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**Date deposited:** 26<sup>th</sup> February 2013

**Version of file:** Author final

**Peer Review Status:** Unknown

## Citation for item:

Outhwaite W. [When Did 1968 End?](#). In: Bhambra GK; Demir I, ed. *1968 in Retrospect: History, Theory, Alterity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp.175-183.

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## **When did 1968 end?**

My 1968 began promptly on New Years Day when I caught the slow cross-country train from Manchester to Harwich and thence to Hoek van Holland and by train to Basle. After that, the year was substantially one of missed opportunities. I spent the next four months learning German in the Black Forest and a further four months consolidating it in a temporary job in Basle. By then, the German movement was substantially over. (*Die Zeit* recently published a photo of Ralf Dahrendorf and Daniel Cohn-Bendit debating at an open-air meeting in nearby Freiburg, but that was the previous year.) In Basle, I was only a tram ride from the French border, and crossed it occasionally, but there was nothing to see in the small border town and with the general strike no obvious way of getting to Paris. I again missed seeing Cohn-Bendit when he was replaced on a visit to a student meeting in Basle by another member of the *Mouvement du 22 mars*, which seemed to have been worried about a personality cult developing round him. There were some more demonstrations and meetings, including one addressed by Elmer Altvater, but that was about it as far as I was concerned. Back in England in the autumn, and beginning to study PPE at Oxford, I went on the big anti-Vietnam demonstration in London at the end of October, which so scared the BBC that they sent programme tapes to Birmingham in case their buildings were occupied, but I opted out of the more adventurous side-trip to attack the US Embassy. For as long as it lasted I was a member (not that there was anything as formal as membership) of the ORSS, Oxford Revolutionary Socialist Students.

Nostalgia isn't what it used to be, and having already accepted an invitation to write a kind of memoir, in the volume edited by Alan Sica and Stephen P. Turner (Outhwaite 2005), I am one of the last people who should be indulging in any more Mayalgia.) There is however a sense in which the Western 1968 (the Eastern European one was very different, though to some extent overlapping)<sup>1</sup> is a year defined by process rather than outcome, inviting a focus on its phenomenology rather than an analysis of its material causes and consequences. In other words, the memory, true or false, is to a substantial extent the reality.

An excellent edited volume by Gerd-Rainer Horn and Padraic Kenney (2004) on *Transnational Moments of Change: Europe 1945, 1968, 1989* puts 1968 into an appropriate context. 1968 differs, however from the other two years, I think, in that they both brought a specific outcome: the end of dictatorship and, for much of Europe, occupation, war and genocide. We may be nostalgic for the demonstrations or for the breaching of the Berlin Wall in the wonderful autumn of 1989 and, if we are old enough, for the celebrations of victory or liberation in 1945, but these are these are in a sense ancilliary to the main events: in 1968, the main event *was* the *événements*.

1968 is often likened to two revolutionary years in the nineteenth century: 1848 and 1871 (the year of the Paris Commune). Here also the outcomes were disappointing, especially if compared (a little harshly) to the great revolution of 1789. Their after-lives were largely on the terrain of memory: as the 'springtime of peoples' or as the rehearsal for the expected socialist revolution which finally came, in a rather unexpected form and venue, in 1917.<sup>2</sup>

1848, like 1989, is a relevant comparison year for another reason: the international character of the movements and the way in which events in one location served as a model for others. But whereas 1989 displays a relatively simple domino pattern, ironically imitating in reverse motion the Western strategists' earlier image of the spread of communism, the temporalities of 1968 were significantly different in different parts of the West. In France, of course, most things happened in May, but in Germany the movement was by then already in decline, with a last failed attempt to prevent the government's emergency legislation finally passed at the end of the month. In Italy the student movements had peaked earlier in the Spring, though the workers were beginning a series of movements lasting into the mid-1970s which gave the 'hot autumn' of 1969 and the '68 years' their names and led Colin Crouch and Alessandro Pizzorno, perhaps over-influenced by the Italian case, to write of the 'Resurgence of Class Conflict in Western Europe Since 1968' (Crouch and Pizzorno 1978).

Before we ask, then, when 1968 ended, we should ask when it began. In France, as Maud Anne Bracke notes in her chapter, it has become common to speak of 'the '68 years' (*les années 68*) as running from the end of the Algerian War in 1962 to the presidential election of 1981 which brought the socialist François Mitterand to power. Yet as late as 15 March 1968 a journalist could write in *Le Monde* that 'France is bored'; a week later the *Mouvement du 22 mars* had occupied the university at Nanterre and the rest, as they say, is history.

As Patricia Hill Collins reminds us in her chapter, which neatly links the mobilization for Obama's election victory in 2008 with the 1968 struggles,<sup>3</sup> we should go back a little earlier and to the largely Marxism-free zone of the USA, where students had been involved in the civil rights movement from the beginning of the

1960s. The Berkeley Free Speech Movement of 1964 had typically banal origin in the University's attempt to ban activity of a Hyde Park Corner type from a site on the edge of the campus. A few months later, the Vietnam War had become the cause célèbre which it remained until the US was driven out in 1973. In Europe, student movements in Belgium, Italy, Germany and finally France became a significant force in 1966 and 1967. But the protests against the Vietnam War and against the militarization of West Germany had earlier roots in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in the UK and the German 'Easter marches' modelled on it.

The intellectual bases of the student and related movements had also been laid in the early 1960s by the European and North American New Left (The British *New Left Review* was launched in 1960) and boosted by such books as Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* of 1964. Neo-Marxist theory was one important element, finding institutional expression in new political parties like the French PSU, the British and French Trotskyist *groupuscules* and student organisations like the US and German SDS (Students for a Democratic Society and Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenschaft respectively).<sup>4</sup> The new left, as Horn (2007: 212) points out, came together with sections of the old left (communists in Italy though not in France; in West Germany and the UK there were hardly any) in what can be called a new far left, often theoretically dogmatic and practically utopian but anti-authoritarian. (The anti-authoritarian dimension, drawing on the critical theory of what had come to be called the Frankfurt School, was particularly strong in Germany, for obvious historical reasons.)

Also important was situationism, a movement with affinities to surrealism and a substantial physical presence in the Amsterdam Provos and Kabouters. An early student movement event was the publication in Strasbourg in November 1966 of a

situationist pamphlet on ‘the misery of the student condition’, and Raoul Vaneigem’s *Traité de savoir-vivre à l’usage des jeunes générations* was published in 1968. The choreography of the demonstrations, occupations and other events and their textual counterpart in leaflets and posters owed as much to situationism as to the more stolid traditions of revolutionary Marxism.

The components of the 1968 movements, then, were diverse, as were their temporalities in different countries and cities. And yet there were all sorts of geographical and sectoral cross-overs and linkages, including, in France and Italy, the much-desired opening to the workers. A causal analysis of the movements is confronted with something that Montesquieu recognized in the mid-eighteenth century: the need to relate long-term trends with specific events. If a Berlin policeman had not shot dead a student demonstrating against a visit by the Iranian Shah and dictator in 1967, the Berlin movements might well not have spread to the rest of the country. Conversely, if De Gaulle’s helicopter ride on 29 May 1968 to visit the commander of French forces in Germany had not strengthened his resolve, his regime might have fallen. There were political specificities which contributed to the success of the movements. De Gaulle was ageing and had been in power for ten years (‘dix ans, ça suffit’ was one slogan); the contradictions between his confrontational strategy (‘reform yes, fuck-up no’) and that of his more conciliatory prime minister, Pompidou, were an important source of weakness. In Germany, a ‘grand coalition’ of Christian Democrats and Socialists had made the need for an opposition outside parliament (APO) seem particularly obvious, and the country’s Nazi past made emergency laws and police brutality more than usually sensitive issues. Or if, on the other hand, Harold Wilson had given in to US pressure, as of course British prime ministers habitually do, and sent some troops to Vietnam, the

demonstrations which formed the main theme of the British movement might have been even better supported.

When, then, did 1968 end? The 1968 movements in the 'West' had few immediate and concrete results. There were pay increases in France, rapidly eroded by inflation, and some organisational reforms in higher education there and in West Germany. Only in Italy was there a lasting demonstration effect on working-class militancy. In Britain, as Mick Jagger complained, there was 'no place for a street-fighting man in sleepy London town'. The effects of 1968 have rather to be seen in longer-term cultural and generational terms. As Ken Plummer writes in his chapter, 'A range of movements existed before 1968 in relative isolation and quietness, but the furore of 1968 helped them to develop in the years between 1969 and 1975...' At the same time, however, as Stephen Frosch writes, 'The capacity of an administered society to absorb dissent...is nowhere more visible than in the consequences of the 1968 revolts.'

In one sense, '1968' was over well before the end of the calendar year. In France, it was pretty much over by the end of May. The factories and universities were back at work; the Gaullist regime was secure again, though the General made his long-threatened and overdue departure in the following year, and the hopes and fears of insurrection rapidly dissipated. The 1973 'oil shock' and the restriction of pay increases and state spending, later consecrated by the ideological and electoral successes of neo-liberalism, could be seen as a further milestone or tombstone for the end of 1968. We should probably pay more attention to 1973-4 as a crucial turning-point for western capitalism and the welfare state. This was the end of the 'thirty glorious' post-war years of prosperity and the beginning of an age of welfare cutbacks

(often coinciding with growing expenditure) and of what we can now recognize as the increasing marginalisation of Europe and North America in global capitalism.

Another, more local and political milestone might be the *Berufsverbot* in West Germany in 1972, introduced by Willy Brandt's socialist-dominated government which followed the grand coalition and banning those linked with 'anti-constitutional' movements from public employment (both of these terms being broadly defined) .

Here again we must note the very different political climates across otherwise similar western European democracies. In Italy or France, to be a communist was perfectly normal. In Britain, it was statistically abnormal but something of little interest, except perhaps to the security services. In Germany, it could lose you your job. In Germany, too, 1977 marked the effective end of leftist terrorism (which itself was of course one desperate response to the perceived failure of 1968), with only a few sporadic repeat attempts in the following few years. In France, there was no continuity between 1968 and the later terrorism of *Action Directe* (Wieviorka, 1998: 281); here there also remained a serious Trotskyist political presence. In Northern Ireland, 1968 meant a different kind of protest, demanding fair access to jobs and other resources for the catholic population; the Unionist backlash against what it saw as just another wave of republicanism led to a serious political and military confrontation which has only recently ended.

1989, as Chris Armbruster has pointed out, is of course another crucial landmark in relation to 1968 (Armbruster et al. 2009; see also Jarausch, 1998). In Czechoslovakia and across the Soviet bloc as a whole, it marked a clear end to the period initiated by the 'Eastern' 1968 of reform in the spring followed by repression in August and 'normalisation' thereafter. The failure of 1968 in that part of the world was, along with those of 1953 in East Germany and 1956 in Hungary, a further



unmasking of state socialism as a viable alternative to capitalism. Later on, for leftists in the west, 1989 was the demise of a real, if unattractive, alternative, which could be seen either positively, as the removal of a distraction to the pursuit of socialism in the west, or, more pessimistically, as a sign of its unviability. But to the extent that 1968 was a *communist* movement (Touraine, 1968) the events of 1989 might be seen as another end-point.

This raises a broader issue. Not surprisingly, since they were substantially student movements, the 1968 movements attracted a lot of attention from academic contemporaries, some of whom were themselves active in the movements. Opinions divide roughly between those sympathetic to the movements (though often critical as well) and more dismissive ones, such as Raymond Aron's book on the 'Elusive Revolution', in which Marxism is presented as (in the title of another of his books) 'The Opium of the Intellectuals', or Erwin Scheuch's collection called 'The Anabaptists of the Welfare Society' – the term refers to an extremist early protestant revolutionary sect. Alain Touraine's book provides a sympathetic but critical discussion of the 'utopian communism' of the movement as a rather confused reaction to the emergence of a post-industrial society in which conflicts around the use of *knowledge* would become as important as those over the (other) forces of production.

In Germany, the student movement divided the critical theorists of what had come to be called the Frankfurt School, following the return of the Institute for Social Research to Frankfurt in 1950. Adorno (1903-1969), the Director of the Institute after 1958, like Horkheimer (1895-1973), deplored what he saw as the dangerous 'adventurism' of the movements, whereas Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979), based in California but making occasional visits to Germany, strongly supported them. He

wrote to Adorno in April 1969, 'We cannot avoid the fact that these students are influenced by us (and certainly not least by you)' (Gilcher-Holtey, 1998: 168).

Marcuse, unlike Adorno and Horkheimer, had been politically active at the end of World War I. Habermas, born in 1929, was a generation apart from them. A teenager in the final years of World War II, he describes himself as 'a product of re-education', coming to terms with the horror of the regime under which he had grown up. He had been closely involved with university issues from the end of the 1950s, when he worked on a research project on students' political attitudes, documenting their rather unpolitical state. His book of 1962, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, documented a parallel decline in the quality of public debate, as politics became dominated by what we would now call spin. He had formed, with Wolfgang Abendroth, a socialist support group for the SDS, wrote a preface to a book they published on university reform, and joined in campaigns against the Vietnam War and the emergency laws. He was therefore very sympathetic to the aims of the movement but parted company with its strategy of provoking the state into revealing its oppressive character. Its importance, for him, lies in its modernising effect on West German political culture.

I suggested earlier that the real effects of 1968 should be seen in broader cultural and generational terms. Here is a rather cool reaction by someone from the generation immediately following that of 1968, writing of West Berlin in the late 1970s: (Garton-Ash, 1997: 37-8; 41)

I had mixed feelings about the sixty-eighters...I could sympathize with some of their political projects...However, they seemed to me often hysterical, self-

obsessed and self-indulgent. I tired of their moaning about problems that struck me either as self-created or as minor compared with those in the East.

Garton-Ash (1997: 150) was of course working a good deal in Poland in 1980, and interacting with Solidarity activists who were also substantially of the 1968 generation.

There were things, important things, that they had in common with the sixty-eighters in Germany: the casual way of dressing, the programmatic informality (straight to *ty*, rather than the formal *pan*), the attitude to sex and to personal relations more generally. But other, more important things were utterly different. The German sixty-eighters had never themselves lived under Nazism. The Polish sixty-eighters had lived and still lived under communism.

1968 in Poland was of course notable for the regime's anti-intellectual and anti-semitic pogrom, an ill wind which blew, eventually to the UK, some leading thinkers such as Zygmunt Bauman, Włodzimierz Brus, and Leszek Kołakowski. But the differences in the *political* 1968 in east and west, documented in Zdenek Kavan's chapter here, go along with a trans-Iron-Curtain *cultural* shift, tracked for the West by R.F. Inglehart in *The Silent Revolution*. Inglehart's book, published in 1977, was of course extremely influential in the English-speaking world; the German translation of 1982 had even more impact there.

If this shift, to a postmaterialism which should perhaps really be seen as another version of consumerism, with a focus on self-realisation and ‘experiences’ (the *Erlebnisgesellschaft* described by Gerhard Schulze (1992)), a corporate world where a laid-back atmosphere of sofas, first names coexists uneasily with a reality of increasing stress and insecurity, is a paradoxical legacy of 1968, there is also a more genuinely postmaterialist alternative culture finding political expression in local and global social movements. The 1968 movements display a paradoxical combination: one the one hand a deeply serious concentration on issues like class inequality and war which mainstream opinion tended to marginalize, and on the other hand an imaginative and playful political choreography. They leave us with the question of what we should understand by *serious* politics in the twenty-first century: protest movements which seem utopian or the increasingly formalistic rituals of post-democracy (Crouch, 2004). Rudi Dutschke announced the need for a ‘long march through the institutions’, which he was tragically unable to make himself.<sup>5</sup> In their different ways, Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Joschka Fischer can be seen as doing this, as can their British and North American counterparts in politics and intellectual life<sup>6</sup> now reaching the end of their careers and marking a further milestone in the road on from 1968. This political generation, for all its sometimes narcissistic combination of pseudo-intransigence with willingness to compromise, has surely played a positive part in the political modernisation of our societies.<sup>7</sup> It is less easy to judge what the future of our politics is likely to be, but if the ‘outcomes’ of 1968 were substantially ‘learning outcomes’ (to borrow for a moment the vile jargon of UK academic bureaucracy), the learning still goes on.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Michael Lühmann 2008. See also Zdenek Kavan's chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Caroline Humphreys' classic ethnographic study of the *Karl Marx Collective: Economy, Society and Religion in a Siberian Collective Farm* (Humphreys 1983) recounts how the fishers of Lake Baikal prayed for a good catch to the spirits of two Communard heroes.

<sup>3</sup> We should also recall the less happy parallel with the 1968 assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy: the concern for Obama's physical safety during the campaign. Collins suggests another temporary end-point to 1968 with her claim that Reagan's election in 1980 'can be seen as a direct response to the radicalism of 1968'. In France nearly thirty years later, the future President Sarkozy lashed out in public, for no obvious reason, at the ideas of 1968.

<sup>4</sup> The German SDS, which had fizzled out at the end of the 60s, was recently reincarnated in association with the new socialist party, *Die Linke*.

<sup>5</sup> At the other end of the political spectrum, Niklas Luhmann (1992: 152-3) wrote that society 'does not have an address. If one wants something from it, one has to address oneself to organisations.'

<sup>6</sup> On intellectuals, see for example Fleck et al. 2009.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the ironical cover of *Spiegel* No. 44, 29.10.07. 'Es war nicht alles schlecht. Gnade für die 68er.' ('It wasn't all bad. Give the sixty-eighters a break.')