

## "The Lasting Legacy of the World Revolution of 1968"

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The world revolution of 1968 was the most important political event of the twentieth century - more important than the Russian Revolution in 1917, more important than the defeat of Hitler and the establishment of U.S. hegemony in the world-system in 1945, more important than the collapse of the Communisms in 1989/1991. For unlike these other monumental events, the impact of the world revolution of 1968 has bequeathed the world-system two legacies that are irreversible, since they were the shattering of the accepted normative consensus in two matters, neither of which can ever be reestablished.

The world revolution of 1968 is shorthand for a series of events that occurred between 1966 and 1970, and which occurred in virtually all parts of the world-system. Most specifically, this includes events that occurred in the pan-European world, the so-called socialist bloc of nations, and what was at the time referred to as the Third World. I include in this list the student/worker uprisings in North America, western Europe, and Japan; the Cultural revolution in China, the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia, and the uprisings elsewhere in eastern Europe (most notably, Poland and Hungary); and the multiple events in the Third World (from Mexico and various parts of Latin America to Senegal and Tunisia to India and the Philippines). There was virtually no country that was

untouched by this political tsunami.

These uprisings varied in how long they lasted and how violent they were. In the short run, they all failed in their immediate objectives because they all were suppressed sooner or later and more or less effectively. Sometimes they were repressed brutally. Sometimes they were brought to an end by limited concessions on material issues. None of them achieved their more ambitious proclaimed objectives of fundamental social change, either in their countries or in the world-system as a whole.

Nonetheless, despite the repression and despite the very major counterattack to everything that 1968 represented, which was incarnated in the thrust for neoliberal globalization that began in the late 1970's, the world revolution of 1968 transformed the world-system's geopolitical and geo-cultural structures, to the degree that we can call 1968 the end of an epoch and the beginning of the transition to a new world-system.

What were the major changes that occurred as a result of 1968? They were two: the dethroning of centrist liberalism from its long-held position as the dominant and uncontested ideology of the world-system; and the definitive and meaningful entrance of the "forgotten peoples" into the ongoing political struggles of the world-system. To understand what happened and why this is so important we have to return to the historical roots of the prior consensus in each of these domains.

## *1. The dethroning of centrist liberalism*

The origins of the three great modern ideologies - conservatism, liberalism, and radicalism - can be traced to the French Revolution. The French Revolution brought about far less change, politically and economically, within France than it is usually credited with achieving. But it did transform the cultural realm of the capitalist world-economy as a whole. Until the French Revolution, there persisted a major disjuncture in the capitalist world-economy. While its economic and political institutions were by then well-institutionalized, the prevailing cultural norms were still largely derived from prior feudal systems and were at odds with capitalist practice.

What happened as a result of the French Revolution is that two new cultural norms began to receive widespread legitimization throughout the world-system. The first had to do with the normality of political change. Political change, of course, was a constant of the real world as far back as we can perceive what was happening in human societies. Political change was not new. What was new was what people said about political change.

Up to the French Revolution, the usual argument about political change is that what occurred was not change. Instead, the change was presented as the restoration of the traditional path from which the world or the country had temporarily deviated. The very word, *revolution*, is derived from this old idea, since a

revolution literally means a circular movement, returning to that which was the starting point. As a result of the French Revolution, it became widely accepted that political change, for good or ill, was a normal phenomenon. Indeed, it was now widely presented as something positive, under the label of progress.

The second normative change brought about by the French Revolution has to do with sovereignty. Sovereignty was a concept invented in the sixteenth century and had to do with the right of each state to make its political decisions autonomously within its defined frontiers. The unclear question, however, was in whom was this sovereignty vested? The original idea in the sixteenth century was that sovereignty was lodged in the sovereign. That is the origin of the term. The political theory that justified this was the concept of the absolute monarchy. In the two subsequent centuries, there were efforts to wrest sovereignty from the exclusive purview of the sovereign and force the sovereign to share it with the legislature, which meant essentially sharing it with the aristocracy. This effort had some limited success in some countries.

The French Revolution was fought in the name of a new idea, the idea that sovereignty was lodged in the "people." Who the people were, that is, how the people were defined, has been a matter of much debate ever since. But the idea that it was the people who are sovereign came to be very widely accepted, even after the political downfall of those who launched the French Revolution.

The combination of these two new ideas - that political change is normal and that it was the people who are sovereign - had very radical implications, for it suggested that the existing political institutions might be overthrown whenever the "people" felt they should be. The three ideologies were invented as ways of coping with this radical combination.

The first ideology to take root - immediately after 1789 - was conservatism, in the now legendary writings of Burke and de Maistre. They both insisted on the undesirability of states interfering with the natural authorities of traditional institutions - the Church, the local community leaders, the family - whose authority was consecrated by long practice and much wisdom. These views were essentially reactionary, that is, a reaction to the presumptuousness of the revolutionaries and other partisans of legislated progress.

Liberalism was put forward as a moderate response to conservatism. Liberals argued that, although they rejected Jacobin excesses in the French Revolution, the concept of progress, inevitable progress, was a positive and reasonable basis for political action. Liberals did so however on one proviso, which was that the changes they advocated be gradual and under the supervision of competent specialists.

In the entire period up to 1848, the political arena was divided between liberals and conservatives, or the party of change and the party of order. The radicals were those who espoused in-

evitable change but wanted to see it occur not gradually but as rapidly as possible. Such radicals as there were attached themselves to the outer fringes of the liberal camp. Their greatest strength was in Great Britain, in the one country where liberals were strongest and the conservatives most ready to make small concessions to the demands of the liberals.

This line-up changed considerably in the "world" revolution of 1848. The year 1848 saw two kinds of revolutions. There was the very first real social revolution - in France. It lasted only four months but it frightened the liberals, who promptly joined forces with the conservatives to suppress it brutally. The second kind of revolution was what the historians call the "springtime of the peoples." These were nationalist/liberal uprisings in a series of countries - notably Germany, Italy, Poland, and Hungary. This frightened in particular Prince Metternich, the grand apostle of reactionary conservatism.

The important thing is what the advocates of the three ideologies deduced from the world revolution of 1848. The liberals deduced that they were correct in their centrist position - that slow change under the aegis of the specialists was the only viable option. But the social revolution in France frightened them. They thus also deduced that the real danger to their position came not from the conservatives but from the radicals.

What the conservative camp noticed was that the one country that had no uprising was Great Britain, the country where radicals

had in fact been strongest. They deduced that it was the reformist instincts of the British conservative forces that explained the absence of a revolution. The conservatives deduced that the liberals were correct in arguing that unyielding reactionary conservatism was counter-productive, and that timely, small concessions were a useful way of limiting social change. They became what came to be called "enlightened conservatives."

And finally the radicals deduced that spontaneous uprisings, which had been their proposed tactic before 1848 and which was the way in which the 1848 social revolution in France had begun, did not work. Such spontaneous struggles were too easily suppressed. Radicals turned instead to the idea that social revolutions must be prepared, must be organized, must indeed be bureaucratized.

The resulting panorama of political struggle from then on was one in which all three ideologies came to practice in effect the strategy of the centrist liberals - planned, gradual change. Conservatives and radicals became in effect avatars of the centrist liberals arguing largely about the speed and extent of the changes, but not too much more. It was thus that, right up to 1968, centrist liberalism reigned supreme as the geo-culture of the world-system, the only ideological position to be taken seriously by political actors.

This political panorama was shattered by the world revolution of 1968. What caused this shattering, ironically, was the widespread victory of the traditional anti-systemic movements in the

period 1945-1968. The three varieties of the "Old Left" - the Communist parties, the Social Democratic parties, and the national liberation movements had all achieved state power, more or less, during that period. The Communist parties were in power in the so-called socialist bloc, one-third of the world. The Social Democratic parties were in power, at least alternating power, in the pan-European world, another third of the world. And the national liberation movements (and/or populist movements) had come to power in most of the global South, another third of the world-system.

All three varieties of the traditional anti-systemic movements had adopted and advocated for almost a century the so-called two-step strategy - first achieve state power, then change the world. What the revolutionaries of 1968, in almost every instance, said (in one language or another) was that the Old Left movements had achieved state power (step one) but they had clearly not changed the world (step two). The world-system and their own countries still lived amidst great economic gaps between the top and the bottom. They all were still undemocratic and repressive. And they all still continued to have clear class-systems, even if the bourgeoisie now bore other names (such as the Nomenklatura).

The conclusion these revolutionaries drew was that centrist liberalism did not work, even when it was in the hands of their avatars among the "radicals." They raised into question the utility of the two-step strategy, and therefore of the priority given to



the achievement of state power. They called for the unlinking of radical movements from centrist liberal ideology. In the turmoil and in reaction to the turmoil, the conservatives also reopened the question of their adoption of a version of centrist liberalism. They too called for their disjunction from it.

It was not that centrist liberalism disappeared. It has not. What disappeared was the idea that *only* centrist liberalism was a serious ideological position. The world moved back into a climate of three ideologies in struggle - centrist liberalism, with a revived genuine conservatism on its right and a revived genuine radicalism on its left. This is a legacy that is unchangeable. The world shall never return to an unquestioned monopoly of centrist liberalism. The rules of political struggle have been permanently transformed.

## 2. *The entry of the "forgotten peoples"*

All the parties of the Old Left were hierarchical, vertical structures. Each claimed to be the only legitimate expression of radicalism in its country. Each argued that competing movements were either deviant groups, expressing a false ideology that the major movement rejected or were organizations pursuing the interests not of the "people" as a whole but of particular groups. In this latter category the vertical organizations placed women's organizations, racial, ethnic, or religious rights organizations, peace

organizations, and environmental organizations. The position of the Old Left vertical structures was always that such "specialized" organizations had to subordinate themselves to the authority and the priorities of the main vertical organization. Otherwise, they weakened the cause of the principal objective of the Old Left organizations, the achievement of state power. It was always further argued that the demands for the rights of particular groups would and could be satisfied only *after* the coming into state power by the Old Left vertical structure.

In effect, the vertical Old Left structures claimed to be the only legitimate expression of the people. The interests of particular segments of the people had to be postponed until later. This was the ideological claim that was strongly attacked by the revolutionaries of 1968. Their argument was simple. The vertical structures were now in power. And the interests of what might be called the "forgotten peoples" had not been met. The forgotten peoples said they were no longer willing to wait in any way for the so-called main revolution. Their demands for social justice were as urgent, as legitimate as the demands of any other group.

The forgotten peoples demanded recognition, and first of all from the Old Left. Indeed, they went further. They said that the Old Left organizations were as narrowly based as the organizations of the forgotten peoples. Both the Communists and the Social Democrats constantly talked about the needs of the working classes, the proletariat. In practice, they seemed

to be referring primarily to White males who worked in industrial jobs. But this was in fact a group as particular as any other, and in fact a relatively small group. As for the national liberation movements, they were accused of representing primarily the point of view and the interests of the dominant ethnic group in their country, and in fact only that of the White males among them.

Who the forgotten peoples were varied from country to country. But they were always a substantial group. And they participated disproportionately in the uprisings that constituted the world revolution of 1968. What they demanded was not only the recognition of the immediacy and importance of their demands, but the dismantling of the concept of one single, hierarchical, vertical organization per country. They saw the political future in coalitions of multiple organizations, what has since come to be called horizontal structures.

The demands of the forgotten peoples constituted an assault on the Old Left, and the Old Left perceived it as that from the outset. The Old Left everywhere resisted the revolutionaries of 1968, in many cases joining forces with more centrist and conservative elements to fight against them. But, if the Old Left sometimes or even often won the battle in the short term, they lost it in the middle term. Within a few years, the Old Left organizations realized that, if they were to survive, they had to accept the legitimacy of the argument that the demands of the forgotten peoples were

urgent and important, indeed fundamental to the realization of a better world.

The Old Left structures decided that they had no choice but to incorporate these demands within their own platforms. It is very easy to verify this transformation. Take any party journal and read its text written in the 1950s. You will find no serious discussion in such journals of women's' issues, no serious discussion of racial or ethnic injustices, and no discussion whatsoever of the demands of gay and lesbian rights. Or rather, one might find some discussion in terms of a particular issue that was being espoused by the Old Left organization, provided that it was being pursued by a front organization controlled by the vertical Old Left movement. Now look at the same kind of party journal in the 1980s. Suddenly, the entire tone had changed. Feminist causes are espoused. Anti-racist causes are espoused. Environmentalist causes are espoused. Demands of gays and lesbians are espoused. There is no longer any talk that these demands are bourgeois or non-popular. Quite the contrary!

If we look at the world political scene, we see a major reorganization of left political strategy. Now it is no longer assumed that obtaining state power is the priority. It is a matter of debate in each country whether this is important at all. The new face of the world left was launched in 1994 by the neo-Zapatistas in Chiapas, who rose up on January 1 of that year to demand the autonomy of the indigenous peoples. Their strategy was not aimed at obtaining state power in

Mexico but at reclaiming the land of the indigenous peoples and the control of their own socio-political space. But at the same time, they asked for support across the world and offered their own support to all groups fighting for the same objectives across the world.

It is not that the world left has renounced the idea of class. It is that it is no longer accepting the simplistic version that had prevailed until 1968, that the working class was composed only of persons employed full time in urban, industrial employment. The definition of the working class has been enlarged to encompass a much wider spectrum of people. Similarly, national liberation is being redefined to include not merely one ethnic or linguistic group but all persons resident in a given political entity. These redefinitions are controversial in their detail and in the differing complexities of different locales in the world-system. But they present the basis of a more useful analysis of the politics of the world-system and therefore of a more useful strategy to pursue the kind of fundamental social change the world left has always represented.

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