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1968: What If We Had Never Tried?

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Abstract

For those who don't know me, I come from Lancashire in the North West of England. All of my grandparents were operatives in the cotton mills. In 1966 I became the first member of my family to go to university, at Manchester, and I graduated with what must have been a long service degree in 1971. 1968 in Britain was not the milestone year that it was in France or the USA, or indeed Poland or Czechoslovakia. British troops were not in Vietnam, at least not officially, and we had no draft. No great linkage formed with the working class movement, no Chicago and thankfully, nobody dead. From an international perspective England was dull. But if you were there, it was fabulous. In fact 1968 was the prelude, in student politics terms, to 1969 when things became much warmer. Late 1968 had seen a series of occupations of university administrations and in one of these, student burglars came across a treasure trove of correspondence between various Vice Chancellors discussing their problems with left wing students. It may seem quite predictable that the authorities would be talking to each other about us, given that we were threatening to burn the place down some time soon, but, perhaps because the time was overdue, outrage grew on our campus.

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Peter Cockroft

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One notorious and very tall student demagogue gave notice that he would call a general meeting of the student body and call for an occupation of the administration block at Manchester to protest against political spying. "No Dossiers ! For A Democratic University !!" Events might have remained in the realm of the usual suspects doing the usual things, had the university authorities not behaved with breath-taking stupidity. They went to the High Court and requested, ex parte, an injunction on the demagogue and some of his colleagues

restraining them, actually us, from speaking at any meeting of the student union regarding any matter and at any other meeting of anyone if it was anything to do with an occupation of the university. The injunction further banned the parties from going anywhere near the university administration building, which rendered it rather difficult for them to pursue their studies. The injunction was granted in full.

Within a day the biggest, longest and most extraordinary student occupation of the era began. I am assured that it was just terrific. A lot of people took drugs for the first time, had sex for the first time and talked about every political issue under the sun. I was not one of them, since the whole point of the demonstration was that I was under an injunction which prevented me from being there.

Manchester 1969 provides a neat bookend with the London School of Economics 1967. At the LSE, where I did actually get in having hitched down to London, the authorities expelled the president of the students union and the president of the graduate students association because they had allowed a resolution calling for an occupation to be discussed in their relative organisations. Clearly one of the characteristics of this period was the terminal stupidity of the authorities. Mass occupation followed and then the establishment of the Free University, which actually conducted serious and not so serious classes for a number of months before it petered out.

In the year in question, 1968, Manchester distinguished itself by disrupting a lecture on campus by the Minister of Education in the Labour Government. We yelled at him a bit and he tried to run away so we sat down and blocked his path. One of our people was expelled, one suspended for a year and there were threats of dire retribution on the rest of us.

In Manchester and London we can see the pattern which was central to the growth of the student movement from Nanterre to Berlin to Columbia to Berkeley. A rising sense of entitlement and democratic aspiration in the student body and outrageous stupidity on the part of the authorities.

Three great national demonstrations dominated the national political year for us – the two Vietnam demonstrations, in March and October, and the demonstration against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in September. The Czechoslovakia

demo was large, spontaneous, chaotic and, when it degenerated into running skirmishes across open country, very scary.

In terms of the Vietnam war demo, the previous October (1967) had seen national shock at the levels of violence on both sides in the first of these events, which were mainly organised by a tiny Trotskyist group which met in a phone booth and was able to put 100,000 people on the streets, many of them ready to fight. The demonstrators were overwhelmingly students.

Britain had a tradition of large demonstrations, mainly for nuclear disarmament, going back decades. Many of these events included civil disobedience tactics, sit downs in the street mostly, with the pacifist participants being more or less violently carted off by the police. October 1967 and March 1968 were totally different. They were set up to place the largest possible number of people into the vicinity of the American Embassy with the clear but unspoken agenda that the building would be stormed. After March 1968, where the demonstrators were very willing and the cops went completely berserk, the organisers faced a dilemma, because it was clear that if this continued, someone was going to get killed. The organisers blinked and resolved that the October 1968 demonstration would not go to the embassy. Those who opposed them and went to the embassy anyway did not have the numbers and were easily handled by the police.

I want to consider what happened to us and what we did in the context of my current preoccupations with institutional and generational time.

Consider the upheaval of the late sixties in the context of institutional time. Time passes at different rates in various institutions. Society at large marches on through the centuries with that set of ideas which constitute the hegemonic norm constantly changing. But change has been glacially slow in the universities, with their primitive costumes, arcane structures and bizarre pretensions.

Consider the university and its noble ideals, feudal remnants if you go back far enough, of the battle between church and state, where the choice was between theocracy and oligarchy. Most notably, consider Academic Freedom. Since academic can cover a multitude of sins, really we can take this to be freedom writ large. Freedom! Does any word better take us to

1968, Freedom from class oppression, sexism, racism, free sex, free drugs, free food and here we are in this institution which professes to be a zone of freedom in the bourgeois wilderness. Yes please, I'll have a bit of that.

Of course no government in the capitalist world, where things have moved on a bit from the Middle Ages, wanted this. Allowing a few dons to continue with Latin and Greek was one thing but no government was signing up for 1968. And the freedom that was inconvenient on the campus became downright irritating when it took to the streets.

Much has been made of the fact that so many of the students of 1968 were from working class backgrounds, the first generation that was able to get to university. I think this is important but we need to be careful. This was true of Britain but certainly not of the USA and things got even hotter in the USA. And in any event, what linkage do we make between the polychromatic explosion of 1968 and working class backgrounds? Were the Vietnam demonstrations more violent because hooligans from the working class had invaded academe? Were experiments with drugs and sex something that the working class invented?

Another reasonable question flows from this: "Why did the student movement go to the left?" And add to that, why did it not only reject conservatism but actually take up arms against the more florid manifestations of fascist reaction? All the key figures in the ongoing anti-fascist movement in Britain came out of 1968.

I don't know, but I feel sure that the collective wisdom of the Gramsci Society will develop a clear and comprehensive answer. There are, nonetheless, some straws in the wind that I would put into the discussion.

Perhaps collectivist and mutualist outlooks flourish best in an environment of economic security and we could compare this environment with the post-oil shock insecurity which surely played a role in the development of economic rationalism only a few years later.

Alternatively, if we consider 1968 as primarily a cultural rather than a political manifestation (I appreciate the heresy involved here) and the politics as an optional extra, mutualism and collectivity, the politics of love, clearly provide the best fit

with hippie culture.

Much continues to be written and spoken about the generation of 1968. The Boomers. There has been less consideration of the elders. If the sixties gave us a permissive society, what about those who, albeit implicitly, were giving their permission?

The parents of a twenty year old in 1968 would have been born around the mid 1920s and would have experienced, as children and then as young adults, both the Great Depression and World War II.

The generation that made 1968 had lived totally different lives. For a start very few of them knew much about hunger, which was the most primal reality both during the Depression and during the food rationed war for the working class. Then they had grown up in a world where economic insecurity was increasingly a memory for their parents rather than a present reality. For those who reared families in the fifties and early sixties, it brought material security and comparative wealth that was previously unthinkable.

Were these elders worried that their sons and their daughters were beyond their command? It's my impression that in the main they were not. Despite the earnestness of much of that era, it was also constantly entertaining. We never had an Abbie Hoffman claiming that he was going to levitate the Pentagon or the brilliant inventiveness of those French posters, but we were having fun and people having fun without cruelty are usually entertaining.

Staying with entertainment, we should not underestimate the importance of sex. This was the golden era between the time when the contraceptive pill became widely available and the later onset of AIDS. Sex was not risk-free but it seemed to be until you got your first dose of crabs or the clap. I don't have a lot of time for Wilhelm Reich but there is a good argument that all those hormones buzzing around in a libidinous climate of frequent but never casual sex must have added to the general propensity to go to extremes at the least provocation.

I suppose we have to talk about the politics.

We were left-wing. Everybody was left-wing. If you had a beard you were left-wing; if you were a poet or an artist or a singer you were left-wing; if you had written a book you were

left-wing; if you had read a book you were left-wing. If you were clever or funny or sexy then you simply had to be left-wing and if you considered yourself to be a leader of the left then you were a Prince of the City. Right-wing men were dickless morons. The very idea of right-wing women was simply ridiculous.

We were smart and we valued learning. Publishers and booksellers dined out on us because we read like the clappers. If you wanted to be heard then you had to know your Marx and your Lenin, not to mention the history of the Bolsheviks, the anarchists, the Chinese Communists, the General Strike, the politics of feminism and black consciousness and the Third World and a lot more.

Organisation on campus oscillated between fluid semi-anarchic structures and the occasional attempts of closet Nazis to impose discipline. The composition at Manchester was, I suppose, fairly typical. The Communists were always there, half inside and half outside. Inside because they wanted to be, outside because the Communist Party of Great Britain had close ties to the Soviet Union and even after the invasion of Czechoslovakia, which they criticised, it was hard for them to shake that image. The Communists were the best organised and the only strategic thinkers which is how they gained control of organisations, including eventually the National Union of Students. But of course capturing mountain tops has its limits. Of anarchists and syndicalists we had hardly any, and of the bizarre groups which popped up in London, the Maoists and Guevarists and out and out nutters we had even fewer. In the main we were independent leftists.

The Labour Party was there but in truth it was a sad act. Beyond opportunism and an obvious nervousness at the volatile chaotic mix that the main body of the left presented, it was hard to figure out why they bothered. My recollection is that they initiated nothing and the only time they did much was when they were following us. In 1970 there was an attempt to mobilise students in support of the Labour Government but we were far too smart to buy into that one, and so we got a Conservative Government which shows how really clever we were.

Trotskyism was saved, at least temporarily, by 1968. With the passage of time, I've lost my grip on the intricacies of

Pabloite revisionism and the alphabet soup of organisations. The only group that made real inroads in the student body in our part of the world was the International Socialists. But even the IS, which I briefly joined, was not able to handle the passionate, quixotic and frequently juvenile twists and turns of student politics.

What the IS and other groups offered was a way out into the wider world and that mythic connection between students and the working class. Perhaps the fact that they recruited, at best, in the dozens rather than the hundreds is an indication that not that many of the students of 1968 were actually looking for this. Looking at the numbers, the working class weren't either.

1970. Two years or so on and Edward Heath becomes the first generally acknowledged homosexual to be elected Conservative Prime Minister and I am showing a group of final year school students around the students union. The animosity was palpable. Not that they disliked me, although I am sure they did, but that they disliked everything about the notion of a students union, political involvement, they didn't even seem to be much interested in having a good time. They were all dressed by K-Mart. The tide had gone out and with remarkable speed.

Tastes can change quickly in a student body which replaces a quarter of its membership each year. But the death of 1968 and all it stood for was shockingly swift.

Campus struggles became less important as the universities appointed bosses with more smarts than their predecessors and an entry to university became more associated with raising your income and less to do with expanding your consciousness.

1978. I am back in Manchester and all that remains is the Grass Roots Bookshop, which I had managed for a couple of years and On The Eighth Day, selling drug paraphernalia, doodads from the far east and home furnishings. Hippie capitalism. You may not be able to fool the children of the revolution but you can certainly buy them if the price is right.

Of course the politics did not die. The internationalism and humanitarianism which animated the movement against the Vietnam war morphed into the struggle against apartheid and against fascism and racism in Britain. The struggle went

on, but perhaps the love went somewhere else. “Pet Sounds” “Sergeant Pepper” and “Bookends” are the sounds I remember from 1968. The Clash and the Pistols were doing something else.

It will never come again and nor should it. It was great fun and a massive self indulgence, indeed for those who were there it was the time of our lives, but in real political terms, Vietnam ground on, the Tories were elected to office and the Labour Party congealed into a rump which made the dreadful Thatcher years possible. Post Modernism and Economic Rationalism became the dominant discourses and every movement has to be judged by what came after it.

But there is still a candle burning in the window.

In 1968 young people said that it was not enough. That beyond the material well-being which had put refrigerators and washing machines and televisions into almost every home, there was a poverty of the spirit which could not be addressed in a capitalist society.

We demanded more; and how we demanded more is the most important lesson. There was nothing defensive about 1968. This was not a left which could be identified by a vocabulary based on “Stop” “Don’t” and “No”. This was a left which created new questions and provided the answers to those questions; a left which was entitled to call itself “Progressive” and which embraced the future and change and new frontiers and went at it with brashness and aggression. We were les enragés, we were unreasonable; less interested in capitalism providing us with concessions and more focussed on building something new for ourselves. We attracted the brightest and the best of our generation and drew out of our own people talents which they never knew they had.

Of course we failed. Our demands for more failed to resonate with the population at large, even in France, and we descended into the sort of societies which could elect and re-elect Thatcher, Reagan, Bush and Howard; which could see the social democratic dream curdle into New Labour and some increasingly ugly creature which we might come to call Ruddism. But what if we had never tried?

What if the grey morass of the fifties had slithered directly into the desperate selfish grasping egotism of the eighties. What

if psychedelia and flower power, sit-ins and street fighting had never appeared. History would have been the poorer, we would have been the poorer and there would be one less benchmark in the centuries long struggle against tyranny.