

From Barricades to Baghdad

Lee Jones

Published in *Cherwell*, 18 May 2007

For many, the mere mention of 1968 is enough to conjure up romantic images of rioting, radicalism, and revolution, with students in the vanguard of a worldwide rebellion against authority. But nearly 40 years on, a sober analysis suggests that the movements spawned by the '68ers hold a degraded notion of politics, while many of its veterans, once united in their opposition to the American war in Vietnam, were enthusiastic supporters of the disastrous decision to invade Iraq. Where did it all go wrong?

The May 1968 riots that began in Paris but spread across the globe did, for a brief moment, present a genuine challenge to established authority. Led by Daniel "Danny the Red" Cohn-Bendit, students fought running street battles with the police. 10 million workers joined them in a general strike, forcing their conservative leaders in the French Communist Party and its affiliated trade unions to begrudgingly lend their support. President de Gaulle, who had fought the Nazis and faced down civil war over the Algerian conflict, hid out in a German airbase, preparing to flee the country. Had the Communists seized the moment, the course of Western European history could have been dramatically different. As it was, government forces restored order, de Gaulle won a snap election, and the workers trudged back to the factories. By June, it was all over.

As Paul Berman describes in his *Tale of Two Utopias*, '68ers were more or less united by the fear that fascism was resurfacing in the West, manifested in creeping state "totalitarianism", cultural forms dulling the people's revolutionary spirit, and the imperialist policies of both the West in Vietnam and the Soviets in Czechoslovakia. Yet the '68ers were deeply divided about how to respond to this threat.

A small minority sought to create Marxist-Leninist parties capable of mobilising the workers for the coming revolution. But most, like Cohn-Bendit, rejected the "*crapules staliniennes*" of Communism, and many '68ers despaired of the West and its working class, which apparently preferred corporatist, acquiescent trade unionism to revolution. Instead, many '68ers looked to figures like Mao, Ho Chi Minh and Che Guevara for their inspiration, waiting for the "real" revolutionary party to emerge from the Third World. Some took a more libertarian stance, rejecting all structures of power and developing counter-culture to challenge "totalitarianism". This took wildly varying forms, from New Left communes in Europe to the "freak scene" and anti-war hippies of the American West coast.

What both these dominant responses had in common was their individualistic rejection of structures of authority. Many French, German and Italian '68ers were clearly influenced by the strong European tradition of Marxism, but their suspicion of power structures led them to avoid the traditional Leftist slog of building up mass parties in favour of often-violent direct action. Likewise, Timothy Leary, who coined the phrase "tune in, drop out", explained that its essence was the highly-individualist "discovery of one's singularity, a commitment to mobility, choice and change".

In Italy, the Red Brigades committed themselves to the violent overthrow of the state, but rather than mobilising the working class to that end, they staged a series of high-profile kidnappings and bombings in the 1970s. French radicals led a similar campaign, while the German Baader-Meinhof gang waged a personalised anti-capitalist war by shooting leading bankers and bombing department stores. Joschka Fischer, appointed Germany's Foreign Minister in 1998, rioted in support of the gang, photographs of him beating up a policeman surfacing in 2001. Other '68ers' pursuits were less violent, though no more focused on

mobilising Western societies for the revolution. Cohn-Bendit led “invasions” of rock concerts and ran a kindergarten to produce “liberated” youngsters.

The ‘68ers’ failure to lead a revolution in the West was followed in the 1970s by the failure or corruption of many causes they held so dear in the Third World. The end of the Vietnam War took much of the wind out of the sails of the American ‘68ers, many of whom were more interested in dodging the draft than fighting imperialism. Indochina itself, once the target of high revolutionary hopes, was now seen as the home of modern Nazism. Bernard Kouchner, a former French Communist Party member who had unsuccessfully volunteered to serve Castro in 1968 and would later establish *Médicins Sans Frontières*, homed in on the refugees fleeing socialist Vietnam as proof of its new totalitarianism. Pol Pot’s Cambodian killing fields and recognition of the brutality of Mao’s Cultural Revolution exacerbated the ‘68ers’ growing despair. Elsewhere, Third World revolutions in Angola and Ethiopia seemed just as bloody.

German ‘68ers were particularly worried by the apparent rise of anti-Semitism in their pro-Palestinian activism. Germany’s Revolutionary Cells were involved in the murder of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics, and the 1978 hijacking of an Air France jet in support of jailed Palestinians. Joschka Fischer later said the separation of the hostages into Jewish and non-Jewish groups (the latter were released) at Entebbe was a crucial factor in leading him to eschew violence.

Faced with all these disappointments, the fissiparous “new left” split further. Many ‘68ers “dropped out” of politics altogether: Fischer, for instance, became a taxi driver. Others continued their fragmentary politics in so-called “new social movements”. These single-issue campaigns often spoke up on behalf of “voiceless” entities, such as animals, the environment, or ethnic minorities in other countries, objects that - unlike Western workers - could not reject their claims to leadership: this was the origin of the modern animal rights and Green movements. By the 1980s both Cohn-Bendit and Fischer were senior Green party figures. Most ‘68ers were therefore noticeably absent from the 1980s workers’ struggles against the onslaught of neoliberalism, as Reagan and Thatcher led the charge to dismantle the welfare state.

The ‘68ers gradually reunited around their core opposition to “totalitarianism” in all its forms. The “New Philosophers”, led by French ‘68er Bernard-Henri Lévy, promoted an uncompromising *moral* critique of the USSR. “Former leftist” André Glucksmann promoted humanitarian intervention, following Bernard Kouchner’s emphasis on saving lives rather than creating a new society. Glucksmann also backed NATO, arguing the threat of totalitarianism required a military response. Although the anti-militarist Greens initially disapproved, Cohn-Bendit’s book about 1968, *We Loved the Revolution So Much*, included an interview with Polish ‘68er Adam Michnik who approved of the Vietnam War as a challenge to Communist totalitarianism.

With Lévy and other “former leftists” agitating strongly for intervention in 1990s hotspots like Bosnia, the Greens eventually came around. One of Joschka Fischer’s earliest acts as German Foreign Minister was to end 20 years of Green anti-militarism by campaigning for NATO intervention in Kosovo, falsely claiming that Serbia was planning genocide. Czech president Václav Havel, embodying for many the spirit of ‘68, had brought his country into NATO and thence Kosovo. Javier Solana, a Spanish ‘68er and author of *50 Reasons to Say No to NATO*, was by now NATO’s Secretary-General and, having overseen NATO’s 1993 intervention in Bosnia, now presided over a sustained bombing campaign that left Serbia’s civilian infrastructure in tatters and half of its population unemployed. Kosovo was detached from Serbian rule, becoming not a self-determining, independent state, but an

UN-EU protectorate. The UN's first Special Representative, charged with building up a new civil administration, was none other than Bernard Kouchner. Truly, it was the '68ers' war.

This coalition was the fruition of political collapse, the possibility of genuinely radical, revolutionary politics dissolving into a morally-driven desire to save foreigners who, once seen as inspiring, self-determining revolutionaries, were now imagined as helpless victims.

The desire to do good on the global stage was also an expression of the failure of the '68ers to transform their own societies. Coming to power in the 1990s in the wake of the historic defeat of the working classes, the generation of 1968 pursued the "triangulation" politics of the "third way", compensating for the continued dismantling of welfarism with superficially progressive social and foreign policies. Young people today are now paying for the '68ers' failure in the form of spiralling student debt, higher taxes, the threat of a raised retirement age and stagnant pensions, the preponderance of dead-end, low-paid and degrading jobs, and the unaffordability of decent housing - a stark reversal of the social conditions the '68ers enjoyed and rebelled against.

The international realm presents a superficially simpler moral plane that offers an escape route for this failed generation. Despite beginning their careers in opposition to the bloody American intervention in Vietnam, many '68ers supported the Iraq War, allying themselves with the US neo-conservatives (whose predecessors were also disillusioned leftists) who also incongruously believe in the use of state power to change conditions in other countries, but not at home. Cohn-Bendit, Lévy, Kouchner and others (like former Communist and 1968 student leader Jack Straw) cheer-led the US invasion, while Fischer was pilloried for his refusal to accept the case for war against Saddam's "totalitarian" regime.

The divisions over Iraq, however, will not last. Several high-profile '68ers base their careers on demands for intervention, with Hável demanding the UN take action in Burma, and joining the campaign against "Islamic fascism" led by Lévy. Cohn-Bendit, Kouchner and Lévy are also demanding international intervention in Darfur. Despite expert assessments by *Médicins Sans Frontières* that such calls are born of ignorance and the work of African experts like Alex de Waal that shows how intervention has exacerbated the Sudanese civil war, the '68ers' strident calls for intervention are now being picked up by a younger generation. Figures like Nick Cohen and others associated with the Euston Manifesto, like Oliver Kamm (author of *Anti-Totalitarianism: The Left-wing Case for a Neoconservative Foreign Policy*) are desperately trying to rescue the concept of intervention from the bloody wreckage of Iraq.

Despite being possibly the most disappointing generation ever produced by Western society and having demonstrably failed to achieve their revolutionary goals, the generation of 1968 has profoundly influenced modern politics. It still defines what it means to be a radical today; that is, to be both Green and hyper-interventionist - a remarkable retreat from the human-centred ethos of the 1960s that stressed self-determination and revolution. This power to define "the radical" is, however, a zombie-like remnant of the past, a function of the collapse of political alternatives in society. The task for our generation is to engage critically with the legacy of '68 - and replace it with our own.