

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5525>



Reviews

A guide for a future 68

- Reviews section -

Publication date: Tuesday 22 May 2018

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

The 1968 political events did not last just a few months as some commentators want us to believe in an attempt to strip them of any relationship with what happened before or after. The Hot Autumn was not an improvised explosion but the result of a combination of structural factors and the rise of a new consciousness. It was linked to the social and cultural transformations caused by the modernising processes of a society that was rapidly changing, from an economic structure that was prevalently agricultural to an industrial one. It resulted in a deep-going mixing of the population due to the internal migration of millions of people from the south to the north of Italy.

By Diego Giachetti

At the same time a new generation emerged that wanted to play the role of protagonist in an ongoing process of social change, setting out objectives and tasks. This was a rebellion based above all on a generational conflict which was seen initially in the family and in schools in non-political forms and demands which were more to do with the sphere of personal liberty. In this way, when the student struggles exploded in the universities, a young generation was forming that was able to act as a reservoir of support, even if this did not always amount to direct involvement.

International factors were behind the political formation of this generation – mainly the Vietnam war but also the Israeli-Arab conflict, the ongoing revolt in Latin America and the death of Che in October 1967. Splits occurred in the traditional left with the birth of the new left and in catholic circles with the emergence of dissidents that broke the traditional political unity of Catholics around the Christian Democratic Party. Another feature of the situation was the political difficulties of the centre-left governments from the middle of the 60s, as they retreated from a reformist line due to the threats and real manoeuvres of coup plotters and as a result of the first signs of an economic crisis after the boom years of the economic miracle.

68 as a pretext

Rarely are anniversaries a favourable time for the historical reconstruction of events and even less for expressing a valid judgement on the facts. This is particularly true for 68 and the celebration of its 50th anniversary. Feelings are still very strong and have not diminished. There are too many interested parties today who discuss this past in order to distort it. Contemporary witnesses are used but are often incapable of turning their ‘I was there’ experiences into a comprehensive interpretation or of going beyond factual personal stories to a real history.

Nando Simeone in his book, 1968, the necessary revolt, published by Red Start Press, avoids this celebratory and testimonial approach. Here 68 is not understood as the key, monumental, epochal year but is instead used as a basis for examining a long term political historical process. The focus is on the educational institutions, but particularly the university in the modern 20th century when we saw the change from a university for the elite to one for the masses and then the university as a business which is finally privatised.

The student protests broke out at the same as there was a considerable increase in the number of students; the consequence of the extension of the educational cycle which we saw in the 60s with the arrival of compulsory middle school and then upper school. Protests began when the proposed law on the reform of the universities was presented by the education minister.

In February 1967 the Pisa students had drawn up the 'Theses of the Sapienza' (Sapienza is name of some Italian universities, it also means knowledge in Italian – Tr). The first occupations started in November in Trento, the Catholic university in Milan and at Palazzo Campana, the humanities faculty in Turin. The protests were one and the same time against the university as a system of education and as a system of power and repression but then began to question the system itself. Demands for change and innovation were not adequately met except in a few isolated cases. Students got the message, you could not change education without changing society and the state that repressed the protests. In this way a political vanguard was formed, ready to link up with other oppressed social sectors.

Nando Simeone's work focuses on the generational conflict and the youth revolt using a marxist interpretation. In this way, he grasps the emergence of a new element - the eruption on the political scene of a new youth protagonist. This social category was 'constructed' by the development of capitalism which from the 1950s had extended the conditions of youth/adolescence to broad layers of working people. It was specifically this new social layer which was key in the mobilisations which unleashed one of the deepest crises capitalism has experienced from the Second World War to today – the 68 events, which also had repercussions in the so-called 'socialist' countries like Poland or Czechoslovakia. .

Generation, class and gender

Having defined his analytical framework, the author develops a linear examination of the various forms that the generational conflict has taken on in Italy from the second half of the twentieth century. Starting from the youth in the striped shirts who led the demonstrations against the fascists and the Tambroni government in 1960, going on to the youth counterculture of the 60s and the generational renewal of the working class which was also linked to workers coming from internal migration. These were structural changes – as well as ideological ones – which prepared the terrain for what we know as 68 and the student movement. It was a symbiosis between three types of conflict – class, generation and gender. 68 was a conjuncture which favoured the birth of the feminist movement, when women decided to assert their autonomy through separatism and the consciousness raising movement.

It was originally a cultural and existential revolution which preceded and accompanied the revolt with different outcomes in various countries. For example, in the United States it seems difficult to separate the counter-cultural and existential movement from the student revolt. In Italy, on the other hand, the rupture between the two elements took place in the course of the 68 events and was the result of the strong politicisation of the political current which was forming in the universities, encouraged by the revival of workers struggles. The space for the development of the existential revolt was so limited that it would return repeatedly in subsequent years through the activity of women, from critical radical groups, in the diffuse autonomist currents, in the 77 movement and in the Panther youth upsurge of the 1990s.

Beyond 68

The writer does not limit himself to 1968. Many pages are dedicated to the analysis of other youth and student movements – that of 77, 85, the Panthers, the European student agitation of 2005-6 and the Onda (=wave) movement of 2008. The story of the movements is always set out and contextualised in order to understand their characteristics, how they are framed by the historical, cultural and political conjuncture.

These student movements are the product of the dynamic combination of three elements: the political radicalisation of young people at the higher levels of education; the proletarianisation of intellectual work and the student

experience as a young person, subject to a specific oppression which is linked to age. A significant part of the book is given over to a critical analysis of the political organisational forms that the various student movements have taken in their attempts at self-organisation.

An attempt to be an independent protagonist often meant deliberately polemicizing with other forms of political organisation judged to be bureaucratic or top down. 68 started as a project of student self-organisation but did not last long because the vanguard coming out of those struggles were pulled into political activity to build a new revolutionary leadership of the workers movement as an alternative to the reformists.

A similar process affected the 77 movement. The 85 movement anticipated the problems of autonomous organisation which also came up in the Panther movement. Occupations were the main form of struggle in these movements but there was an important debate about setting up a citizens' coordination that would democratically represent the occupied and self-managed schools. The debate and the practical working out of forms of social and democratic self-organisation, which had not been central in the 70s among students, became much more a question for the Panther movement and its failure to find a solution at the national level was one of the main causes of its implosion.

The function of schools and universities varies according to the overall political framework society has at any one time. This has been verified with the 'reforms' brought in by the triumphant liberal-capitalist system over the last thirty years. However even today, as before, the author re-affirms that any hypothetical reform of the school or university cannot be isolated from an anti-capitalist perspective.

It is not possible to fight for another university without radically changing this society. Today all this is much more difficult because for various reasons the socialist project has minority support among the population – just as only a minority chooses to get involved in a party political project that aims to transform society. In this environment the movements that will emerge must learn how to treasure the experiences the author of this book has gone through. He states that "writing it also has had a therapeutic effect because thanks to the work I have had to conjure up the force to recuperate the political and personal memory that had nearly all disappeared after the events". Nando has done it, therefore there is hope, you can recover distant memory and experience and re-establish a past in order to build a future.