Conversations with Stuart Hall: the inheritors of '68

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In January 1968, the South Vietnamese Chief of Police shot dead a young man in a check shirt, at point blank range, in the streets of Saigon. For me, at nineteen, the photograph of this event had a double meaning. Of course, it showed starkly the casual brutality of the regime which the Americans were propping up. But it showed something else. The young man in the check shirt was not an innocent bystander, caught up in a stop and search raid. He was an officer in the National Liberation Front. He had been fighting - and killing - as part of the NLF's Tet (New Year) offensive, which had fought its way to the outskirts of the US Embassy itself, threatening the headquarters of the mightiest military machine on earth.

So, for me and millions like me, the lesson of Tet was not the victimhood of the Vietnamese but their heroism. Alongside the anti-war movement, the offensive forced Lyndon Johnson to abandon his ambitions for a second full presidential term. It inspired the uprising in American cities which followed the assassination of Martin Luther King in April, and the rebellion of students and workers in France in May. In August, it was emulated by protestors at the Democratic Convention in Chicago, and supporters of the Prague Spring. It was captured on film again in October, when Tommy Smith and John Carlos raised their black-gloved fists in protest against racism and for human rights during the men's 200 metres medal ceremony at the Mexico Olympics.

It's all the more odd, then, to be told that the most enduring legacy of 1968 was the neoliberalism of the 1980s. Yet the idea has become increasingly prevalent. It is the core thesis of conservative historian Dominic Sandbrook's monumental history

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of post-war Britain - already over 3300 pages long and in four volumes, and he's only up to 1979. It's the view of former 1960s revolutionary Régis Debray, who now argues that the uprising of which he was a part let loose the ultra-capitalism of the 1980s and 1990s.[1] Likewise, left-wing commentator Anthony Barnett argues in his Brexit book *The Lure of Greatness* that 'the revolt that began in 1968 led to a renewal not of socialism but of capitalism'.[2] In a Guardian article about the V&A's 2016 exhibition about the late 1960s counter-culture, *You Say You Want a Revolution?*, Polly Toynbee accepted that 'out of all this revolution against "the system" came a "me" individualism that grew into neoliberalism'.[3] The exhibition's narrative began in swinging London and ended in Silicon Valley: its thesis was that Apple (Beatles) gave birth not to a new society but to Apple (Steve Jobs).

The idea that Thatcherism was somehow Tariq Ali's fault would have seemed very surprising to the lady herself. In late March 1982, commenting on the Brixton riots of the summer before, Thatcher announced that that 'we are reaping what was sown in the sixties. The fashionable theories and permissive clap-trap set the scene for a society in which the old virtues of discipline and self-restraint were denigrated'.[4] Three years later, she grouped together a potpourri of 1960s folk devils - striking teachers, football hooligans, left-wing local councillors, trade union pickets - as examples of the 'enemy within'.[5]

Though she espoused economic libertarianism, Thatcher was a social conservative, an ideological marriage that was not new, or - really - hers. 2018 also sees the fiftieth anniversary of Enoch Powell's rivers of blood speech in Birmingham. In his remarkable series of lectures and articles about emergent Thatcherism in the late 1970s, Stuart Hall identified Powell and Powellism as its progenitor. Concentrating on another Birmingham speech, in Northfield during the 1970 election, Stuart noted how Powell had first identified an 'invisible enemy within', consisting of students 'destroying universities' and 'terrorising cities', the near destruction of civil society in Northern Ireland and the accumulation of 'further combustible material' of 'another kind'. Thereby, as Stuart argued in his 1978 lecture 'Racism and Reaction', black people, their identity grounded in obviously visible and unalterable biological fact, 'became the bearers, the signifiers of the crisis in British society in the 1970s'.[6] Not for nothing did Conservative journalist Peregrine Worsthorne write, after Thatcher's triumphant success in the 1983 general election, that 'What is now Thatcherism was originally known as Powellism: bitter-tasting

market economics sweetened and rendered palatable to the popular taste by great creamy dollops of nationalistic custard'.[7] Some years before that, in *Policing the Crisis*, Stuart had pointed out how - before the 1970 election - Edward Heath had sought to square the Powellite circle by planning to combine what would later be called neoliberalism with the strong state that would be necessary to impose it - a strategy which would be implemented successfully through the British coalfield in 1984-5.[8] As she mobilised the police against the miners, Mrs Thatcher was also using the power of the state to eliminate Ken Livingstone's Greater London Council - which, as James Curran points out in his book *Culture Wars*, represented the most consistent effort of the graduates of the late 1960s to put their ideals into practice: consulting with, empowering and enabling, gay people, women, ethnic minorities and the (rapidly declining) manufacturing workforce of London.

In his writings on Thatcherism, Stuart frequently describes this 'unstable combination' of libertarian economics and social authoritarianism.[9] And there were certainly traditionalist conservatives who were critical of Thatcher's economic liberalism, including Worsthorne, who thought that the problem with 1970s Britain was not too little liberty but too much, and insisted that the problem with Labour was 'that it had set too many people far too free'.[10] But although Thatcher's coalition was powerful and continues to have resonance, today it is its mirror image - the progressive left cocktail of social liberalism and economic interventionism - that is under serious (some would say existential) threat.

The theoretical inconsistency of Labour's own cocktail was not a major political issue through most of the post-war period, when its traditional (and traditionalist) supporters were happy to vote in their economic interests, and to put up with the party's programme of social reform; and in any case much of that agenda, particularly as it related to women workers' rights, was clearly in their interests as well. But this deal was consciously broken by New Labour, whose rejection of Labour's traditional economic agenda had real effects on working people's lives.

Under successive New Labour governments after 1997, real wages continued to stagnate or fall (though disguised by the rise in personal debt and the topping up of low wages by tax credits). The unions remained shackled by Thatcher's trade union laws, as management consultants 'modernised' the working practices of both private and public-sector workforces. Under Thatcherism, as Stuart wrote in 1991, there was 'not a school, hospital, social service department, polytechnic or college in the

country which has not been so remodelled'.[11] Under New Labour, managerialism continued to challenge employee behaviour, 'not by changing their minds but by changing their practices, and thus the "culture"'.[12] By remaining socially liberal, but also becoming proudly neoliberal (and globalist) in economics, New Labour had redrawn the political fault-line.

Initially this strategy was successful. But between 1997 and 2001 Labour lost nearly three million votes, many from its working-class core. In 2005 it lost another million and half - a significant number from its liberal wing, appalled both by the Iraq war and by Labour's consequent resiling from its progressive social agenda. By July 2004, Blair was paraphrasing Thatcher's critique of the 1960s as an era in which young people 'were brought up without parental discipline, without proper role models and without any sense of responsibility', and calling for an 'end to the 1960s liberal consensus'.[13] And, as Stuart pointed out in 2011, the party that had given us the Human Rights Act now went on to offer 'widening surveillance, private policing and security firms, out-sourcing, the round-up and expulsion of visa-less migrants, imprisonment of terrorist suspects without trial, and ultimately complicity with rendition and a "cover-up" of involvement with torture'.[14] In the 2010 general election, the civil liberties sections of the Liberal Democrat and Conservative manifestos (the Conservatives under Cameron seeking to reposition themselves as socially liberal) were virtually identical: no ID cards, National Identity Register, children's database or retention of innocent people's DNA. Labour's manifesto didn't have a civil liberties section at all.

So when - somewhat to its and his surprise - the electorate invited David Cameron to form a coalition between free-market Liberals and socially liberal Conservatives, it appeared to herald a fulfilment of New Labour's promise. In contrast to this, the Blue Labour tendency was an attempt to build a coherent mirror-image alliance on the other side of the new faultline, by combining traditional interventionist economics with faith, flag and family social conservatism, while its guru Maurice Glasman called for a complete halt to immigration.

Meanwhile, and with much greater success, the traditional working class was being targeted, across the continent and beyond, by the populist right, who had spotted that social democracy's vacation of left economics had created a vacuum which it set out to fill. From Warsaw to Wisconsin, parties which had hitherto combined reactionary populism with free market economics heaved their

economic platforms to the left. Poland's hitherto traditionalist Law and Justice Party transformed itself to a populist right party, opposing immigration but supporting the welfare state, and appealing thereby to working-class families who had lost out during the shock therapy marketisation of the 1990s. The Austrian Freedom Party, once hostile to welfare spending and in favour of raising the retirement age, reversed those positions. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders' Dutch Freedom Party converted itself from free-market anti-statism to support for workers' rights and the minimum wage. In France, Marine le Pen declared the Front National to be 'France's leading working-class party'.[15]

In Britain, UKIP declared itself opposed both to big business and banking, came out against the bedroom tax, and dropped its earlier reservations about the NHS. As with New Labour before it, the Coalition government's marriage of economic and social liberalism quickly morphed into a more traditional compound of neoliberal economics and - in Stuart's glorious phrase - 'low-flying authoritarianism'.[16] And Conservative ministers - particularly Theresa May at the Home Office - soon gave ample evidence of what would happen - from the snooper's charter via Extremism Disruption Orders to repeal of the Human Rights Act - once they took to the open skies. Once again, in a government which claimed to combine the two, economic liberalism was sustained while the social liberal agenda withered.

And then came the referendum; in which, freed from traditional party contours, working-class electors were able to vote social-conservative without having to vote for the rest of the Conservative package as well. Like the rocks exposed by a lowering tide, the referendum was perceived as revealing an underlying hostility to social liberalism which had been there all along. Only a third of 2015 Labour voters voted Leave. But the strength of the Leave vote - and Ukip - led the newly crowned Theresa May and her advisors to target potential voters in Labour areas, hardening their stance on social issues while - to use a Stuartism - double-shuffling to the left on economics. In her first speech as prime minister, on the steps of Downing Street, May promised to be on the side of what Ed Miliband had defined as the 'squeezed middle' but which she rebranded as the 'just about managing'.

Thus the Conservatives (along with right-populists on the continent) could position themselves as the direct mirror opposite of what was increasingly defined as a globalised, liberal, cosmopolitan elite. Hence May's 2016 Conservative conference speech, in which she berated politicians who have 'more in common

with international elites than with the people down the road', concluding that 'if you believe you're a citizen of the world, you're a citizen of nowhere'. While, in the same month, Donald Trump claimed that Hillary Clinton 'meets in secret with international banks to plot the destruction of US sovereignty in order to enrich these global financial powers';[17] including, no doubt, the bank from which he stuffed his cabinet. This conspiratorial model has, of course, its roots further to the right, where American Neo-Nazi Matthew Heimbach calls for nationalists to 'stand united against our common foes, the rootless international clique of globalists and bankers that wish to dominate all free people on the Earth'.[18]

So, a year ago, the character of the conjuncture was clear. Abandoned by social democracy's defection to neoliberalism, the left-behind half of the population was turning to right-populist parties offering a cocktail of mock-socialist economics and real social conservatism. In panic, Conservative parties sought to present a slightly watered-down version of the cocktail. On the left, the socially progressive middle class split from its traditional working-class base. Clearly, when Theresa May called the election last spring - promising an adamantine Brexit and an attractive selection of Labour economic policies - she was on the way to a landslide.

Why didn't it work? One reason was that - despite the apparent lesson of Brexit - the last thirty years have not seen a swing towards traditional values, but away from them. The much-touted correlation between Leave voting and belief in the death penalty is surely less significant than the fact that support for its restoration has declined from 75 per cent of the population in 1983 to under half today. There has been an extraordinary liberalisation in attitudes towards homosexuality, inter-racial marriage and extramarital sex. Published since the election, the latest British Social Attitudes survey confirms that support for same sex relationships has increased from 47 per cent in 2012 to almost two thirds now.[19]

But the BSA survey tells us something else, which is that attitudes to tax, spending and welfare have also moved dramatically to the left. So, support for raising taxes and expenditure, 32 per cent in 2010, is now 48 per cent. Support for more cuts has dwindled from 35 per cent ten years ago to 29 per cent today. Public opinion seems to be moving leftwards on social and economic issues *at the same time*. Hence, Labour increased its purchase on the higher-educated middle class. But it also won the young working class (70 per cent of DEs aged between 18 and 34). And thus won three and a half million more votes in 2017 than it had won two years before.

And how does this relate to 1968 and its legacy? Well, Jeremy Corbyn was nineteen in 1968 and became a London borough councillor in the early 1970s; John McDonnell was seventeen and later became deputy leader of the GLC. In terms of personnel, the current Labour leadership is the 1968 generation gone grey. But what happened last summer was not about a year in politics; it was about a decade in which the 1960s compound of social emancipation and anti-capitalism had been renewed. Jeremy Corbyn's 600,000-strong model army clearly owes much of its size and strength (and social media nous) to the activist movements which emerged in 2011: the Day X protestors against the student fee hike; the schoolkids protesting the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance; Occupy and UK Uncut. Which in turn were the inheritors of 1968.

First, by being youth movements. The election may not have seen as big a growth in youth turnout as was originally estimated;[20] but there was clearly a dramatic increase - for Ipsos Mori, 20 per cent - in the numbers of young people voting Labour. The cross-over point from Labour to Tory is now well into middle age: if the slogan of the 1960s was 'don't trust anyone over 30', now it's 'don't trust anyone over 47'.

Then there's the fact that the movements of the 2010s echo those of the 1960s, in style and substance. From Wages for Housework to MeToo, from Black Power to Black Lives Matter, from 'We are all foreign scum' to 'We are all Khalid Said', from yippies levitating the Pentagon to UK Uncut invading Fortnum and Mason, from Berkeley's Sproul Plaza to Cairo's Tahrir Square, from Chicago's Lincoln Park to the steps of London's St Paul's, the form and content of late 1960s protest saw itself renewed nearly fifty years later.

It's easy to see the differences between now and then: as Paul Mason notes, the 2011 Egyptian uprising was planned on Facebook, organised on Twitter and broadcast on YouTube.[21] But it actually happened when people came together in a public space where - in the words of the Chicago yippies - the Whole World Was Watching. Led by the secular graduate young, the Egyptian revolution also mobilised the unionised Egyptian working class and the urban poor. MeToo challenges the lopsided gains and losses of the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s; it is at root a protest against the abuse of power in the workplace.

And the protestors of the 1960s and the 2010s both faced the state. The tactic of kettling first came to prominence when it was used against students on Day X.

Undercover policemen infiltrated environmental groups as the FBI had infiltrated the Black Panthers. Electronic and online surveillance has increased massively, in fact and in law. In *Europe's Fault Lines*, Liz Fekete argues persuasively that, in Hungary, Greece and elsewhere, the state not only colludes with the far-right ideologically, but has complied with it militarily, in policing neighbourhoods and borders. Both in action and reaction, our world echoes the world of fifty years ago.

Apart from the overthrow of the Ayub Khan regime in Pakistan, the movements of 1968 won no direct political victory. But, as Stuart reminded us, one should not confuse the outcome of an event with its impact. The conjuncture which saw the desegregation of the American south, the bringing down of two presidents, and the birth of contemporary feminism, did indeed emancipate individuals. But those gains were won through collective protest, community and solidarity, by movements that were the enemy of the market state. And which, it appears, may be on the way back.

David Edgar is a playwright. His play *Maydays*, first performed in 1983, is being revived by the RSC in autumn 2018. His solo show *Trying it On* opened at the Warwick Arts Centre in June, and he will perform it at the RSC and the Royal Court in October.

This article was first presented as a talk at The First Stuart Hall Public Conversation*, Conway Hall, 3 February 2018, organised by the Stuart Hall Foundation. The idea of the series is to invite contemporary thinkers to discuss some of the ways in which Stuart Hall's ideas have interacted with their own work.*

Notes

1. John Lichfield: 'Egalite! Liberte! Sexualite! Paris, May 1968', *Independent*, 23.2.08.

2. Antony Barnett, *The Lure of Greatness: England's Brexit & America's Trump*, Penguin 2017, p355.

3. Polly Toynbee, 'Did we baby boomers bring about a revolution in the 60s or just usher in neoliberalism?', *Guardian*, 8.9.16.

4. Quoted in the *Guardian*, 18.3.82.

5. Speech to the Conservative Central Council, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 23.3.85.

6. Stuart Hall, *Selected Political Writings: The Great Moving Right Show and Other Essays*, Lawrence & Wishart 2017, pp152-3. Hereafter, *SPW*.

7. Peregrine Worsthorne, *Sunday Telegraph*, 12.6.83.

8. '1970: Birth of the law and order society', *SPW*, pp159-61 (extract from a chapter in Stuart Hall, with Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: 'Mugging', the State and Law and Order*, Macmillan 1978).

9. *SPW*, p210.

10. Maurice Cowling (ed), *Conservative Essays*, Cassell 1978, pp147-8.

11. *SPW*, p269.

12. *SPW*, pp307-8.

13. *Guardian*, 20.7.04, quoted in Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good*, Little Brown 2005, pxv.

14. *SPW*, pp327-8.

15. Liz Fekete, *Europe's Fault Lines*, Verso 2017, p118.

16. *SPW*, p295.

17. David Neiwert, *Alt-America, The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump*, Verso 2017, p307.

18. *Alt-America*, p242.

19. *Guardian*, 28.6.17.

20. Britain Election Study Team, *The myth of the 2017 youthquake election*, 29.1.18.

21. Paul Mason, *Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere*, Verso 2011, p13.