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Our history

# Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia: 1968 as the antipodes of 1989

- Features -

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**From March 2 to April 14, 2018, a series of initiatives dedicated to "May 68 seen from the South" were held in France, initiated and supported by the Sortir du colonialisme network, Cedetim, the Institut Tribune socialiste (ITS), the IPAM Foundation, the Gabriel Péri Foundation, the Fondation de l'écologie politique, the Copernicus Foundation, Espace Marx and the Centre d'histoire sociale du XXe siècle. The French magazine "Contretemps" will be publishing articles on "the 1968 years" including some contributions on "May 68 seen from the Souths" throughout 2018. This article by Catherine Samary is a modified version of her contribution to the latter.**

I am delighted to be part of an international "decentring" about 1968. It is essential. And, I think, important in relation to understanding central and eastern Europe. It is obviously specific and at first sight difficult to "locate" it in a panorama on "1968 seen from the Souths" – that is, at the geopolitical level, colonised and neo-colonised countries! And yet, it has its place in the overall views presented during the first introductory forum: beyond decentring – in relation to the French May 1968 – the movements of which I will speak (in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia) share two general transversal aspects to the "1968 years" in the world, in spite of different contexts.

The first is the political radicalisation of a new generation, which everyone comments on; the second is the revolutionary dynamic of 1968, albeit without a clear, still less a unified "project". As stressed by Luciana Castellina, this oppositional dynamic, critical of the existing order and its relations of domination, did not spare the regimes originating from the revolutions of the 20th century in the search for a more emancipatory and democratic socialist alternative – that is precisely what was seen in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. Their place in the debate on the 1968 years is "geo-political". I want to explore this, in an overall way, before describing the movements of 1968 in these three countries.

## **Getting a perspective on the "Communist bloc" in the "1968 years"**

Responding to a question posed in the first forum on the absence of the "Chinese Cultural Revolution", Etienne Balibar correctly stressed that one cannot simply "situate" China in the "South", although some approaches do that. In the geopolitical sense, since the revolution and again in this phase of the 1960s, it no longer belongs in the category of colonised or neo-colonised countries.

To take up the formulation of Gustave Massiah in the overall view he presented, we must evoke the "three blocs" concerned by the 1968 years: even if it is interesting to focus on the bloc of the Souths (or of the "Third World"), of profound interactions weighing on the consciousnesses and relations of force of the world order. It was true in the French May 1968 of the first bloc (the dominant or imperialist capitalist countries, what is known as the "north" of the West or Centre, on which we don't focus here). But it was also true inside the bloc of countries identifying with Communism: the Chinese Cultural Revolution of the mid-1960s also related to that bloc. It is also there that we must place the "countries of central and eastern Europe" I have been asked to speak about.

There was in this bloc, beyond common socio-economic and political points, a great diversity of political situations and histories leading to lasting differences and inequalities; as is true in all the blocs. China was not the USSR and their conflicts sharpened during the 1960s, marking political divisions in the "Communist camp", visible inside the Tricontinental. [1]. This would considerably weaken the revolutionary dynamic of the 1960s.

Beyond the dominant powers of this “bloc” Yugoslavia (self-managing since 1950, “non-aligned” after 1956, and open to the winds of the world market to attempt to balance dependencies) was not Poland and Czechoslovakia either: the latter were inserted in the orbit of the USSR and the quasi-autarkic relations of Comecon until the 1970s. [2]

A major difference with the progressive movements in the countries in the South in the phase which concerns our debate concerns the identity of the “common enemy” evoked by Carmen Castillo: anti-imperialism united the Souths despite their diversity, but in Hungary, Poland, Yugoslavia or Czechoslovakia it was Soviet tanks, not NATO and the USA (as in Cuba or Chile) which were directly threatening. And in these countries, the mass democratic and emancipatory movement among youth and intellectuals and in the factories clashed with a single party which did not tolerate losing its monopoly of power and privileges while governing in the name of the workers and of socialism. Such was the immediate adversary of the big anti-bureaucratic movements (from the 1956 years to the 1968 years, extending in Poland until the early 1980s), even if the single party was itself traversed by oppositional movements identifying with the ideals of socialism/communism: The specific dynamic of these movements in these years (prior to 1989) was to seek to reduce the gap between ideology and reality.

This moreover is why I do not speak of “dissidences” of the 1968 years in these countries (contrary to the announced title of my contribution, which I did not choose). This notion has been forged above all to describe the anti-Communist currents in these regimes. I wish rather to evoke the movements identifying de facto or consciously with Communist ideals, in the full sense. The notion of “dissidence” obscures how much the “communist mole” undermined these regimes, taking up the rights proclaimed and the dishonest discourses to turn them against censorship, the absence of workers’ control over choices and conditions of work, the privileges of power and consumption of the Communist “nomenklatura”.

These remarks are all the more important in that they strengthen a questioning that I wish to raise in the last point of this placing in perspective, as to the interpretation of the big mass democratic movements of the 1968 years – to which I link, for Poland, the uprising of the self-organised Polish workers in the independent trade union Solidarno?? in 1980: was it an anticipation (or premonitory signs) of what would subsequently be presented as the “democratic revolution” of 1989? Or are they essentially contradictory phases and logics (even if no movement is “pure” or homogeneous, and if one can identify with democracy by being communist or anti-communist). I will defend this second interpretation of 1968 as the antipodes of 1989, linking my questionings to the remarks of Carmen Castillo on the current “commemorations” of 1968: as she has stressed, these very largely seek to water down the subversive scope of the movements of that phase, globally located before the so-called neoliberal “counter-revolutionary” shift (to use the terms of David Harvey).

Indeed, the principal way of obscuring the radicalism of what was at stake in relation to the countries formerly identifying with socialism, notably key players like Poland and Czechoslovakia, is to conceal all that which profoundly reflected a radically democratic “communist” logic in the great mass democratic movements prior to 1989. That is why the anti-Communist “dissidences” are invoked, possibly playing on the ambiguity of words: the challenging of the power of the CPs was “formulated” against the “Communism” identified with the single party regime.

Beyond words, the major difference between the “democracy” of 1989 and that of which I will speak about in 1968-1980, is that the first is content with an electoral pluralism (quickly transformed into an alternation without alternatives, profoundly regressive socially, associated with forced privatisations), whereas the movements pre-1989 placed the democratic question at the heart of the enterprises to “socialise” them on the basis of workers’ councils, mobilising the social base of the Communist regimes of these countries, Communist workers and intellectuals, with or without a party card.

I wish now to illustrate the subversive dynamic (both anti-bureaucratic and anti-capitalist, whether consciously or not) of the democratic mass movements of 1968 (and globally before 1989) in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia.

## Poland. 1968, between 1956 and 1980-1981

The Polish 1968 was essentially a movement of intellectuals and youth which was repressed (on anti-Semitic bases) before any intersection with a workers' movement. However, it is linked to the uprising of workers' councils of 1956 located as in Hungary in the de-Stalinisation opened by the Khrushchev report to the 20th congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). The sending of Soviet tanks against the anti-bureaucratic revolution in Hungary, had in a certain way allowed an attenuation and deviation of the forms of repression in Poland: there was a channelling and normalisation of the workers' councils, but acceptance of university self-management. And the mobilisation of intellectuals in 1968 took place against censorship and the attempts to challenge this self-management. The Marxist intellectuals Jacek Kuron and Karol Modzelewski – freed from prison after their "Open Letter to the Party" written in 1965, were considered as the inspiration for the youth mobilisations. [3]

I would like to cite here an interview with Karol Modzelewski, at the time of another 1968 anniversary (that of 2008). [4] It testifies to the spirit of the "Open Letter to the Party" of 1965, both radically critical of the "Communism" of this latter and the privatisations post 1989:

"For us, it was an ideal of the social system based on the self-management of the workers. In other words, we wanted to go from "Communism" not towards privatisation, but towards workers' councils which should govern not only the enterprises but also to constitute the framework of state power through a pyramidal system of councils.... Our argument was Marxist. That is to say that Marxism was employed to unmask the system, criticise it and call for its overthrow."

He was one of the "experts" solicited by the workers when they set up their autonomous trade union in 1980-1981 whose programme demanded the establishment of a "self-managed Polish republic" developing workers' rights. Questioned in this same interview on his interpretation of the support given to neoliberal shock therapy of Balcerowicz at the end of this decade by what remains of Solidarnosc??, he evokes, between the two phases, the repression inflicted by the "Communist" general Jaruzelski, the demobilisation which followed, and says: "Thus at the end of the 1980s, the system collapsed and when the orientation of change was decided, there was no longer this essential element which gave the tone in 1980-1981. There was no longer the pressure of the clearly egalitarian and collectivist milieus, as with the first Solidarnosc?? which was largely a child of socialism."

"A child of socialism" and not the anticipation of a pseudo "democracy" which imposed mass privatisation after 1989. Such is also the interpretation that I support, and which applies to the 1968 Prague Spring, extended by its often forgotten Autumn, as the antipodes of 1989.

## Prague 1968. From Prague Spring to the Autumn of workers' councils

Today, what is most often remembered about the "Prague Spring" of 1968 (which can be verified by consulting Google!), is the intervention of Soviet tanks during the summer: it is supposed to illustrate the organic incompatibility of "Communism" (obviously assimilated to the rule of the single party) and the profound democratic aspiration then expressed. The international impact of the rally of Spring 1968 and the massive presence of youth from outside the country, coming notably from the countries identifying with socialism, but also from elsewhere, were associated with the hope of a "socialism with a human face". And this rally was held inside a major country of the "bloc", supported by the reformist wing of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (the leader Alexander Dubcek and the economist Ota Å ik), as debates took place, in the USSR as in Cuba, on reforms of administrative planning seeking to enlarge the margins of the market and the directors. I don't have time here to review the context and contradictions of these reforms,

largely technocratic in nature. I wish to emphasise that which is most often concealed and ignored.

On the one hand, the market reforms were not popular among workers (because of their inegalitarian effects and the threat to jobs they represented). And it was to respond to this defiance that the democratic opening was introduced by the reformist wing of the Czechoslovak CP seeking to consolidate its social base. The explosion of Spring 1968 did not respect the boundaries of the official reforms however. But above all, it is not generally known that there was a pro-self-management wing inside the CP (notably around Jaroslav Å abata). It was opposed both to the conservatives and to the technocratic reforms, advocating the introduction of workers' councils in enterprises endowed with management rights fundamentally inspired by the experiences and debates of neighbouring Yugoslavia.

Concessions to these demands had been made, although remaining marginal. What is still less well known is that the intervention of the Soviet tanks, supposedly to prevent a "capitalist restoration", catalysed a major response from the workers, led by the self-management wing of the CP and the official trade union: the explosion of workers' councils. Their first national meeting was convened in January 1969 was nearly six months after the beginning of the occupation. A draft "law on the socialist enterprise" was drawn up and presented to the government, still led by Dub?ek. Their force and legitimacy were such in a regime identifying itself with the workers and socialism that it was not possible to "simply" repress them. The proposals were watered down in a co-management sense. But the movement continued to grow: by March the number of workers' councils had grown from 200 to more than 500. They were slowly smothered, then banned in July 1970: two years after the Soviet intervention, under a "normalised" regime.

Without being able to say more on this subject, I would like to conclude this point by citing what the writer Milan Kundera said in December 1968 (before he shifted to anti-Communism): "The Czechoslovak autumn undoubtedly surpassed in importance the Czechoslovak spring of 1968... The socialism which identifies with liberty and democracy cannot do other than create a liberty and a democracy such as the world has never known." [\[5\]](#)

I will end on the Yugoslav June 1968, still less known and whose anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist content is very much more explicit still.

## **Belgrade: June 1968. For a self-management from below! Against the red bourgeoisie!**

The occupation of the universities in June 1968 in Yugoslavia is another illustration of the global youth radicalisation. It took place in a phase of a considerable surge of strikes in Yugoslavia against the inegalitarian and destructive effects of the self-management rights produced by the "market socialism" reforms since the mid-1960s. The system led by Josip Broz (Tito) and regime theorist Edvard Kardelj was then at a crossroads: it was marked by social and national polarisations in opposed directions which I cannot deal with here. I want only to stress here that which relates to the international revolutionary 1968 and the big democratic and anti-bureaucratic movements evoked in Poland and Czechoslovakia.

Contrary to the instrumentalization of youth by Maoism in the Cultural Revolution, or in the reformist initiatives supporting the Czech Spring, the Yugoslav youth of June 1968 were spontaneous. Also, this movement took place in a system which, to resist the (post) Stalinist hegemonism of the USSR, was open both to the countries of the South and the Centre. Finally, unlike their sibling countries "of eastern Europe, self-management – notably in the area of publications – favoured a broad circulation of ideas which accompanied the liberalisation of travel (and something more negative, the emigration of workers seeking jobs following the rise of "socialist unemployment").

Also, the French May 1968, the Prague Spring and the movements against imperialist intervention in Vietnam combined in the radicalisation of youth with the issues raised by the self-managing economic reforms. The autonomous Marxist current around the magazine *Praxis* had for several years been organising of conferences of the new non-institutional international left which had contributed to the emergence of an autonomous movement of young anarcho-communists identifying with self-managed socialism. The inequalities of the market were opposed in the name of socialist ideals; and critical Marxist analyses were formulated against the alienation of self-management by a statist plan or by the market under the slogans “against the red bourgeoisie” for “self-management from below” and for a “self-managed planning”. Finally, as in Paris, in the occupied faculties of Belgrade posters of Che Guevara were prominent and demonstrations were organised against the visit of Nixon and in support of the NLF.

Tito came to congratulate the youth for their socialist and self-managing spirit, after having dismantled any autonomous movement and exploiting the Soviet intervention in Prague as a threat to Yugoslavia so as to isolate the oppositionists. The combination of selective repression and reformist concessions was reflected in the last constitutional modifications of the time of Tito and Kardelj, in the early 1970s, presented at the second self-management congress in Sarajevo. It was about channelling the centrifugal tendencies by reinforcing both the right of the rank and file bodies of self-management and those of the republics (reinforcing the confederalisation of the system notably in foreign trade). Inflation, the growth of inequalities and the generalised indebtedness of the 1980s would express at the economic level the absence of coherence and control of the contradictions at work leading to radical changes of logic: at the end of the 1980s the new laws on ownership would dismantle self-management and social ownership – with predominance of bourgeois projects on nationalist bases.

## In conclusion: 1989, completion of the new capitalist globalisation

In his introduction, Gustave Massiah evoked the “capitalist world system” (according to the terminology of Immanuel Wallerstein). But before being able (since the 1990s) to implement a new effectively worldwide capitalist globalisation, the dominant forces had to reconquer what they had lost from the First World War until the 1970s: the control of around a third of planet where revolutions favoured growing resistance in what remained of the capitalist world system, in its heart and in its semi-peripheries. It is the fear of “Communism” (internal/external) in the sense of an extension of revolutions, which has radically modified the role of the USA and the world relationship of forces of the 1960s and 1970s. This was associated with the social gains inside the countries of the Centre until the 1960s, this reformism then hit its limits during the crisis of profits and of society of this decade of “stagflation”. [6] But in the (neo) colonised Souths, it was about armed polarisations between revolution and dictatorial anti-Communist “developmentalism” involving counter-revolutionary coups.

We understand all the better what was the crisis of the world order in the 1960s in the “three blocs”, when we evaluate the imperialist counter-offensive and its phases, specific to each of these blocs: in the Souths, during the 1960s, this was the rise of colonial wars, of armed struggles evoked by Carmen Castillo, and the killings of leaders of the Tricontinental, evoked by Bashir Ben Barka during the first forum (including African-American leaders), prolonged by the coup in Chile in 1973. In the countries of the Centre, this was the so-called “neoliberal” turn faced with the crisis of profit and of society of the 1970s – of which we will not speak here, but which was very much present. This historic turn in the dominant imperialist countries supported by the big financial and military institutions at their disposal, radicalised into world social war after 1989/1990, with the disintegration of the “Communist bloc” in all its internal/external opacity. The shift of a substantial part of its “Communist” nomenklatura towards insertion in the world order took place in a differentiated fashion which I will not deal with here. But we are as yet far from recovering from the terrible blurring of labels, of relationships of force and socialist projects which produced the Jaruzelski coup in Poland, the repression of any autonomous movement in Yugoslavia or the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia “against capitalist restoration” – completed by the turn to capitalism of “Communist” China.

I will end with an anecdote illustrating this blurring: after Pinochet's coup in 1973, the Communist leaders of a "normalised" Czechoslovakia purged of hundreds of thousands of CP members, condemned this coup, vaunting the socialist dynamic of Allende's Chile. Our comrade Petr Uhl who had been imprisoned for having attempted to establish a Socialist Youth Movement in 1968 told his compatriots that in general, to know the "truth" about great world events, it was enough to reverse the terms of the lying official propaganda. But this time, what the newspapers of the regime said had to be believed: Pinochet's coup against Allende's Chile should be denounced, even if the CP was doing so also! Petr Uhl and Anna Á abatova, with whom I evoke this memory now, told me that at the time they circulated a petition expressing this solidarity.

I regret that the state of Petr Uhl's health does not allow him to be among us and to express directly his comradely greetings. But I am happy to do it for him.

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[1] Tito's Yugoslavia, which identified with Marx and the Paris Commune against Stalin and was "excommunicated" by the latter in 1948, remained, for Mao's regime (and the "pro-Chinese" currents) inside the "Western camp". China's break with the USSR took place in the 1960a in the name of Stalin against Khrushchev and his policy of "peaceful coexistence". There was no question of a rehabilitation of Titoism in China. For its part, the Cuban regime chose to rally to the USSR to face the US threat, drawing closer to its policies: hence Castro's support for the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968

[2] Comecon = Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, functioning largely on political-economic bases under Soviet domination.

[3] The "Open Letter" was published in France in 1967 in mimeographed form by the Fourth International, then by Editions Maspero in 1969.

[4] See "Contretemps" number 22, May 2008, 1968: Un Monde en Révolte. <http://www.contretemps.eu/wp-content...>

[5] [Cited by Vladimir Claude FiÁjera, in the "Contretemps" article mentioned above. He indicates that Jaroslav Á abata quotes this extract from Kundera in an article from the review "Listy", number 6 of December 2007.

[6] This reformism combined logics of Keynesian and social democratic inspirations and that of the CPs accepting the subordination of their orientations to the construction of "socialism in one country" and thus to the diplomatic interests of the USSR.