

Logie Barrow
 My '1968'

ABSTRACT

This emphasises the richness of late-1960s leftist activity; author's reaction to the twin shocks of 1956 (Suez and Hungary) into opposition to both Western and Stalinist imperialisms; dynamics of the "International Socialist" group. On fringes of struggles at LSE; their impact. Servicing others' struggles; full employment from 1940s allowed shopfloor momentum: 'DIY reformism'; example: Manchester's Roberts-Arundel struggle. GLC tenants' movement from 1967. Arguing with pro-Enoch Powell dockers, April 1968. Differentiated solidarity with French 'events'. August: sudden Soviet re-possession of Czechoslovakia; divergent motives on solidarity-demo. Position on Vietnam struggle; much hysteria on all sides before and during London's Vietnam demo of 27th October. Factual and methodological convolutions of blaming the '1960s' for neoliberalism.

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The key quality of Britain's 1968 was variety. Factories, housing estates, anti-racism, anti-imperialism, and anti-Stalinism: an unusually large number of struggles escalated. Some climaxed, but the narrative of none is confinable to that year alone.

Who is speaking? For me personally, 1968 brought few revelations. Aged eleven in 1956, I had reacted to the simultaneous earthquakes of Suez and Hungary into my current world-view: against anyone's imperialism, not least 'mine'. That simultaneity, plus the range of leaflets collected during 1960–1962 while on Easter marches for unilateral nuclear disarmament, made me a natural recruit to the International Socialism group when Tony Cliff (Ygael Gluckstein) talked hilariously on the hollow absurdities of the Soviet system to the Cambridge student Labour Club in early 1964. The group's key principle was "neither Washington nor Moscow". Strategically and internally, we identified far less with Lenin than with Rosa Luxemburg, whom we saw as his democratic critic. Cliff was to reverse this during 1968, on the plea that a wave of student recruits needed structure. Like nearly all members, I went along for the ride. By the mid-seventies, this took us from a few hundred, mostly intellectuals, to some thousands, mostly workers. But our internal regime soon disgusted many, me included.

From 1966, I was based in London, so as to research under the loosely Stalinist Eric Hobsbawm. Most of my documents were housed in the library basement of an

institution whose extreme overcrowding smelt like the Sorbonne I had known during 1963: the London School of Economics (LSE). I also went to many meetings of LSE's Socialist Society. So this put me nearly 'in' the student struggles that began there during March 1967—though not 'of' them: I was wary of undermining my comrades by being 'unmasked' as some 'outside agitator' (as if they needed any!). Nonetheless, I found myself standing near enough to the Director, Sir Sidney Caine, on the key evening. A genius of elitist provocation, Sir Sidney had ordered the porters (for us, friends) to block the main lecture theatre against a meeting about the appointment of Walter Adams, who had collaborated with Rhodesia's racist government, as his successor. Shifting into persona as a researcher who had found the library suddenly closed, I sidled up to Sir Sidney while inwardly giggling at my ex-Hong Kong Civil Service uncle's description of him as "an excellent chap". Pseudo-naively, I asked him to make a symbolic concession. His response: "You are provoking violence". A deafening half hour later, one of the porters dropped dead of a heart attack.

Unlike much of the media, LSE's authorities were savvy enough to exonerate everyone of blame. Exoneration came via an enquiry. The students had expected this to savage them, so they boycotted it. As a non-LSEer, I decided our side should be heard. I need not have worried: the two professors (one was David Donnison, a leftist housing expert; the other I have forgotten) barely questioned my brief summary of how far any hysteria had come, not from students but from Sir Sidney. Into 1969, Caine's and, in due course, Adams's authoritarianism guaranteed LSE's place as the most visible of radical centres in Britain. Thereby, the two boosted the Maoist or Guevarist concept of 'red bases'. I still see such concepts as carts put before any horse of mass struggle: doomed to rot and rust. But, via the media, they certainly boosted hysteria on all sides, as we will see.

I was used to servicing others' struggles: as an International Socialist, my main function was to service working-class ones. As we will also see, the 1960s were to become the middle decade of DIY workplace militancy: for future Thatcherites and others, the frightening side of capitalism's longest boom. Specialists in 'industrial relations' were starting to talk of 'unofficial unofficial strikes': those won so quickly, that even the routine unofficial leaders had had no time to react. Not that any Fulham or Hammersmith factory or building-site I sold our weekly paper outside of was to prove a key centre of militancy. But you could not predict that. However, selling a pamphlet by Colin Barker and Cliff on shop stewards began to earn us respect from many local Communist trades unionists—contacts of our working-class members—who had once seen us as wordy sectarians. Our point was: what we called 'DIY reformism' was itself a better strategy than winning union elections for the Communist Party-backed left. Our contactings were to prove vital for later years.

There was also, from 1967, a widespread and, in some areas soon militant, movement among tenants whose rents the Greater London Council (GLC) was raising. With hindsight, we may see this movement as angering some Tories into supporting privati-

sation and their 'Tenants' Right-to-Buy' scheme during the 1980s. Indeed, we can now see the GLC's Head of Housing, Horace Cutler, as a neoliberal long before Margaret Thatcher in demanding privatisation of any functions of the (local) state, including housing: under him, the GLC sponsored such a scheme, initially to sweeten that rent-rise. I spent many evenings, a-leafletting around the huge White City Estate. More than one big tenants' demo was to enliven 1967–1968. But White City was not going to be among those areas where ensuing months and years were to bring massive rent strikes or densely organised solidarity against eviction (features also characterising some previous working-class upsurges around 1919 or the late 1940s). The sole crucial 1968 struggle where we were not even indirectly on the edges was that of the Ford seamstresses: Dagenham lay at the wrong end of the District Line from our West London.

My research took me to libraries in England and Scotland. I would phone the International Socialists branch secretary (listed in the weekly I was selling) and be offered a mattress or rolled carpet. Manchester's turn came: when I rang Barker, he responded "Yes and there may even be a bed, assuming you come to the picket line at Roberts-Arundel at 7 o'clock every morning". Roberts-Arundel (R-A) was an engineering firm, taken over by an American who had then sacked all union members. This 1966–68 confrontation, with daily shovings and shoutings between strikers and blacklegs plus police, became strategic for the labour movement in Northwest England. In the end, the closure of the firm would be seen as a victory: that perception is itself a measure of how far decades of full employment had boosted working people's self-confidence. But here, R-A's relevance comes via an incident that was still causing mirth along our picket line during the week I was there. Much of the original workforce hailed from the Indian subcontinent. Some were now strikers, others strike-breakers. One 'white' striker had asked one of his new comrades: "Why don't you say to them [the blacklegs on the other side of the street] what we used to say to you?" Instantly, the shout had gone up (re-enacted in pseudo-Indian accent): "You dirty black bastards. Why don't you go back where you came from?" Some still see this as showing beautiful progress from 'race-' to class-consciousness. For me, it shows how incompatible ideas can flourish in the same minds—and how unpredictably.

Such flourishings were certainly going to mark another incident I was on the edge of. Britain's spring 1968 saw not merely one brief demonstration in solidarity with the movement in France (on which some Maoists, after trying to provoke ritual punch-ups with the police outside the French embassy, shouted "CRS-SS" to mystification among passers-by). Rather, all socialists were reeling from workers' marches in support of the increasingly racist Tory MP (member of parliament) Enoch Powell. During April, his 'Rivers of Blood' speech had brought not merely identifiably Fascist workers on to the street, but also significant groups of their fellow-workers—not merely in Powell's West Midlands, but also over a wide canvas, including Gateshead, Huntingdon, London's Docks and Smithfield Market. (Should observers of the 2016 Brexit referendum find some of this geography vaguely familiar?)

As soon as news reached LSE that London dockers were marching to the Commons in Powell's support, all available lefties jumped onto buses or simply ran down there. On arrival, we found most dockers incensed by a cry of "Fascists" from one self-righteous student. His cry had pitched some into making a rush at him: nice pictures for next morning's right-wing press. But Westminster seemed awash with pubs. Was the group of dockers I ended up drinking with typical? Anyway, they had recently lost a strike, were rightly scared of losing their jobs to containerisation, had never worked alongside 'blacks'. So they were wide open to right-wing propaganda against 'swamping', and for the rights of Powell and other racists to free speech. But they bridled at being classed with Nazis whom older and younger ones alike viewed as the enemy: again, inconsistencies might open minds to argument.

Apart from the French crisis—where we could amuse ourselves at a big Communist Party struggling, even more than in 1936, to control a general strike—1968 brought two other key external events that heightened all sides' instincts that things were moving to a climax. First, the Vietcong's Tet offensive seemed to open the year. It took some weeks to fail, but only in terms of what were coming to be called 'body-counts'. The shock within much of the media invigorated us anti-imperialists, not least many American students, some of them with experience in the U.S. Civil Rights struggle. They had already set up anti-war committees, one soporifically called "STOP IT!"

Tet chanced to come a rough ten months after a massive Vietnam demo had led to unexpectedly large-scale violence outside the American embassy in Grosvenor Square. Thus, any 1968 repeat was expected to be even nastier and more massive. With local comrades I joined Earl's Court branch of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign. We had no perspective of taking anything over. For us, the best solidarity with anti-imperialist struggles was to maximise class struggles in imperialist countries, not least Britain. Our workerist line helped recruit a few VSCers to us. And one precondition for even such tiny successes was for us to be reliably present in a branch that seemed to have most varieties of non-workerist political correctness, ranging from intellectualist Trotskyism to Guevarism (which 'Che's' flop and murder in 1967 had speedily made modish) and of course Maoism.

Suddenly, from the small hours of 21 August, a second crisis climaxed: Soviet-bloc tanks repossessed Czechoslovakia. Our IS analysis of things Soviet was fitting reality like a glove. Of course we had always thrilled to anything that might shake either of the world's two blocs; but we had also warned that Dubcek's 'Socialism with a Human Face' was an economically naive way to regenerate what was still a class society. That 'class' analysis of Sovietised societies was important when discussing with British Communists. True, they were mostly opposed to this new Soviet invasion, unlike that of Hungary in 1956. But we viewed them, too, as naive about the dynamics of Soviet society. When Radio Beijing also denounced the invasion, we were merely amused at Mao, so recently the genius of China's horrendous Great Leap Forward and now of a bloody farce of a 'Cultural Revolution', joining in against his Soviet rivals.

Thus, with so much to say in so many directions, we joined a big demo that evening. It began outside the Czechoslovak embassy on Notting Hill Gate. By happy coincidence, the Earl's Court Exhibition Centre was hosting a Soviet Trade Show. So down we marched there in our thousands—to an anti-climax: what to do when confronted, behind insurmountable gates, not with tanks driven by confused Russian-speaking conscripts, but by an unmanned combine-harvester? Since that morning, many thousands of young Czechs and Slovaks had faced agonising dilemmas: to go home or not? Many hundreds of them were now among us. Some started destroying red banners carried by Maoists and others. Frenetically, we were hopping around between various clumps of London activists: "Don't be provoked: try to understand their feelings." But those burning banners proved another predictable godsend to right-wing newspapers the next morning.

The same papers spent months making everyone expect the next national demo about Vietnam, due on 27 October, to trigger—no-one-knew-what. All over central London, the days before saw windows being boarded up. That was precisely why, along with other ISers, I viewed those fellow-lefties who argued for "going to the Square" as so-many-thousand self-dramatisers. To me they seemed to be making a mistake as ancient as 1848.¹ My fear was that the same vagueness of radicals' excitement over 27 October would likewise multiply confusion. As if insurrectionist nonsenses about how to revolutionise Britain were not enough, there were also potential confusions in relation to Vietnam itself. For 'Uncle Ho' in particular, we felt how vital our differentiation was between adulation and critical support. In some junctures we would need to mention his massacre of Vietnam's Trotskyists, his foreign policy blunders during the mid-1940s, and his bloody repression of North Vietnamese peasants during Soviet-type 'collectivisation' in the late 1950s.

Further, if another and perhaps even bigger riot in the streets of Mayfair was never going to do anything remotely so grand as deepen Western capitalism's contradictions or otherwise aid the Vietcong, why risk getting our skulls bashed in? Why not by-pass Mayfair altogether and head for Speakers' Corner? That was also where most other

1 From school and now as a labour historian, I knew how supporters of the 'People's Charter' for democratising Britain (mainly via *one-man-one-vote*) had presented three successive petitions to parliament, signed by millions. The third was to be presented during a vast demo on 10 April of that year. Some Chartists believed sheer "moral force" would somehow suffice. Those who thought "physical force" would be needed were presumably hoping some incident in London might trigger some sort of tsunami to sweep the Old Order away. The government copied them by overreacting: barricading all bridges with artillery, thereby confining any demo to the other side of the Thames from Westminster. Windows were boarded up (then too). Admittedly, the anti-climax of that day had not ended the Chartist movement: physical forcers had switched their focus to Northern England and elsewhere. But, from the morning papers on 11 April 1848 into 1950s school textbooks, that anti-climax did allegedly bury it.

marchers headed. So, in the short term, the main climax the day brought to another year of hyperactivity involved many tens of thousands of us simply surging up Fleet Street (where, into the 1980s, most national newspapers were based), chanting “Lies! Lies! Lies! Lies!”

Certainly, ‘1968’ seemed to make the ideas that had moved a growing minority—of us under-thirties—seem more relevant than we had ever known. That boosted our self-importance, whatever else. Yet, though post-c. 1960 cultural insubordination might turn any number of conservative stomachs, world capitalism would hardly lie down and die of cultural colic. In the even longer term, some now see that circum-1968 atmosphere as encouraging an extreme libertarianism, which was soon recuperated into neoliberalism. Of course there are individual biographies along such lines: individuals remain... individual. But, if we inflate a few biographies into some grand long-term trend, we belittle the earlier persistence of neoliberalism’s academic pioneers (Friedrich von Hayek, Mont Pelerin conferences etc.), let alone of now-obscure non-academics such as Cutler of the GLC, as mentioned above. Indeed, overplaying the cultural dimensions of 1968 is as silly as underplaying them. You end up treating any selection of what melts into air as solid. Cultural history, if taken too much in isolation, caricatures itself and proves little beyond its own purview.

Logie Barrow was born 1945; un-posh schooling 1949–52; posh till 1966 (Winchester and Cambridge); doctorate (1975) on British socialists’ strategy and imperialist ideology; 1967–80, zero-hours teaching (non-specialists) all over London; three-term full-time respite at U.E.A., 1977–8; from 1980, prof of British Isles (and imperial) social history at Bremen University. Publications include *Independent Spirits: Spirituality and English Plebeians*; *Democracy and the British Labour Movement, 1880–1914* (jointly with Ian Bullock); articles on ... British anti-/vaccinationism.