

THINK PIECE
#95

Forever young:

50 years on from May 1968

Mark Perryman



THINK PIECE

#95



Cover illustration by Hugh Tisdale after an original '68 poster. Available as a T-shirt from www.philosophyfootball.com

Published May 2018 by Compass
By Mark Perryman

© Compass

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism or review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrievable system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of Compass.

Compass
81a Endell Street
London
WC2H 9DX
info@compassonline.org.uk
www.compassonline.org.uk

Compass is a home for those who want to build and be a part of a Good Society; one where equality, sustainability and democracy are not mere aspirations, but a living reality.

We are founded on the belief that no single issue, organisation or political party can make a Good Society a reality by themselves so we have to work together to make it happen. Compass is a place where people come together to create the visions, alliances and actions to be the change we wish to see in the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Perryman is the editor of *The Corbyn Effect* and a member of Lewes branch of the Labour Party and Momentum. In 1988 he was one of the organisers of Marxism Today's 20th anniversary '68 Show'.

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

1968 has shaped radical progressive politics perhaps more than any other year. It was a moment when the social movements of women, race and peace, which had been developing throughout the decade, collided with new left thinking and ideas. It was crystalised through mostly student protest on campuses and in cities across the West. As Mark Perryman sets out here, no government fell as a consequence, but space was opened up for a libertarian and non-statist left to flourish. The reverberations of '68 continue to ripple through our politics half a century later.

Compass is keen to keep exploring these key issues and would welcome any comments or ideas about how.

Compass **Think Pieces** are shorter, sharper and more immediate responses to key issues. The ideas and the thoughts are always those of the author, not Compass. They can cover any topic that helps us understand better what a good society should or could look like and how we might get there. We welcome suggestions for future publications, especially from women and any groups or people in society who are under-represented in the field of political thought and action.

Please contact:
frances@compassonline.org.uk in
the first instance.

**A mix of myth and reality.
Nevertheless, fifty years on, May '68
will always be forever young, or so
Mark Perryman argues.**

There are some years when such an extraordinary series of occurrences fill the twelve months that nothing short of an epic moment is created. The Tet Offensive in Vietnam, Martin Luther King's assassination, The Prague Spring, *Les Evènements* of Paris in May, USA medallists' Mexico Olympics black power salute. And those are just the edited highlights; what made them both special and interlinked is their combination with movements and ideas.

Jeremy Corbyn, Bernie Sanders and Jean-Luc Mélenchon have something in common, apart from left-leaning politics. They are all roughly the same age: late sixties, early seventies. It's not immediately apparent from their biographies what they were up to in 1968, in that sense they can hardly be claimed as *soixante-huitards*, '68 ers, unlike some of their lefty contemporaries. Yet it was this era that fundamentally shaped the radical politics for which they have become such powerful and effective advocates.

Paris, London, Rome, Berlin

A youth revolt, spearheaded, though not restricted to, student unrest. This was decades before the era of the massive expansion of the university sector. A time when maintenance grants were just about enough to live on, reasonably priced university-owned halls of residence, no tuition fees, a two-tier system of universities and polytechnics, along with a flourishing art school culture. Higher education for the few, not the many, success determined by A-Level results that were of course heavily skewed via class privilege.

Yet, for those fortunate few the experience was immeasurably better than the one today's students are forced to pay for. Many of them have no choice but to live at home and commute to study, their coursework competing for time with the part-time or even full-time work they need to do to pay for their education. Timetable slots for free-thinking and discussion are sacrificed to the cause of conveyor-belt degrees. Marketisation has transformed the entire sector into a service for customers. And while the day-to-day experience for students has got progressively worse, their personal debt liability has soared.

In *Student Revolt*, the author Matt Myers describes both the significance and impermanence of what happened when students revolted against all this in 2010:

*"A revolt by previously disorganised people shook the British state, but was dispersed almost as soon as it had begun. It was a moment of heightened transition, a catalyst in the decomposition of old politics and organisations and the founding of new experiences and new methods of organising – even if its organisational forms proved transitory."*¹

A catalyst doesn't have to be permanent. The sheer fact it erupts and effects change is quite sufficient. '1968' has acquired a near-legendary status that is as much cultural as political. Charles De Gaulle, Richard Nixon, Harold Wilson, and Leonid Brezhnev are hardly harbingers of change. None of them were exactly moved by the 1968 *Evènements*. Yet, it would be a very crude form of politics to suggest therefore those events did not matter.

Paul Mason² has a not dissimilar take to Matt Myers on the demographics of 21st century rebellion, characterising the core group as ‘the graduate with no future’, yet armed with a laptop and thus almost limitless access to social media networks on a global scale. Highly motivated, but not drawn to the rigid hierarchies and faction fights of a pre-existing left. There is a commonality here with ‘68, though in those days just about the only means of global communication was rock music, the bewildering capacity of what a smartphone can do now not even a figment of the wildest imagination.

Plus ça change

In what seems a lifetime ago, because it is, on the 1978 tenth anniversary of ‘68, historian Eric Hobsbawm in the magazine *Marxism Today* described that generation of revolting students thus:

“The student generation of the late 1960s became the first in the history of the developed capitalist countries to turn to the left en masse: at all events the first since the generation of 1848, with which it had some similarities. It did so for several reasons. Some students could, by virtue of their favoured position, see some essential weaknesses of the great boom more clearly than other groups more directly involved, and materially benefiting from it. All of them faced a direct contradiction between what the universities taught them and the careers as the cadres of the new bureaucratic consumer capitalism for which they were destined: its managers, technicians, bureaucrats, media propagandists and teachers. In most countries they confronted conservative regimes ossified by long and exclusive control of power, and in the USA the specific hazard of conscription in a reactionary, appalling and unpopular war. Prosperity gave them unusual freedom at this time, since

getting a living did not look like a problem. They had (unlike most people in production) a great deal of time they could devote to politics. And they were young enough to carry their belief in the necessity of revolt into action.”³

Hobsbawm identifies the reasons for the transience of the student revolt, and there is a clear crossover with the impermanence of 2010 that Myers also describes:

“There was, however, no organic link in the industrially developed countries between this new student and intellectual left and the working class movement; especially as many of the rebels rejected the actually existing mass labour movements as insufficiently revolutionary.”⁴

Though Hobsbawm did recognise how the student revolt might on occasion feed into more traditional forms of trade union militancy, at the same time he cautioned against generalising these moments:

“Where social tensions within the working class had also been building up, which had found no immediate means of expression, the student movement provided the spark for the explosion of mass strike movements. This was the case in France and Italy, but by no means elsewhere.”⁵

Despite those theorists, then and now, too eager to bid farewell to the working class, the ‘spark’ of the student revolt could provide a welcome addition to changing the mood for action, but hardly a catalyst on its own. The mythologising of ‘68 too often frames it as a generation on the verge of rebellion. It proved to be anything but, although in the long term the shifts it initiated may yet prove to be more

profound than a turn on the barricades might provide. Hobsbawm, again, puts this achievement of the '68 student movements most succinctly:

*"They announced a new period of struggles and political alignments, but they did not initiate revolutionary upheavals."*⁶

Stop, start

In the same year that Hobsbawm wrote his tenth anniversary review of '68, he gave a lecture, *The Forward March of Labour Halted*. Alongside Stuart Hall's *The Great Moving Right Show* essay, this would help pioneer – via the magazine *Marxism Today*, where both were published – a revival of creative thinking, some would dub it in the language used in these circles 'revisionist'. Hall in particular took note of the central importance of the 'political alignments' Hobsbawm had attributed as a key legacy of '68.

Hobsbawm's revisionist account of the post-war decline of the Labour movement combined an empirical analysis of such factors as a falling Labour vote, changes in the pattern of trade union organisation and more broadly working class culture, and a decreasing scale of industrial action, with a political critique of an over-dependency on what he called 'economist militancy.' He declared the faultlines in this as follows:

*"straight-forward economist trade union consciousness may at times set workers against each other rather than establish wider patterns of solidarity."*⁷

There was however precious little revisionism in the conclusions Hobsbawm drew from his analysis, declaring the late 1970s as a period when "the working class and its

movement should be in a position to provide a clear alternative and to lead the British peoples towards it"⁸ and then going even further left with a 'what is to be done' prescription for fellow Marxists:

*"If the labour and socialist movement is to recover its soul, its dynamism, and its historical initiative, we as Marxists, must do what Marx would certainly have done: to recognise the novel situation in which we find ourselves, to analyse it realistically and concretely, to analyse the reasons, historical and otherwise, for the failures as well as the successes of the labour movement, and to formulate not only what we would want to do, but what can be done. We should have done this even while we were waiting for British capitalism to enter its period of dramatic crisis. We cannot afford not to do it now that it has."*⁹

The unashamed radicalism of Hobsbawm's argument got a tad lost as he was embraced first by Neil Kinnock as 'Labour's favourite Marxist' and more latterly, and perversely, by the arch-anti-Corbynite and wannabe-historian, Tristram Hunt. And yes, there were some who took his pessimism about the trade union movement's recent past and immediate future as the reason to extinguish just about any optimism of the will. But essentially the point Hobsbawm was making, good Marxist as he was, was to change it.

A decade on the run

Ten years on from '68 the legacy was contested, sometimes bitterly, by all shades of the left. In terms of theory, despite the occasional salience of situationists, Trotskyite-inclined revolutionaries and card-carrying anarchists, it was three giants from the communist tradition who held intellectual sway for much of the 1970s

and after: Gramsci, Althusser and Poulantzas. None could be said to be of 1968, yet their influence was a direct result of those events.

In contrast Régis Debray was absolutely of those events. A pioneer of a brand of third-worldism in left politics which prioritised, sometimes romanticised, an 'other' as the tool towards revolutionary change. Latin America, the Caribbean, North Africa, the Middle East, South-East Asia, anywhere so long as it wasn't the home front. Debray's farewell to '68 ten years on was thus none too fond:

*"Transformed by the various state mechanisms into reforms, draft laws, statutes, settlements, amendments, Secretariats of State and Ministries (for Reforms, the Condition of Women, the Quality of Life, Manual Labour, the Environment, Youth, Desire, New Energies, New Ideas etc.) all the effort – despite inevitable wastage inherent in the type of operation since the beginning of time – has been carefully turned to profit by the very system against which it was mobilised. To put the bourgeoisie on the road to the New World, the May militants had to endure the thumping handed out by its 'special detachments of armed men'. It is hard not to understand why young 'revolutionaries' have subsequently lost some of their enthusiasm for sacrifice and the cult of abnegation."*¹⁰

Being generous, it could be credited Debray was seeking to inspire his fellow '68 veterans and those who had joined in during the intervening decade to a more radical ambition. But for most his strictures, and others that resembled Debray's line of the more-militant-than-thou-bible of r-r-r revolutionary change, served instead the cause of demobilisation to the eventual point of self-destruction. Or as the writer and

critic David Widgery rather neatly put it, miserabilism.

For a line of thinking that was every bit as critical of what the '68 legacy had turned into over the ensuing decade, yet retained the ambition of what could emerge out of the best elements, turn to the socialist-feminist pamphlet *Beyond the Fragments*, first published in 1979. This was analogue-age *samizdat* activism, a revelatory politics that spread via word of mouth, photocopies, independent radical bookshops that also served as activist hubs, the libertarian-socialist magazine *The Leveller* and feminist magazines including *Spare Rib* and *Red Rag*. As a political juggernaut prepared to smash the post-war consensus and throw Hobsbawm's halting of the forward march of Labour into headlong retreat, the authors Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright outlined a very different road for the left to follow out of a crisis, too much for comfort of its own making.

The book helped pioneer the 'prefigurative'. This was the idea that the personal is political, or to put it in a way that connects to the broadest possible experience of dissatisfaction and marginalisation generated by being 'politically active' (a term loaded with all sorts of connotations, most of them unhelpful) on the left, how we do our politics shapes the politics that we do. Wainwright catalogued why things had to change:

*"The subjective experience of political organising, whether it is 'off-putting' or involving, whether it builds up your own sense of power to change things or makes you feel powerless, is so vital to whether or not women become active."*¹¹

The list of the causes will remain familiar to many who have had the misfortune to find their enthusiasm and idealism organised almost out of existence via the sorry ways too much of the left conducts politics. Herein lies the key continuity between the '68 legacy and today's left in and around Corbynism.

The lost 1980s

But first, the rupture. For me, growing up politically in the 1980s, the scale of the squandered potential is evident when I think back to being in the crowd for a glorious Sunday afternoon in Hackney's Victoria Park, 28th April 1978, almost exactly ten years on from *Les Evènements*, the first Rock against Racism Carnival. Paul Gilroy describes the momentous significance of Rock Against Racism (RAR) as:

“Unruly opposition was given creative expression not just in the musical cross-fertilisation that came from the founding commitment in which black and white bands always shared audiences and performance space, but in the visual excesses of the RAR collective's graphics and the effervescence of what would now be drily called their 'branding' strategy. Badges, stickers and bright placards were all orchestrated around key colours, icons and slogans. There was an unprecedented connection between the spirit of political dissent and the novel ways in which it was being communicated and rendered. These tactics certainly drew courage and inspiration from the brazen confidence and reckless '1-2-3-4 let's get on with it' attitude of punk, but they also surpassed it in delivering viewers and participants beyond the limits of a world projected recursively in black and white.”¹²

This is more or less a manifesto for what a left remade in the image of '68, not as

copy-cats in the style of an unchanging Leninist, or for that matter Labourist, catechism, but unafraid to adapt to changing cultural circumstances while retaining the origins of inspiration.

Standing in London's Victoria Park 1978 as a fresh-faced sixth former straight out of Tadworth, Surrey, I didn't have the learned eloquence of Paul Gilroy to describe my experience of the first Rock against Racism Carnival as anything much more than discovering politics could be fun.¹³ In fact, if it couldn't be fun why would anybody but the most committed be bothered with it, hence one of the curses of the left, the 'cult of the activist.' In contrast, the appeal of the Carnival, of Rock against Racism, was that anybody could join because there was nothing to sign up to, no membership form, no committee, just a movement we could both call, and make, our own. And this was the era when mail still meant posting a letter, a friend someone you bumped into, not added to your Facebook page, twitter the noise birds make, text was a book to read not a message to send. Analogue ruled, yet RAR proved for a time at least to be the most (post-) modern of social movements.

Like RAR, Hilary Wainwright, '68er and co-author of *Beyond the Fragments*, was another carrying forward these kinds of connections into the 1980s. In Wainwright's case a model of political change rooted, contrary to all the then new-fangled post-this-that-and-the-other, in good old-fashioned political economy. Reviewing the legacy of London's GLC led by Ken Livingstone 1981-86 in their book *A Taste of Power*, Wainwright with her co-author Maureen Macintosh wrote prophetically:

“Any future political authority which thinks it can construct a progressive and successful economic policy without developing a model of constructing and implementing it in association with (and also sometimes in active contradiction with) those in whose interests it is intended to operate will be wrong.”¹⁴

Therein lies an explicit commitment to the feminist imperative of the prefigurative that had first emerged out of ‘68, via the vital necessity to dispel the feared ‘nice slogan, but what about the practical outcomes’ that any radical project serious about political power must overcome. And bringing this bang up-to-date in the age of Corbyn, writer Lynsey Hanley marks out the huge potential that is released when this is overcome:

“Where politics fails, cynicism reigns, and the only way to negate that cynicism is to treat politics first as a local endeavour – in which voters have direct and regular contact with politicians whose experiences inform their parties’ national policymaking from the bottom up.”¹⁵

Mining another source of lost inspiration, the largely accurate, and immensely uplifting, film *Pride* starred both the stalwarts of Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners (LGSM) and the communities who provided the backbone to the 1984-85 Miners’ Strike in the Welsh valleys. As well as being a professional historian, Hywel Francis, then a Communist Party member, later a Labour MP, chaired the local miners support group that LGSM twinned with to such good effect in both film and actuality.

In his book *History On Our Side*, Francis recalled the impact of 1984-85:

“The network of women and mixed support groups had given rise to an alternative, community-based system of food, clothing, financial and morale distribution which had sustained about half a million people for nearly a year. The social and political skills of organisation and communication were akin to the experiences of people during a social revolution. Women, men and indeed children had learnt more about the strengths and weaknesses of the state apparatus, more about the problems of working-class solidarity and above all more about their own individual and collective human potential than at any time in their lives. The new links within and between coalfields, with non-mining areas in Britain and indeed internationally were all pregnant with possibilities.”¹⁶

Of course, Francis was writing about a very specific kind of geographical community in a very particular set of historical circumstances. Nevertheless, the creative solidarity this strike sparked and is so memorably portrayed in *Pride* offers at least the beginnings of the shape of things that might have become a new model Labour Party, but didn’t.

Because by the mid-to-late 1980s, in the wake of general election defeat after general election defeat, any hope for change was being fast-tracked to extinction, well until someone unearthed ‘things can only get better’ as the party’s bright, new and bouncy soundtrack.

But before all that there still remained the bare bones of another narrative. Coming out of the wave of benefit gigs the 1984-85 Miners’ Strike had sparked ‘Red Wedge’ was a well-intentioned and hugely ambitious attempt to keep a culture of resistance on the road,

avowedly political, 'soulcialism' as the Red Wedgers liked to call it, and pro-Labour without being in and of the party. None of this is easy, then, or now. Music writer Sean O'Hagan summed this up just as the venture was beginning:

*"The fact that Red Wedge has a distinctly loose, hazily defined relationship with the Labour Party is both a strength and a possible failing."*¹⁷

While Stuart Cosgrove, with O'Hagan an early pioneer of the *New Musical Express* post-punk shift towards a 1980s politicised rock writing, put those contradictions in two typically vivid passages of popular critique. Firstly, the potential audience, which he described in terms of geography, gender and class:

*"A red wedge is just a ginger haired typist from Carlisle who dances to soul music and has to save up for her holiday. And if Labour wins the typists' vote, who cares what art students do with their ballot papers?"*¹⁸

And secondly, the fundamental challenge a cultural movement of the sort Red Wedge aimed to generate posed to the conservative organisational structures of Labourism:

"What happens when the Red Wedge circus moves on? What does it leave behind, some satisfied souls and a few hangovers? Red Wedge has to become the animator not the afterthought, it has to generate events and not simply provide them,"

before adding to emphasise the point:

*"Red Wedge has to chase the improbable and fast. It has to unite the night away. Labour: it ain't nothing but a parrrrty."*¹⁹

Of course nothing of the sort happened. Labour lost the 1987 general election, and then reverted to cultural type at the notorious 1992 Sheffield Rally with Kinnock shouting repeatedly 'We're all right', plus the occasional starstruck 'Woah!' for bad measure. Blair at least professionalised the output with celebrity photo-opportunities, but as for any cultural shift there was to be nothing of the sort.

The key point about Red Wedge was that it came from both within and without Labour. It was a seriously ambitious attempt to effect change in the party's culture that wasn't factional in any traditional sense. Red Wedge was much more open than that, all who could see that Labour's ways of working and appealing weren't working could have a piece of that change, but the commitment to this necessity wasn't deep enough, it was too swiftly jettisoned. Tony Mainwaring at the time that Red Wedge emerged was political assistant to the Labour Party's General Secretary. He was thus deeply embedded in the party's organisational ways and means. He rather honestly describes this lost opportunity:

"There was a moment of crystallisation of a new form of politics. It was brilliant and beautiful to see, and Red Wedge was reconfiguring the DNA. But I don't think the Labour Party had the reflective learning capacity to draw and learn and honour what was being done. The Party was bound to let it down in some way because there wasn't a clear enough expectation and conversation about what 'good' would look like."

Yet 30 years on Mainwaring remains convinced of the potential that did exist:

"The answer isn't what Red Wedge brought to the Labour Party, it's what

kind of politics we could have created together. If it had developed for another few years it would have been extraordinary.”²⁰

Red Wedge was ten years before Blairism, an alternative model of modernising Labour beckoned, but found the door, eventually, slammed shut. And then in 2017 it appeared to open again. It is easy for timeworn politicians and hardbitten commentators to sneer at the rock-star-style adulation of the Glastonbury crowd when Jeremy Corbyn took the stage. But there are precious few politicians now, or ever, who could attract not only such affection, but trust too, from young voters, and possibly even more threateningly, the voters of tomorrow.

Labour, led by a guy who is old enough to qualify as ‘68er grandad-dancer, and we can only imagine he might even have the kind of moves on the dancefloor to prove it.

We are all wont to become nostalgic about the era in which we grew up politically. Me included, guilty as charged. Actually, it’s worse than that, it’s conservative. *Guardian* writer Gary Younge very expertly positioned the yearning for ‘the Corbyn effect’ to represent meaningful, radical change in this precise of 1980s left nostalgia context.

“If this really were a return to the eighties, as some suggest, then he would have a peace movement making his case for him against war and a vibrant trade union movement making the case against austerity. As it is, he doesn’t even have a party he can rely on. He did not emerge to the Labour leadership organically from a deeper organisational base but disorganically from a wider, amorphous, alienated sentiment.”²¹

Younge was right then, but 2017 has proved, as he has also written, that we shouldn’t ever entirely give up on our hoped-for continuities:

“This (2017) election was the first time since the crisis that a mainstream party had offered principled opposition to austerity and shifted the conversation from immigration to investment in public services. We were told that voters would not buy it. We were told it was not possible. But when the clock struck 10, the tectonic plates shifted. And for just a minute, until we found our footing, we felt a little giddy.”²²

Kinnock, Blair, Brown, Ed Miliband - none of this is to suggest they were all bad. Blair and Brown did more good than any Tory government would ever do. Given half a chance, Kinnock and Miliband would have been better prime ministers than Thatcher, Major or Cameron. But they didn’t do enough that was good, they weren’t different enough. They were what we ended up with because of the lost 1980s, the rupture with ‘68 was made in those defeats and the preceding decades too. That’s the point of the rise of Corbyn, a movement of the present and future that hasn’t mislaid the politics and principles it originated with, since day one. As somebody else’s T-shirt puts it..

The world turns

The 20th anniversary of ‘68 was not at all like the 10th. As Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques wrote at the time:

“Then the lines of continuity were still strong. Now the umbilical cord has been cut. In the West, at least, we are living in a different era.”²³

But why, the authors asked, did ‘68 retain its appeal, twenty years on and

after a decade of Left defeats for the anniversaryists? This much remained unchanged:

“1968 was one of those years, rare in history, which mark some kind of turning-point. It condensed into one moment many of the most significant political and cultural developments of the decade – for example, the civil rights movement of the early 1960s and the anti-authoritarian and libertarian cultural currents of the era of affluence. It saw momentous social movement and political change, not only in many Western countries, but also in the East and Third World. It was this global reach – and the interaction between these apparently separate spheres – which made 1968 so compellingly an ‘international’ event. And without doubt, it was this which made it one of the historic moments of modern times, comparable with 1848 or 1917.”²⁴

In 1988, still recoiling from the defeat of the 1984-85 Miners’ Strike and Thatcher’s third successive general election victory of 1987 it remained plausible nevertheless to catalogue the positive legacies of ‘68 that had survived. These Hall and Jacques listed as:

“The extraordinary power and liberatory effect of people in movement; the re-emergence of the working class as a mass protagonist; the articulation of a new set of demands; the coming into play of new areas of conflict; the constitution of new social antagonisms; the emergence into struggle of new social subjects. 1968 ushered in the social movements that were to become such a force in the 1970s and which were to transform the left’s view of what politics was. And with this came new models of society, a new sense of what socialism might and should be about.”²⁵

That’s some balance sheet, most of which from the vantage point now of the 50th anniversary has more or less stood the test of both time and politics. But other aspects of ‘68 perhaps haven’t. 1968’s anti-statism has proved to be capable of being accommodated by both big business and the right. Against any version of authority, for self-expression above the needs of the collective has on occasion come at the expense of the collective, the big and so-called ‘bad’ nanny state. Against Labourism and Leninism, that was the easy part, but what kind of left politics was it for? Abstract declarations in favour of working class power aren’t much use if our politics has little or no understanding of, let alone support from, that class. As the 30th anniversary approached in 1998, those weaknesses, while they persisted, were sidelined because of the Blairite compact with the neo-liberal consensus: 1979 was the new starting point; 1968 lumped in with everything else of the out-with-the-old tendency, as it rushed headlong towards whatever was new.

Forever young

The 50th anniversary takes place in entirely different political circumstances for the left, at least, in Britain. By no means a done deal, yet Labour has been in a state of near permanent revolution for the past three years, since Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader. The generation who suffered the defeats of the 1980s but never lost their principles, those who departed leftwards having marched against Blair’s illegal war, the students who revolted over the tripling of their tuition fees, but found no political home to call their own. Labour remains a broad church, as it has always been, but these are the communities now who more or

less make up the majority, of members if not yet MPs.

Lewis Bassett calls a significant chunk of this influx 'movementist', sometimes in contrast both with their natural allies on the Labour left as well as in conflict with Labour's centre right. Each in their different ways weighed down by a traditionalism that sees little good in the '68 legacy. Bassett outlines what the movementists offer instead:

*"For those of the movementist trajectory, events and their political economic context impressed an urgent need to respond to conditions of austerity. As a result, 'social movement' actors and organizations became inflected by an emphasis on class as well as a renewed awareness of the material and ideological power of the nation state, which, in the theories that had been popular among the movementists, was thought about only in terms of its erosion. This shift in political consciousness was the prerequisite for 'social movement' activists adopting state-centred strategies. Such a shift alone, however, did not necessitate an explicitly parliamentary direction"*²⁶

What has changed, particularly since the 2017 general election, is a sense of optimistic will co-existing with residual pessimistic intellects to find the means for a social movement to win parliamentary power and effect change. Something which, despite a great line in graphics, '68 came nowhere near achieving.

But the reason '68 still matters is that any fulfilment of that ambition will be a result of cultural change, movements, events and ideas, as '68 taught us and feminists put into practice via the prefigurative. It matters far less whether those connections are made

visible, and certainly not in the 'good old days' manner of some sections of the left - they are simply there in practice.

There may be precious few obvious signs of 1968's presence in politics today but this conception of Labour as a social movement is certainly one. It means a break with a way of doing politics which we have no-one but ourselves to blame for, or as Beth Redmond rather saltily put it in a tweet:

*"I remember being part of a left who would organise boring as fuck meetings that no one would but cranks would want to go to, and then sit and wonder why they couldn't get any young people to turn up. Seems a fuckin lifetime ago..."*²⁷

But Beth Redmond isn't having any more of that and as a result makes a crucial distinction:

*"Commitment and dedication to a movement, to getting a Labour government, is key. Commitment and dedication to boring everyone to death is unnecessary."*²⁸

A left that can spot the difference was the stuff of dreams fifty years ago. Today we are on the verge of not only making it possible, but finding the means to have some fun along the way, what Redmond has dubbed 'halcyon days'. Because a party that doesn't know how to party is no party at all. And for that, if for nothing else, *merci beaucoup Mai '68*.

Les Evènements de 1968

Janvier

- 5^e Alexander Dubček elected First Secretary of Czechoslovak Communist Party.
- 30^e North Vietnamese National Liberation Front (NLF) launch Tet Offensive against US forces in South Vietnam.

Mars

- 11^e NLF forces reach Saigon in the South, US launches counter-offensive.
- 17^e Massive Vietnam Solidarity Campaign demo fills Grosvenor Square, site of the USA's Embassy in London.

Avril

- 4^e Martin Luther King assassinated.
- 5^e Dubček grants freedom of the press.
- 8^e US offensive in Vietnam continues to make ground against NLF.
- 9^e Attempted assassination of student leader of Rudi Dutschke leads to wave of student demonstrations in West Germany.

Mai

- 2^e Students occupy part of the University of Paris.
- 3^e Street battles between students and police in the Latin Quarter of Paris.
- 9^e Soviet armed forces commence military manoeuvres near the Czechoslovak border.
- 13^e A 24-hour general strike in France is supported by both workers and students. Paris peace talks between USA and North Vietnam commence.
- 14^e The Sorbonne in Paris is occupied by students.
- 17^e Across France factories are taken over by workers. Numbers involved are estimated at over 100,000.
- 20^e France is brought to a virtual standstill by combination of workers' strikes and student demonstrations.
- 30^e President De Gaulle dissolves the French National Assembly in order to hold fresh elections in June.

Juin

- 8^e Italian police break-up student occupation of university buildings in Milan.
- 12^e French government bans all demonstrations.
- 19^e 50,000 join anti-Vietnam War march in Washington DC.
- 30^e Gaullists win landslide victory in elections to France's National Assembly.

Juillet

- 16^e USSR issues warning to Czechoslovak government that the liberalisation policy, the 'Prague Spring', is unacceptable.
- 27^e Despite the threat of a Soviet intervention Dubček declares that the liberalisation policy continues.

Août

- 10^e USSR-led Warsaw Pact military manoeuvres near the Czechoslovak border.
- 15-18^e Heavy fighting between NLF and US forces in Vietnam.
- 20^e Czechoslovakia invaded by tanks and troops from USSR, East Germany, Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria. Czechoslovak government, including Dubček, arrested.
- 25^e-27^e Talks commence between USSR and Czechoslovak government.
- 28^e Mass anti-war protests, some violent, outside Democratic Party Convention in Chicago.

Septembre

- 11^e Soviet armed forces begin withdrawal from Czechoslovakia.
- 13^e Under Soviet pressure Dubček forced to reintroduce state censorship of the press.
- 18^e Mexican troops occupy the National University in Mexico after seven weeks of student unrest. Unknown numbers of students shot dead.
- 27^e US launches new military offensive in Vietnam.

Octobre

- 4^e Czech government reverses most of their liberalisation policy.
- 11^e Partly in response to the May protests, French government introduces biggest reform programme of education system since Napoleon.
- 12^e Olympic games open in Mexico City.
- 16^e Olympic gold and bronze medalists in the 200m, US athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos, raise black power salutes on podium. Both are expelled from Olympic Village and US team sends them home.
- 26^e NLF forces launch counter-offensive.
- 27^e 100,000 join anti-Vietnam War march in London.
- 28^e Protests across Czechoslovakia against USSR's role in their country.

Novembre

- 5^e Richard Nixon elected US President.

Décembre

- 25^e The Scaffold's 'Lily the Pink' is UK's Christmas Number One.

Notes

¹ Matt Myers, *Student Revolt: Voices of the Austerity Generation*, Left Book Club: London, 2017, p188

² See Paul Mason. *Why It's Still Kicking Off Everywhere*, Verso: London, 2013, pp 261-296

³ Eric Hobsbawm, '1968 – A Retrospect' *Marxism Today*, May 1978, p133

⁴ Hobsbawm, *Ibid*, p 133

⁵ Hobsbawm, *Ibid*, p 13

⁶ Hobsbawm, *Ibid*, p 133

⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Forward March of Labour Halted?' in *Marxism Today*, September 1978, p 286.

⁸ Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Forward March of Labour Halted?' in *Marxism Today*, September 1978, p 286.

⁹ Hobsbawm, *Ibid* p 286

¹⁰ Régis Debray, 'A Modest Contribution to the Rites and Ceremonies of the Tenth Anniversary', *New Left Review*, May-June 1979, p50

¹¹ Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal, Hilary Wainwright, *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism*, Merlin Press:London 1979, p 252

¹² Paul Gilroy, 'Rebel Souls: Dance-floor justice and the temporary undoing of Britain's Babylon' in Syd Shelton, *Rock against Racism*, Autography ABP 2015, pp 24-25

¹³ See Mark Perryman 'Straight out of Tadworth' in Roger Huddle, Red Saunders (eds) *Reminiscences of RAR: Rocking against Racism 1976-1982*, Redwords 2016 pp 179-181

¹⁴ Maureen Mackintosh and Hilary Wainwright (Eds) *A Taste of Power: The Politics of Local Economics*, Verso, 1987, p 19

¹⁵ Lynsey Hanley, 'Labour's heartlands aren't racist. They need listening to' the *Guardian*, 17 February 2017.

¹⁶ Hywel Francis, *History on our Side: Wales & The 1984-85 Miners Strike*, Lawrence & Wishart 2015, p 80

¹⁷ Sean O'Hagan, 'Power chords, Pop, Politics and Labour', *New Socialist*, March 1986, p 8

¹⁸ Stuart Cosgove 'Bands on the Wagon', *New Socialist*, March 1986 p9

¹⁹ Stuart Cosgove 'Bands on the Wagon', *New Socialist*, March 1986 p10

²⁰ Tony Mainwaring quoted in Walls Come Tumbling Down, *ibid*, p513

²¹ Gary Younge, Stuart Hall Foundation Keynote Speech, www.stuarthallfoundation.org 28 November 2015

²² Gary Younge, 'A Shock to the System', the *Guardian* 17th June 2017

²³ Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques, '1968', in *Marxism Today*, May 1988, p 25

²⁴ Hall and Jacques, *Ibid* P.25

²⁵ Hall and Jacques, *Ibid* P.27

²⁶ Lewis Bassett, 'From Movementism to Labourism' www.opendemocracy.net 26.11.16

²⁷ @redbethredmond 5.01.18

²⁸ Beth Redmond 'Halcyon Days' on www.tumblr.com