How 1968 Changed the World: Movements Making History, History Making Movements[1]

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Summary

As activists in social movements, we live in the shadow of the "long 1968", the wave of struggles that shook the world from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. This is as true in Prague or Derry, with their very different movement histories, as it is in Paris or Chicago, in Bologna or in Mexico City. How we challenge power today, what movements we ally with, how we think about possible futures and how we organise ourselves still depends on the decisive historical moment that was 1968. This article does not seek to celebrate (or condemn) 1968, but to understand a legacy which shapes our own movement landscapes – in order to be better able to think forward to another, more successful attempt at transformation.

Introduction

Across the "global North", social movements after 1968 are often seen as different. The rise of a "new left" – together with the decisive decline of Stalinism and social democracy as perspectives for social change – marks this shift in political practice. So too does thinking about "social movements" as multiple, and the rise of what is now called "social movement studies".

More specifically, the decisive ground of politics has shifted from a strongly-institutionalised politics of interest groups and state-led economic development within a post-war, post-imperial settlement – whether the welfare state or corporatist arrangements of the old West, the authoritarian forms of "state socialism" of the old East, or the national-developmentalist models of post-colonial societies of what was then called the Third World, by analogy with the

[1] This paper draws on my work with Salar Mohandesi and Bjarke Risager for *Voices of 1968* (Mohandesi et al. 2018). Neither is responsible for the perspectives presented here.

French Revolution's Third Estate – towards a fundamental contestation of how decisions are made: or, in other words, of where power lies and where it should lie.

The central roles of the nation state and the political party – which followed from the economic centrality of the individual state and its role as arbiter of distributional politics – have been displaced, not only by neoliberal globalisation but also by politics "below" and "beyond" the nation state. The acceptance of existing cultural hierarchies – centring the members of the "nation", men and a stifling conformity to "normal" sexuality, "normal" bodies and minds, "mainstream" culture and so on – has been met with a fundamental questioning and remaking of everyday lives as well as with attempts to forcibly restore the earlier status quo.

In much of the global North, 1968 marks *a*, if not *the*, decisive transition for social movements from the period of the "European civil war" (Pavone 2013) which reached its height between 1916 and 1948. In that earlier period, the modern nation-state displaced the dynastic states of the Hohenzollerns, Romanovs and Hapsburgs, and the Ottoman Empire. The new states were forged by liberal-democratic, nationalist, peasant and workers' movements in conflicts that reached their height in the revolutions of 1916–19, the fascist backlash from 1922–1945 (and later in Spain, Portugal and Greece), the European Resistance and the carve-up of the continent between the US and USSR (Thompson 1982). Today's authoritarianisms in Poland and Hungary, Italy and Turkey dress up in the clothes of that period but have no new content to offer and no new states to create. The hope for the future, meanwhile, lies elsewhere – not in the creation of a new kind of state. These are not unusual observations, but they do beg the question of *how* and *why* this sort of change happens.

1968, in fact, is not the only such transition in the shape of social movements. Some features of the period opened by 1968 can be found in the movements of earlier periods, for example the late 19th and early 20th centuries: not least the intensive dialogue between what later

feminists would call “the personal and the political”; a counter-cultural challenge to the dominant culture including issues of gender and sexuality, politicised diasporas (in this earlier period Jewish, Irish, Polish, Italian among others), vegetarianism, alternative religions and radical education; significant waves of direct action; and a radical internationalism which sought to connect movement issues as well as movements across borders. We cannot, then, simply construct a universal historical shift from “before 1968” to “after 1968”.

There were also multiple “worlds” of 1968. Struggles within the Eastern Bloc, the capitalist West and what by 1968 was mostly a post-colonial South took different forms. Even within any of these the trajectories and outcomes of movements were radically different: Italy as against Britain, Czechoslovakia as against Yugoslavia, Mexico as against India, even leaving aside awkward cases such as China or South Africa. How can we understand these divergences in other than *ad hoc* ways? These difficulties relate to a wider question in social movement research: how can we think about great waves of social movements and revolutions and at the same time try to understand the intervening periods of relative routine when dominant forces are able to contain struggle within a broadly stable normality?

There are two intellectual traps to be avoided here. One is the temporal provincialism of identifying 1968 as the axial point in world history, a natural temptation for general (and sociological) commentators, but one which ignores the longer timeframe mentioned above. It also ignores the fact that in the Eastern Bloc 1968 had an important second act, in 1980–81 in Poland and 1989–90 everywhere – and that in much of the global South 1968 was itself the second act, following on and attempting to radicalise the moment of national independence. The long 1968, in other words, has to be situated in both time and space.

The other trap is that of over-specialisation (or historical particularism), refusing to think through the relationships and comparisons between countries, between different movement

waves, or between highpoints of struggle and periods of conservative tedium. In this picture most of the social world is taken for granted and all we are really thinking about is the foam – or at most the wave – on top of a deeper sea. This gives us an *histoire événementielle* which can explain nothing, because it does not ask how a wave of revolutions is produced out of a passive society, or how post-colonial Britain with its art-school hippies, the settler society of Northern Ireland with its grim struggles over local power, and the developing Maoist struggles of newly-independent India were connected as part of a single world system.

This paper, then, attempts to relate "waves", moments of social crisis and social movement landscapes in a systematic and hopefully organic way to illuminate the long 1968. Section I discusses how movements make history, the way in which social movement waves provoke organic crises. Section II discusses how history makes movements, the way in which the outcomes of crises shape movement landscapes. Finally, section III discusses the implications for social movements today in the shadow of 1968.

Section I: Movements making history

There is no general agreement on how to define, or explain, social movement waves or waves of revolutions[2]. There is, however, more agreement that such waves do in fact take place. Some waves are generally recognised as such: along with the long 1968, most authors would identify the Atlantic Revolutions (America, France, Haiti, Ireland), the revolutions of 1848, the period of 1916–23 (or its variants) as well as the year 1989 as waves of movements or revolutions, whatever their views on other periods and their assessment of the time and space boundaries of particular waves.

Empirically, all such waves over the past 250 years have been focussed in particular regions of the world-system. I want to propose, firstly, that this fact can be explained in terms of the

[2] This section draws on Cox and Nilsen 2014.

weaknesses of specific regional hegemonic arrangements – which is almost a tautology (how else could we assess the relative strength or weakness of particular arrangements?) Secondly, and again a near-tautology, I want to suggest that a sufficiently extensive and radical wave itself constitutes a crisis, and does not merely reflect one taking place somewhere else.

These are not *simply* tautologies, however. Thinking about the situation in this way focusses our attention on the power relationships between collective social actors: the relationships of leadership, alliance, collusion, co-optation, clientelism, resignation or resistance which in these waves move from a perhaps fragile hegemony to a moment of crisis before being reconstituted in necessarily new ways, whether the new arrangement consists of a restoration on a different basis or a new revolutionary order.

To unpack this somewhat: any long-term strategy for capital accumulation requires a relatively stable social order, as Gramsci taught us. At its simplest, this involves an actor leading the direction of social development (Touraine's "historicity", 1981) which has "horizontal" allies among other dominant actors constituting a general unity around this project, "vertical" support from (some) subaltern actors in return for material and/or symbolic concessions, the resignation of (other) subaltern actors and the coercion of yet others. Within each of these collective actors there is typically some contestation between those factions who see their interests as bound up with the current order and those who seek a better (for them) alternative; in normal circumstances, however, the factions supporting the hegemonic system of alliances are comfortably dominant.

Any large-scale or radical movement mobilisation *can* disrupt this complicated arrangement. In 1968 we see this happening in several dimensions:

- the emergence of new social actors;
- previously coerced actors now mounting effective resistance;

- previously resigned actors once again seeking to assert effective agency;
- contestation within previously supportive actors, both subaltern and dominant.

These changes successfully disrupted the existing hegemony in multiple states across the global North. As this sketch suggests, in a system of relationships change within a single collective actor involves a change of relationships to the others. Most dramatically, the actor which takes the lead in forcing the crisis is liable to be completely transformed by it, if indeed it survives at all, by virtue of the variety of new relationships which it enters into.

To take two extreme contrasts, Italian student radicals and their organisations would go through radical transformations over the following decade in which individuals and networks nonetheless often remained consistently active from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s and beyond. The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia similarly went through a dramatic transformation in the period 1967–68, from the shift towards reform to the purges following the Warsaw Pact invasion, in the process changing its relationship to popular forces and political reformers alike.

Section II: History making movements

> "There have only been two *world* revolutions. One took place in 1848. The second took place in 1968. Both were historical failures. Both transformed the world".

Arrighi, Hopkins and Wallerstein published these observations, rather unfortunately, in 1989. Their point was not so much about the location of these revolutions within the world-system or their structural impact as about how they shaped what I call movement landscapes. They go on to write:

> "In both cases… the political ground-rules of the world-system were profoundly and irrevocably changed as a result of the revolution. It was 1848 which institutionalized the

> old left (using this term broadly). And it was 1968 that institutionalised the new social movements. Looking forward, 1848 was in this sense the great rehearsal for the Paris Commune and the Russian Revolution, for the Baku Congress and Bandoeng. 1968 was the rehearsal for what?" (1989: 98)

Specifically, their claim is about the state-centric nature of popular politics after 1848. For 1968 they cite the successful containment of the radical left in the West, its degeneration in the East and the disappointments of national independence in the South – and the inherited weaknesses of the various old lefts of the period, which made them less and less plausible as bearers of hope for a new dawn. In other words, their claim is that the crisis of 1968 reshaped movement landscapes (the relationships within which movements are embedded) in very fundamental ways.

It is possible to agree with this, and to prioritise these two dates as the key foundational moments of the old and new lefts and the modes of organising associated with them, while acknowledging the significance of other revolutionary waves. The Atlantic revolutions were the moment when the liberal-nationalist-democratic combination was – if not created, because it can be found in the English Revolution – formalised and generalised as the ideology that was exported southwards from the American Revolution, eastwards from the French Revolution, and in more subterranean ways around the world by the Haitian Revolution. The revolutionary wave of 1915–23 (starting with Ghadar, the Easter Rising and Petrograd) gave birth to a vision which married anti-colonialism, state-founding and the hope for development on the exploited periphery of the capitalist world system. In its core, the new wave of left energy and temporarily successful revolutions provoked the rise of fascism as a radical new way of organising popular mobilisation for elite purposes.

The post-1945 independence struggles of Asia and Africa set up durable relationships (of alliance, subordination or coercion) between educated nationalist elites, peasant movements, urban workers and sometimes religious forces – as well as making promises of social change whose partial fulfilment would fuel the rebellions of the global South's 1968. Lastly the "long 1989" (from 1980 in Poland) was not only a second act of the earlier rebellions; it also marked a transition, often within the event itself, from the earlier perspective of radicalising the revolution or realising its real meaning (in this sense very similar to many global South perspectives). In countries like the GDR, the fact that struggles initially spearheaded by long-time dissidents were taken over by emergent forces (at once naïve in relation to the unequal realities of life under capitalism and moving towards a fool's nationalism encouraged by the west) led to a scorched-earth setting in which grassroots movements struggled to survive while the far right took over the streets.

As can be seen, this paper develops and extends Arrighi, Hopkins and Wallerstein's argument in two stages. Section I argued that social movement waves (sometimes) provoke organic crises. In this section, I argue that the outcomes of such crises (almost always) reshape movement landscapes – although I take this world-revolutionary aspect, in their terms, as not being restricted to the very dramatic and widely shared transformations of movement landscapes following 1848 and 1968, but including at least the four other waves just mentioned.

The concept of movement landscapes is intended to facilitate the historical-comparative analysis of specific (national, world-regional, local etc.) contexts. As the metaphor suggests, movement landscapes are internally interrelated, layered, historically constructed and boundaried. The implication is that it is a mistake to attempt to understand movements in isolation. Rather, we should try to see them as part of relationships of alliance, opposition, collusion, etc.

Moreover, we should think these landscapes as being relatively long-lasting features which define "business as usual" in a given period *between* movement waves. This is not limited to the question of the relative centrality attributed to the local state and the modes of organising that follow from that. It also appears as the everyday assumptions that movement actors make about what they can achieve and what kind of goals are worth seeking; who their allies, potential patrons, easy audiences are; who are not plausible as allies or are de facto enemies; what issues are strategic; etc. It thus includes organising practicalities like whose votes can be counted on for which candidates; who jointly issues calls for demonstrations; which movements' participants overlap; who shares a movement infrastructure; and so on.

The origin of such landscapes, according to this analysis, is usually to be found in *prior* movement history, in particular in organic crises which "reshuffle the cards" around these relationships. We could contrast, for example, the relative significance of political and cultural radicalisms in shaping the west European and Anglophone movement landscapes of the long 1968 and beyond.

However, it is not only the crisis but also how it is resolved which is decisive here. As in 1848, the actors which were hegemonic prior to 1968 initially responded to the crisis with temporarily successful measures of coercion. Also as in 1848, they subsequently attempted to reconstitute hegemonic relationships on a new basis. This, however, only met with limited success. And in both cases, there was a remaking of states, of structures of popular consent and of economic strategies over several decades following the crisis. Neoliberalism would displace not only western organised capitalism but also eastern state socialism and southern national-developmentalism, as the previously dominant factions within the leading social actors were displaced by new factions promoting new strategies built around new alliances: hegemonic relationships were rearranged not only above but also below (Lash and Urry 1987).

The crisis of 1968 can be defined as organic, in that *despite* superpower support and temporarily effective coercion it was impossible to subsequently restore hegemonic relationships on the earlier basis. We can see this equally in the failed attempts to restore popular support for state socialism in Czechoslovakia, in de Gaulle's brief Indian summer, and in the longer-term transformations symbolised in 1988 and 1989 by a world in which Michel Rocard and Alexander Dubček could take leading roles, however briefly.

It was not inevitable that this crisis be resolved from above. Other such crises (the Atlantic Revolutions, 1916 or 1917, elements of the European Resistance, anti-colonial agitation) were resolved from below. The resolution from above, as Hilary Wainwright (1994) and others have shown, typically entailed the selective recuperation of some elements of "1968", reconfigured as a consumerist claim for individual choice and as the partial inclusion of women, ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians etc. within the structures of neoliberalism.

This reconstructed hegemony thus necessarily involved a shift in the leading group, its horizontal and vertical allies, and the construction of new boundaries around coercion and resignation. Since movements contested these processes, the remaking of movement landscapes did not simply transcribe generic elite strategies, as some accounts suggest. Consider, for example, the contrasting situation of the movements coming out of the US and Northern Irish civil rights movements vis-à-vis their local states.

As the 1970s wore on, in western Europe at least, this reconstruction meant that individual movements were often increasingly pulled between more radical wings (oriented to alliances between movements from below) and more conservative wings (seeking inclusion, acceptance or at least tolerance within the newly-developing order). Movements thus had to rethink how they oriented themselves towards the new economic relationships, the new hegemony expressed within the state, and the new cultural hierarchies – or rather fight out, internally and

externally, how they shaped their goals in relation to these. These conflicts shaped the struggles of the 1970s in particular, as the shapes of movement defeat and of the remade state became clear.

Section III: The implications for movements today

I want to conclude by noting that we are now well into a comparable period of organic crisis, as Alf Nilsen and I noted in 2014 . The crisis of consent of neoliberalism follows an earlier crisis of legitimacy forced from the left by the alterglobalisation movement, resistance to the US war on Iraq, anti-austerity struggles, and the complex movements of 2011 (*indignad@s*, Occupy and the Arab uprisings).

In this period we saw a long stalemate which can be thought of in terms of an irresistible force (a wave of mobilisations which would have won in the 1990s) meeting an irresistible object (the structurally-embedded neoliberalism of the 2000s). As in 1968, the capacity of the existing hegemonic *status quo* to recover was real, but limited: it was enough to prevent a victory "from below and on the left", but not to maintain popular consent and hence the strategic viability of the previous hegemonic project – in the current case, that of "progressive neoliberalism" (Fraser 2017).

Unlike the twilight of Fordism and Stalinism, however, in the early 21st century there was no elite alternative ready and waiting, no real equivalent of the systematic and well-institutionalised strategies and networks that underpinned the victory of neoliberalism in the 1970s and 1980s. Figures to the right of progressive neoliberalism certainly exist (Murdoch, the Koch brothers and so on) but they lack a strategic vision of the new world they want. Hence the current period of experimentation – Gramsci speaks of "monsters" – in which different elite-led combinations (the many iterations of Trump's administration, the rolling shambles

that is Brexit and so on) seek to maintain their own personal interests at the head of temporary and *ad hoc* combinations of factions. We see not so much a new, coherent and concerted economic strategy (as in the early 1970s) but rather interest groups constituted within the earlier order which now seek to maintain short-term advantage and to find a political force capable of expressing that.

In northern and eastern Europe, defection from the neoliberal alliance has mostly taken place to the right (with the important exceptions of Momentum, Nuit Debout and the Gilets Jaunes), reflecting the limited levels of popular organisation which movements from below have managed to achieve in these countries. Right-wing politicians focussing on the spectacle of racism and authoritarianism more than developing strategic plans offer only symbolic compensations for austerity. As I write, Italy's new government is promising an end to austerity, not because it means to follow through on this, but in order to have a symbolic confrontation with the EU's budget rules.

In these contexts, we might say, we have seen something like the GDR's two 1989s: our movements were able to provoke a crisis of hegemony, but what filled the space we opened was a mobilisation from above. This new right mimics the forms of grassroots mobilisation but its racist "common sense" (in Gramsci's meaning, too) is shaped by mainstream media, the agencies of the security state, the anti-refugee politicians (social democratic as much as Christian democratic) of the old era, and the most xenophobic elements of popular culture. Racism, in this context, is not even primarily about migrants or refugees: it is about putting this old wine in new bottles. The far right does not represent a new economic or social strategy or direction, but an attempt to keep the show on the road at any cost.

On Europe's western and southern periphery, however, there is a different kind of crisis, one where there is no popular majority for the politics of austerity or neoliberalism. Strong left

movements have created a situation where regular breaches in formal legitimacy are required to maintain austerity (rerunning referenda, twisting the arms of elected governments, installing technical governments, the Portuguese presidential veto on left-wing measures and the Greek tragedy of 2015), and in effect the periphery is ruled under the sign of a constant state of exception.

In neither Europe is there as yet any sign of a stable resolution which could bring a broad popular consent behind a new strategic direction. There are no real equivalents of the 1970s neoliberals waiting in the wings; as in the 1920s, we see instead fascism expressing this crisis of consent and an old order flailing around to maintain itself by coercion if necessary. Of course, as history tells us, the smile is likely to wind up being on the face of the tiger.

From above we are seeing a period of experimentation, in other words "making it up as they go along": Trump and Brexit on the one hand; the increasing paralysis of EU institutions on the other; authoritarian leaders exploring how far they can push the dynamic of centralising power and radicalising hatred against internal opposition and ethnic Others (an experiment also happening outside Europe, in states as different as India, Turkey and Brazil).

From below, we have seen a long period of movements against neoliberalism seeking an adequate form: from summit protests and social forums via "squares" and new parties to Blockupy, Altersummit, DiEM25 etc. and now the Gilets Jaunes. Most of these, necessarily, privilege some form of alliance-building or attempt at developing what might be called a proto-hegemony. If they have not, as yet, found a convincing and sustainable strategy, they have not lost either. The outcome has not yet been written.

What the experience of 1968 suggests for our present period is that it is not the *form* of popular organisation that constitutes the crisis for power: in 1968 capitalism, the state, imperialism, patriarchy and racism were challenged in very many ways by struggles with very different

ideologies and modes of organising. It is not that the form of organisation does not matter: it is rather that it is not an adequate explanation for outcomes. What is key is *popular participation*, which takes different forms in different countries, with their own different movement landscapes. Form matters, here, in its recognisability to newly-mobilising groups *both* as meaningful *and* as being significantly different from existing forms; this is part of what gives reason to hope that mobilising in *this* way, through *these* organisations or with *these* allies will make a difference.

The logic of this analysis for radical activists today is that we should not be seeking to form our new alliances with other groups *as they are*: we do not need, for example, to attribute nationalism to popular groups and seek to adopt it. What we need to do is to find our interlocutors in those other groups and develop strategies through which we can act together to construct a broader popular front "from below" (ie on a genuinely participatory basis) as much as possible.

The genius of 1968, and of any genuine period of revolutionary upsurge, is expressed in the sounds of many different popular groups finding a new voice, finding their voice for the first time, or finding it after a long period of silence. What that voice will be, in a new setting, cannot be known in advance, either from outside or from within the group's existing culture: it is, precisely, emergent. What activists can do is to help amplify those voices and draw them into serious and practical conversation about how to make a different world than the one that the right seeks to force on us.

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