

Rojava & the Legacy of May '68

by Marcel Cartier - 02/05/2018 08:57



Yesterday was the day that the working people of the world took to the streets in millions. It was yet another global festival of the oppressed and downtrodden, as well as a day to struggle for the vision of the world we deserve. It was the day that serves as an annual reminder of our collective power, it gives us the chance to imagine an alternative form of organizing society as well. Every May 1st, our liberatory potential is on full display.

The Streets Were Aflame in '68

This year's May Day, or International Workers' Day, had particular relevance. It was 50 years ago today, on May 2, 1968, that weeks of upheaval began to unfold in Paris. A crisis point was reached for the French state, as a modern version of the Paris Commune of a century earlier seemed to have arrived. Students, workers, and women demanded control over their lives and an end to the bankruptcy of the capitalist system. Occupations and general strikes brought the country to a virtual

standstill. Their example spread throughout western Europe, and although a political revolution didn't materialize, the events of '68 remain a major part of French consciousness.

There was also an important international link to what took place in '68. That era was characterized by anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles raging across the oppressed world. Months earlier, Ernesto 'Che' Guevara had been assassinated in Bolivia at the behest of the CIA. His rallying cry for the masses of Asia, Latin America and Africa was 'two, three, many Vietnams!'. In China, the Cultural Revolution was in full-swing, providing a more radical example of the renewal of the socialist project than what many young people saw as an ossified and bureaucratic Soviet model.

From Hope to Reaction to Renewal

In '68, you could be forgiven for thinking that the world was on the verge of revolution, and that capitalism would soon be relegated to the dustbin of history. However, a period of reaction would soon follow. The 1980s saw the decline of the socialist project as 'trickle down' policies were ushered in by the likes of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the eastern bloc, as well as the end of the Cold War, seemed on the surface to vindicate the anti-communists. Neo-liberalism swept across western society as the welfare states that were concessions to the workers' quest for socially just policies were rolled back.

Today, the consequence of the 'end of history' is clear. Inequality has reached absurd levels. Once again, socialism is back on the agenda and radical politics are again part of the youth lexicon. These ideas are gradually coming back into the mainstream, even if their initial manifestations are through 'radical' social democrats such as Jeremy Corbyn. The new generation is gathering experiences and asserting itself in the streets and through the ballot box.

Where Do We Look for Inspiration?

A key question is where can the new generation, eager for examples of emancipatory projects, look for inspiration. If it was Lenin, Che, and Mao who were the principle examples for the '68 generation, there seems to indeed be a massive void that needs to be filled today.

I recall speaking with a lifelong Marxist activist a few years back who recalled how

during that era, it was commonplace for young revolutionaries to read all three volumes of Marx's *Das Kapital*, and make a serious dent in the *Collected Works of Lenin*. Every volume of Mao Zedong's writings was deemed essential. Today, you would be hard-pressed to find many young revolutionaries who have such a profound grasp of the texts of these thinkers. Instead, it is identity politics that largely fill such a gap, leaving a scientific socialist thought on the backburner.

If it was the Chinese Cultural Revolution or the Cuban Revolution that provided the greatest international examples for the generation of '68, what do we have to look to today? In the early 2000s, there was a left-side that swept across Latin America. Progressive and anti-imperialist governments came to power in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, as well as other states which had long been seen the backyard for U.S. power. These radical social democratic projects provided at least a semblance of hope, though the trend is currently under serious threat with the coup in Brazil and the re-emergence of a neo-liberal government in Argentina.

The Quest for a Radical Alternative

In the past decade, I have travelled the world for inspiration and revolutionary regeneration. I have often felt as if I was born in the 'wrong era'. I have been fortunate to have had the chance to seek out radical projects across the globe in a search for answers to the crisis of capitalism, and our ability to overcome it.

I witnessed the commune structure in Venezuela when I attended Hugo Chavez's funeral in 2013. I saw the gains and challenges in modern Cuba, blockaded by the United States for a half century, but still able to provide dignity for its people. I got a glimpse into the North Korean society where my prejudices over the mainstream western narrative were challenged. I participated in political battles in the streets of the United States, Britain, and Germany, protesting both the empire's wars and joining the Occupy Wall Street movement. I visited Turkey on numerous occasions including the Gezi protests, saw Egypt in the throes of the military coup, and witnessed Ukraine turned into a proxy battleground between the U.S. and Russia. I feel remarkably fortunate to have witnessed these epoch-shaking events, mostly for the clarity they have given me in understanding the world through practice rather than simply theory.

Rojava as the Regenerative Project

Last year, I had the opportunity to travel to Rojava, the predominately Kurdish region of northern Syria. To those who have already read many of my reflections from the time that I spent there, forgive the redundancy in what I have to say here. I do believe it to be important, however, to restate firmly and unwaveringly that this was easily the most inspiring experience I have had to date. I have often spoken about the level of rejuvenation it provided for my radical spirit.

To put forward such a sweeping vision of a new society, to carry out a women's revolution and multi-ethnic, a radical democratic project in the midst of this century's most brutal civil war warrants serious admiration for the forces behind this revolutionary transformation. The communes, the cooperatives, the women's organisations, and the grassroots democratic organs are laying the groundwork for a new social order. Observing them was nothing short of awe-inspiring.

That there are contradictions in this process is without a doubt. It is a remarkably complex and multi-layered revolution. Whether it will succeed or ultimately degenerate is, as in any revolutionary development, unclear. It's important, of course, to recall that Lenin once remarked that "he who wishes to see a 'pure' social revolution will never live to see it." It was this clarity by those participating in the Rojava revolution that was most respectable; there was no hint of lying to bend the truth or to make the process seem more pain-free than it actually is. Criticism and self-criticism was and remains the rule of law for those participating in the revolution.

Rojava & the 1968 Era

Rojava shares much in common with the upsurge of 1968. At that time, the radical generation looked to the most progressive and non-dogmatic revolutionaries globally for inspiration. Mao's Cultural Revolution was viewed by the Soviets as betraying the principles of Leninism and the party, yet it aimed to achieve renewal within the revolution and prevent bureaucracy from asserting control and laying the groundwork for the restoration of capitalism. This example of people's power resonated with the youth of France and across Europe who saw the Soviet model and its affiliated parties globally as increasingly representative of a 'conservatizing' trend within the international communist movement.

Today, Rojava provides an example of a non-dogmatic revolutionary process that we can look to for inspiration. This doesn't mean we should necessarily blindly follow it, or to support it uncritically. There are aspects of the democratic confederalist model put forward by Abdullah Ocalan that I certainly find difficult to believe will be realistically attainable. The key is for revolutionaries today to engage in this process. Communists, anarchists, socialists of all different stripes find their own dogmas and

ideological shackles challenged in Rojava. This is part of what makes this process so important. Even if it ultimately fails – and we have the responsibility to stand up to ensure that it doesn't – Rojava shows the power of daring to imagine, of being creative and flexible, but still true to core convictions.

When I studied at the internationalist commune in Rojava for a short period last Spring, one of the most engaging courses was on the history of internationalism. The examples that were cited ranged from the establishment of the First International of Karl Marx to the Palestinian national liberation struggle. However, serious attention was also paid to the movement of 1968.

In some ways, the Kurdish Freedom Movement of today is also a product of that era. The global anti-colonial and socialist sentiment inspired thinkers such as Abdullah Ocalan, who broke with the Turkish left that was increasingly chauvinistic in its positions toward the Kurdish question. Ocalan posited that Kurdistan was a colony, and that a national liberation struggle would need to be waged. This was the core concept behind the establishment of the armed struggle of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Today, the Kurdish Freedom Movement moves forward in its struggle against the nation-state mentality of the region. It retains its radical political character, but expresses continuity and also rupture. They have theoretically broken with Leninism, although some would argue in practice this isn't the case. Either way, the conversation around the model of revolution is an important one, and is being highlighted front and centre by the Kurdish movement who have put forward their new paradigm to be judged in the praxis of daily life.

As the world marks the earth-shaking events of 1968, let's allow ourselves to dream, to imagine, to criticise, to be radical. Let's engage with the forces globally who are attempting to do precisely that. Let's support them and allow them to challenge us. Let's repay them by offering our own critiques, showing that we view their struggle as our struggle.

As Che said, and as became the slogan for the events of '68: Let's be realistic. Let's do the impossible.