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Our history

The spirit of 1968 is inextinguishable – even 50 years later

- Features -

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This rebellious era shaped radical activists – and aggressive capitalists. What can we learn from 1968, for democratic change today?

Capitalist adventurer Richard Branson and cultural and political rebel Tariq Ali were both shaped by the experiences of 1968 – and, significantly, the years that preceded and followed it. These rebellious years shaped a generation but produced ways of thinking that, in retrospect, have turned out to be complex and ambivalent.

Out of this period came women's liberation movements; politicised, grassroots workers' organisations; the convergence of 'single issue' campaigns to address systemic issues such as military power, imperialism and the nature of the state. But this era also paved the way for capitalism's renewal – with a new, flexible, decentralised, unregulated spirit.

Generational changes may produce a circulation of elites – the young coming to the rescue of the exhausted old. But, once in a while, something different happens, and competing cultures and strategies for sometimes wide-reaching change can emerge.

This happens when institutions themselves are exhausted, or recognised as dysfunctional for the majority; when their credibility is lost with a whole generation who then draw on cultural innovations of their time to fashion alternatives to these institutions – or even to entire political and economic systems.

By the late 1960s, post-war paradigms began to crack. In workplaces across Europe, employers faced uncontainable pressures amid state policies of full employment and the enhanced bargaining power of an increasingly organised and confident workforce, restless with the deal of total obedience in exchange for reliable work and wages.

This began to affect profits and lead employers to build political pressure for 'wage restraint' and laws to curb organised labour's power. At the same time, expanding higher education led to growing demands for more services and power for students and teachers. These clashed directly with government imperatives to curb public spending.

The women's liberation movement upset fundamental social relations, established cultural and material orders, including one of their pillars: the idealised 'nuclear family,' dominated by the male breadwinner and serviced by the dependent woman, bringing up children in the isolation of her home.

This movement did not come from nowhere or from some essential moral female force. Feminist historian Sheila Rowbotham, for example, is clear that many of its ideas grew out of "the left movements and culture of the time," including the "heady utopianism" of '68, which she describes as a "springboard for women's liberation." [1]

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The distinctive, palpable, embodied and inextinguishable energy of '68 in fact infused many movements with a sense of possibility and shared determination and confidence to "demand the impossible" and see "beneath the pavement, the beach" – slogans that appeared first in graffiti on the walls of Paris, and on posters afterwards.

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This was also the period in which movements for anti-colonial liberation and against authoritarian governments spread like wildfire around the world, shaking the legitimacy of old and not-so-old imperial and dictatorial orders.

Rebellions from below challenged both capitalism and Soviet bureaucracy – and these revolts combined with crises in the institutions of domination to produce competing visions and strategies for ‘modernisation’: ‘Democracy-driven change’ versus ‘market-led politics.’

Some directly rejected the paternalism of the welfare state and state-defined socialism. They advocated and initiated participatory alternatives, including autonomous education projects, squats, communes and cooperative housing initiatives, women-centred health care, community-controlled nurseries and independent media.

Many of these alternatives were more practical than theoretical, with an unfinished, experimental character. Rather than systematic and ‘complete,’ they were scattered seeds of what had the potential to become a democracy-driven process of change.

‘68 also prompted, in reaction, an alternative strategy, led by political parties and governments, advocating an explicitly ‘market-led’ modernisation. In the UK, Margaret Thatcher and her entourage of free-market think-tanks had already begun their rise to power in the Conservative Party by the mid-1970s.

The rebellions of ‘68 aimed to transform and even eliminate power inequalities altogether.

By the 1980s, marketisation and privatisation as the only way to ‘modernise’ public institutions – presented as ‘old’ and internally unreformable – became the dominant orthodoxy. In Thatcher’s hands, this included the release of ‘the entrepreneurial spirit’.

This approach came on the back of the defeat, marginalisation and at times straightforward repression of alternative democracy-driven processes of change which proposed renewing institutions to maximise public value rather than profit.

Where market-led change meant privatisation, democracy-driven change meant popular participation in public administration. Participatory democracy was the demand around which many rallied, including Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) activists in the US.

The direct participation of frontline workers and service users was essential to these ideas and experiments to reorganise institutions and workplaces on the basis of social need and democratic control.

Importantly, the rebellions of ‘68 and the following decade were about more than protesting the established order and or even building counter-power. The goal was to transform and even eliminate power inequalities altogether.

In doing so, these rebellions overturned fundamental assumptions of social democratic and liberal public policy and the idea that codified, technical and ‘neutral’ knowledge can be centralised and exercised through ‘experts’ and more-or-less benevolent states that can know people’s needs and administer services in standardised, hierarchical ways.

At universities, students also questioned their experiences of increasingly standardised higher education. Some attempted to overthrow the disciplines of their schools (refusing to take exams, for example), challenging what kinds

of knowledge were considered valid.

“Their minds are policed by discipline, patrolled by examinations. Their hearts frozen by authority. Their university mimes society, mimes the factory,” the Italian activist-journalist Angelo Quattrochi wrote in May 1968, observing the student protests in Paris that month.

These students had been taught to expect that higher education would increase opportunities for all to live fuller lives. But the reality was otherwise, particularly for women.

“The shock of motherhood in weary isolation would dash many hopes,” Rowbotham observed, “while the apparent sexual freedom enjoyed by women who belonged to the in-between strata of the educated middle class would turn out to be complicated by under-tows of double moral standards, fear and contempt.”

Women’s shared experiences of subordination inspired further challenges to the dominant mentalities of the time – of individuals as atomised and separated from each other, and the collective as above the individual, solid and thing-like, as if social relations between individuals were of no significance.

They challenged both bureaucratic collectivism and the hyped-up individualism of the consumer boom, with a ‘relational’ view of society that assumed relatively enduring but transformable relations between individuals.

Civil rights movements in the US, followed by Black Power movements, contributed to a new political language which defied cultural subordination and the presumed universality of a white male paradigm.

In general, the ‘new’ left influenced by social movements moved away from the Cold War’s market-state binaries, in which the central strategic goal was to ‘seize’ or ‘win’ power, towards direct and immediate work to create feasible alternatives.

Such thinking took diverse forms in different places according to specific historical contexts, and influenced rich and varied practices throughout the 1970s. Across Europe, radical campaigns on housing, education, health, the needs of women and people with disabilities inspired confidence and showed that alternatives were indeed possible.

Close and innovative alliances between social movements and workers were crucial to this process. At the University of Oxford, we were going on our bikes and scooters, in our jumble-sale gaiety, to give out leaflets to car factory workers as they trudged to work in the dark at 6am, facing pressures to increase productivity with no increase in wages.

More sustained and materially significant collaborations between manual workers and students emerged in the 1970s. Indeed, a frequent – though not general – feature of this period’s radical, grassroots trade unionism was the involvement of committed academics that helped to research employers’ strategies and facilitate workers’ alternatives.

Specific movements, notably the women’s movement and the more radical parts of the environmental movement, made organising with workers a priority. Oxford students supported the organisation of college cleaners, following the example of feminists who in the early 1970s assisted in organising night-shift cleaners in City of London offices.

Radical environmentalists worked closely with engineers and designers for the company Lucas Aerospace, on an

inspiring trade union-led campaign to shift military production to socially-useful energy preservation and energy-friendly transport projects.

Given the importance of relationships with working-class struggles to the '68 movements, the impact of the class war waged by neoliberal governments was devastating. The individualism of the market increasingly took over, aided by a 'postmodern' perspective which tended to focus only on the cultural dimension of the social movements.

This led some to see, for example, the treatment of women as sex objects as a problem of culture alone – and therefore one that could be challenged without also resisting economic exploitation and the social organisation of reproduction through the nuclear family.

A more materialist approach would explore how these economic forms of oppression underpinned and enabled contempt for women as human beings, without denying the importance of cultural representation – and its material consequences.

Postmodernism became much more influential with the rise of neoliberalism in the late 1970s. It proved attractive to a '68 generation loyal to the culture of these movements but disillusioned with the frustrating efforts to bring about social change. It exercised its most significant influence where social movements suffered the severest defeats.

While postmodernism echoed and theorised concerns with language in creating our social and cultural lives, rather than simply reflecting a reality 'out there,' it lacked what was central to social movements as political actors: a purposeful, collective effort to transforming social structures, and collaborations with working-class organisations.

Such collective efforts and collaborations were needed to develop counter-hegemonic challenges to the free-market politics that was becoming increasingly influential.

The influence of this time, its radical thinking and practical experiments, bubbles to the surface whenever these institutions hit crises point again.

A decisive factor in the appropriation of the spirit of '68 by the right was the blunt – and sometimes plainly hostile – responses of mainstream left parties (and, in some cases, even trade unions) to the radical movements of this period.

In France and Italy, it was especially notable in the response of Communist and social democrat parties. In the UK, it was exemplified by sustained hostility of Labour party leaders towards the radical left and the 1984-85 miners' strike, reinforced by sometimes fierce repression by parties of the right, and vicious attacks from mainstream media.

The cultural breaks of the '68 rarely found institutional expression, let alone the ability to drive institutional change. Exceptions prove the rule: Tony Benn's support for workers' control, or at least effective participation in public industries, in the UK, and the experience of Ken Livingstone's Greater London Council (sometimes described as '68ers in office').

Such exceptions were marginalised or directly repressed. It is somewhat surprising, therefore, that like mountain streams, the influence of this time, its radical thinking and practical experiments, bubbles to the surface whenever institutions hit crises point again.

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Think, for example, of the late 1990s ‘alter-globalisation movement,’ challenging the corporate and neoliberal-led world order. Their forms of organisation, anti-authoritarian culture, and anti-corporate, pro-participatory democracy attitudes echoed those of ‘68.

We saw this again in the more recent revolts of the Indignados of Spain, and in the extraordinary surge of support for Jeremy Corbyn, leader of today’s UK Labour party.

Bertie Russell, an activist-academic involved in radical urban politics, born in 1985, told me that he’s unsure about a direct legacy of ‘68, but that “it remains an incredibly important reference point, not just for me but also for a lot of people I associate with.”

He describes ‘68 as representing an important shift in focus in terms of where struggle, and the possibility for progressive politics, is located. No longer, he explained, did it seem to be “defined by, on the one hand, the workplace, and, on the other hand, by the state.”

In the UK, there’s been a significant break from the dominant, somewhat closed culture of the Labour party’s recent past, and an opening up to a more participatory culture. This is evident the wide-ranging talks at The World Transformed festivals, organised in parallel with the party’s annual conference, with delegates moving freely between the two. [\[2\]](#)

These festivals are supported by Momentum, an autonomous movement organised to consolidate and extend support for Corbyn’s leadership and a transformation of the party.

“Suddenly, ‘68 becomes relevant again; how do we think about new forms of community, where we organise society differently? Or new ways of thinking about economy... other than focusing on the trade union as the place where anti-capitalist struggle has to happen; or the state will be the thing that delivers change for you,” said Russell.

The disappearance and reappearance of mountain streams is the subject of many scientific, geological studies. We must also study, then, how the cultures of ‘68 have been kept alive and has even renewed themselves. What makes this bubbling up of participatory, direct action politics, with a sense of feasible utopia, possible?

1968 was not wholly unique; there have been other moments in the past that defined generations and produced tectonic shifts in our world. The left’s defeat at the end of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 would be one example, with the subsequent consolidation of Communist parties across most of western Europe. 1945 would be another example.

In the UK, the defeat of Nazi Germany produced a determination to defeat the enemies of pre-war peacetime – unemployment and poverty. This led to the election of Labour’s modest Clem Attlee over heroic war leader Winston Churchill, and to the laying of the foundations of full (male) employment and levels of education and healthcare that shaped the self-confidence and optimism of the generation born as the war ended.

After ‘68, it was unusual for a party of left social movements to emerge. Though, in all moments of radicalisation, people also keep alive their beliefs in ways that go beyond formal institutions: through the strength of their convictions; passing on ideas in their families; personal friendship networks; and more or less organised groups of allies.

A group of Communist or ex-Communist party members, for example, met in 1956 to try to understand what was going on in the world, and particularly in the Communist world. They continued gathering annually, calling themselves

the ‘Anjou Club’ after the restaurant in which they first met, inviting speakers from younger generations to keep up to date.

Relationships and informal networks were of great importance in keeping alive the spirit of the late 1960s and early 1970s movements, amid the lack of significant political parties that were open to them, and the dramatic weakening of working-class organisations as neoliberal policies were deployed to destroy all material evidence of collectivism.

Notably, the spirit of ‘68 valued and facilitated informal and personal processes of building shared memory and political consciousness. Initiatives across social groups and locations were consciously-created to communicate, debate, and clarify ideas; support cultural nourishment; and enable mutual solidarity.

In the UK in the 1970s, most towns had a local left bookshop; study, research and reading groups sprouted up everywhere, in universities and independently; radical theatre groups toured pubs and clubs; alternative publications emerged; links were drawn between workers’ organisations, women’s, tenants’ and community groups.

Sometimes, local institutions brought different initiatives together in ways that strengthened all and did not undermine the autonomy of any. In many places, a disparate left converged periodically to pool strengths in the face of cuts, factory closures, and ideas of ‘acceptable levels of unemployment’ and ‘necessary’ rollbacks of state spending.

This distinctive break from centralised political models is key to how the spirit, initiative and capacity of ‘68 movements has been kept alive, under the conventional political radar.

The value that these movements placed on practical knowledge – not against theoretical knowledge, but with its own distinct validity – tended to legitimise autonomous initiatives. Importantly, their break from the authority of ‘expert’ knowledge was not in favour of individual conscience but rather of collaborative autonomy.

The favoured model was thus decentralised but coordinated, enabling ideas to spread and be reproduced without a centralised structure. It was this that would revive itself, and break through that radar, when there was an opportunity for collective effort to make a difference.

Decentralised initiative combined with networked coordination could also describe the social relations enabled by new digital technologies. The counterculture of ‘68, in fact, played an interesting role in preparing the way for the cyberculture of the 21st century.

The idea that the internet and new technologies can be tools to fulfil dreams of harmonious living (of people with each other, and with the environment) has roots in the Californian counterculture of the late 1960s and the ‘back to the land’ commune movement. [\[3\]](#)

This ‘new communalism’ featured a holistic vision of personal and social development, and a commitment to sharing and spreading information and innovation – epitomised and propagated by the Whole Earth Catalog published by the supreme countercultural networker and entrepreneur, Stewart Brand. [\[4\]](#)

Although some new technologies, and their creators, came out of work on Cold War defence research, the internet’s development was made possible by the miniaturisation of computers that enabled individual users to have their own machines too.

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Tim Berners-Lee, who created the World Wide Web with his colleagues at the European Organisation for Nuclear Research (known by its French acronym, CERN), was explicit about the web's importance as an open resource for a changing society.

Computer scientists, new communalists, individual users and radical geeks came together to produce diffuse, grassroots collaborations. But more recently, we've seen the increasing monopolisation of the digital world by corporate giants such as Facebook and Google.

The digital revolution, therefore, exhibits a similar ambivalence as all the streams flowing from '68: driven by a culture that favoured both collaboration and autonomy, which could be a tool either for renewing the private market or for spreading the cooperative economy.

The myth is busted, the individual freedom of neoliberalism is done – we have to re-stitch this story of us as collectives and us as communities.

Ten years after the collapse of Lehman Brothers in the US (precipitating the financial crisis, subsequent recession, and a new wave of pro-privatisation and austerity policies), the whole doctrine of 'the market knows best' is being more widely questioned.

These questions are not just about corporate greed, irresponsible lending, or outsourcing, but also the model of the downsized state, of allowing only corporations to plan, of abandoning the boundary between the civil service and the private sector.

"We are at a turning point," says Russell. From the spirit of 1968, he contends, "the bit that got taken was individual freedom, and that got stitched into the narrative of neoliberal management, but the demand was for a collective freedom."

Now, he continues, "the myth is busted, the individual freedom of neoliberalism is done – we have to re-stitch this story of us as collectives and us as communities. The idea is to self-define a collective freedom. It's taken a long time to recover."

He's right that, in the UK, Thatcher turned the desire for individual freedom into its emaciated, atomistic form to justify the unregulated market. But now, here is a new generation which is taking this desire back.

50 years since the Free Speech Movement in Berkeley, an iconic direct action of '68, they are acting on the belief of one of its activists, the late Mario Savo, who stressed individual responsibility in the context of a social movement for freedom.

"When the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart... you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon all the apparatus and you've got to make it stop," Savo said. "And you've got to indicate to the people who run it, that unless you're free, the machine will be prevented from working at all."

This, after all, is what young people were doing when they travelled to Seattle in 1998 to close down the World Trade Organisation talks; when they occupied in 2011 a park by Wall Street in New York City, and a church courtyard near the City of London; when they organised alternative communities of resistance in Spain and Greece.

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More recently, this is what they did when they left their homes, and jobs – if they had them – to volunteer for Corbyn in the UK, or Bernie Sanders in America, and build new movements that have already disrupted political machines in these countries.

The energies of these movements may have only a tangential connection to 1968. But it could be a source of strength to those involved to know that there are precedents, lessons, and allies from these earlier struggles, who grasp the potential of this new generation.

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[Opendemocracy](#)

[1] <https://btlbooks.com/book/new-world-coming>

[2] <http://theworldtransformed.org/>

[3] <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/F/bo3773600.html>

[4] <http://www.wholeearth.com/history-whole-earth-catalog.php>