of a newly confident and rebellious generation of young blacks, and in the movement of opposition to the Vietnam war on America's campuses. The linked issues of segregation in the southern states in public transport and education, registration of illegally disenfranchised black voters and of the violence of both state authorities and white racists were ones which produced wave after wave of radicalisation from the early 1960s

The Freedom Rides and peace marches at the beginning of the decade gave way to the violent urban uprisings of the black ghettos in 1965 and 1967 (Watts, Detroit, Newark etc). The bombing of North Vietnam from February 1965, and the deepening involvement of US troops in propping up the puppet regime in the South, stimulated mass resistance to the war, especially amongst students.

It was the victimisation by University of California authorities of Vietnam protesters that started the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, the prototype of the student radicalisation. It set the tone for countless demonstrations, occupations, teachings and sit ins about Vietnam during the next three years.

These events had a real and significant radicalising effect. The shocking barbarism of the USA in Vietnam was linked to the role of the university authorities through their economic and research links to 'the military industrial complex'. Added to this was resentment at the authoritarian disciplinary system of the universities. Universities were armed with full powers to act in loco parentis.

This intrusive, patriarchal role extended to overseeing and obstructing the social and sexual lives of their students. Student anger mounted. But faced with even peaceful and good natured defiance of their authority, the heads of the universities often panicked and called the police. The cops thoroughly enjoyed handing out savage beatings to people they regarded as spoilt rich kids who were probably communists and 'perverts' to boot. This process explains how in a year or two a powerful minority of students who were indeed drawn mainly from the more privileged social layers and destined (they hoped) for professional careers became subjectively revolutionary and vocally anti capitalist, anti authoritarian, anti war and anti sexual repression.

The stuffy conformity of the 1950s and early 1960s began to collapse at all levels. The accepted truths of the cold war era the 'end of ideology?', the disappearance or 'bourgeoisification' of the working class, the 'consensus' politics were all called into question and came to be seen as 'bourgeois ideology?'. In the teach ins at the colleges, the ideas of a bizarre medley of thinkers were retailed in garbled form perhaps best summed up in a slogan carried (and chanted) on one demonstration: 'Marx, Marcuse, Mao - world revolution now. Differences that had been 'rivers of blood' for the 'Old Left' were cheerfully ignored by the new. A free market in ideas saw Trotsky invoked alongside Ho Chi Minh, Mao, Guevara and even Stalin.

The reasons for this chaos and confusion at the level of political ideas was not only a result of the heterogeneous class background of students in general. It reflected the political bankruptcy of the major political forces within the workers' movement and the progressive petit bourgeoisie, and their total failure to lead or inspire youth in the mid and late 1960s. In the USA the working class was still tied by the AFL-CIO bureaucracy to Kennedy and Johnson's Democratic Party.

For vast numbers of students and black activists, their faith in liberal in and the Democratic Party was shaken to its foundations by the Vietnam war and campus beatings.

In Europe, analogous processes were underway. The British Labour government from 1964 to 1970 backed the USA in Vietnam and imposed an incomes policy on workers. The German SPD had joined a Grand Coalition and supported a draconian emergency law. In France, the Socialist Party (SFIO) was at a low ebb, while the PCF had little appeal to radical students as it red baited them and later sold out the workers' struggles.

This opened the way for new ad hoc organisations to emerge amongst radicalised students. In Germany the SDS (the erstwhile student organisation of the SPD), in France the UNEF and 22 March Movement, in Britain the Vietnam Solidarity Committee and the short lived RSSF (Revolutionary Socialist Students Federation) and in the USA the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) were the organisational expressions of the wave of student revolt.

These groups and others played an organising and agitational role in the great demonstrations and street battles of the year. Yet all of them withered or perished within a year or two, just as the idea of a central role for student radicalism itself faded. At its peak in 1968 the student movement envisaged 'student power' and espoused the 'detonator theory' with universities as 'red bases' or liberated zones. These were based on analogies drawn from Third World guerrilla warfare.

### **Elastic**

'Student power' was an elastic concept usually counterposed to 'reformist' 'student participation' which was dangled before students by the more flexible college administrations. At its most radical it meant rule of the university by general assemblies of students, academics and workers. In practice it usually ended up with a couple of student union members and observers on university senates or boards of governors.

The 'detonator theory' envisaged the French scenario. Student militancy would break the hypnotic spell of consumerism and the welfare state over the workers. The working class was seen by most 1968 radicals as being in a drugged sleep the drugs being 'affluence?', television, bureaucratic structures (trade unions) and participation in elections. The reformist leaders were not seen as active misleaders but rather as a sort of dead weight that a sufficiently explosive charge of spontaneity, direct action and confrontation would blow into the air.

This view appeared to be confirmed by some workers' responses especially young workers to the student mobilisations. But what would these workers join? They could not become honorary students or at least they could only when they were on strike or the students were 'sitting in' or 'taking the streets?'. The idea that students would do so indefinitely thus creating permanently liberated zones or red bases was clearly a utopia.

Yet many in the first flush of enthusiasm believed it (Free, free the LSE; Take it from the Bourgeoisie!?). The example of France with its massive general strike however had a powerful effect in orientating a section of the student

revolutionaries towards the working class.

In Britain the experience of worker student relations was a rude awakening. In May, London dockers marched in support of Enoch Powell's racist 'rivers of blood' speech and clashed with student counter demonstrators. In a negative way however it increased the pull towards the working class. Clearly student revolutionaries thought something had to be done about the workers to bring them up to the French standard!

1968 itself will be remembered by most for its semi anarchistic or libertarian 'leaders', Danny Cohn Bendit, Abbie Hoffman and so on. The anarchists, the yippies, the situationists did indeed provide much of the street theatre of the year. They shocked the bourgeoisie but they had no clue how to even begin the process of overthrowing them. Behind them, however, was a more sober kind of 'student leader'. These by and large either joined would be revolutionary organisations (Maoist, Trotskyist or peculiar combinations of both) or 'disappeared' (some later to emerge as trade union bureaucrats, reformist or democrat politicians).

By the second half of the year the influx into Trotskyist or Maoist organisations was rapidly increasing. This largely explains the crumbling of the 'revolutionary student' organisations. Of course most of these groups pre dated, often by decades the '68 events, but they grew with incredible rapidity in this year and the year to come. In Britain the main beneficiaries were the International Socialists (today's SW) and the International Marxist Group (today's ISG and Socialist Action). The already large and quite working class 'orthodox Trotskyist' Socialist Labour League (SLL) passed up the chance by keeping out of the VSC and most student mobilisations, preferring to run their own. Militant buried in the shrunken and discredited Labour Party also made little or no impact.

In France the Jeunesse Communiste Revolutionnaire (JCR) with a charismatic leader Alain Krivine, grew enormously out of and after the May events. In Germany large Maoist 'parties' developed apeing the ultra left politics and agit prop of Third Period Stalinism. In Italy Maoist and libertarian left emerged. In the USA the SDS grew to an enormous size (60,000 or more) and then began to fragment with the 'Marxist Leninist' Progressive Labour Party (PLP), the increasingly terroristic Weathermen?, developing out of it.

What then were the long lasting and important affects of 1968? It finally broke up the smug conservative boom based world of the 1950s and 1960s. It shook off the hitherto unchallenged domination of the reformist parties whether Stalinist or Social Democratic and it opened the doors on a whole new period marked by renewed class struggle in the metropolitan (i.e. imperialist) countries. If the British workers had disgraced themselves in 1968, in the years following they especially the rank and file shop stewards 'movement' returned to the fray with a vengeance. In 1969 they struck and demonstrated against the Labour government's anti shop steward, anti strike proposals for legislation (In Place of Strife) and defeated it. In 1971, 1972 and 1974 mass strike waves both against the anti union laws and against compulsory wage freezes defeated and drove the Tories from office.

In Italy the working class broke loose in massive strikes in the 'hot autumn' of 1969 in which young rank and file workers played a leading role, creating base organisations and linking up with the revolutionary left to some extent.

The pattern of the first half of the 1970s was precisely the creation of would be revolutionary organisations, often a few thousand strong standing clearly to the left of the reformist Labour, socialist and communist parties. The ideas and wards of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky were again read and discussed on a big scale. for the first time since the 1940s. A minority of militant and sometimes revolutionary workers revived the labour movements with rank and file democracy and mass militant tactics. Of course these organisations and these 'movements' had important and ultimately fatal weaknesses. In particular they failed to fully understand the roots and nature of reformism in the working class and lacked tactics to combat it.

But in a decade where the organisations which grew out of 1968 have capitulated and grovelled before the reformist parties and union leaders they so airily dismissed in 1968, it is worth re-stating and re-learning the lessons of that 'mad year'.

