

Sebastian Berg and Claus-Ulrich Viol

The Short and the Long 1968 in Britain: An Introduction

*In memory of
H. Gustav Klaus (1944–2020)*

1968 is often thought of as a caesura. There is a time before and a time since. In social movement research, the time before is the time of old social movements, the time since is that of new social movements. Further, most scholars of 1968 emphasise that the year serves as a metaphor signalling a political conjuncture that, of course, did not start on 1 January and did not end on New Year's Eve. There is, as also eyewitnesses/participants Anthony Barnett, Logie Barrow, and Mica Nava point out in this issue of *Moving the Social*, a short and a long 1968. The long 1968 often primarily refers to the changes and developments after 1968—especially the rise of new social movements in the 1970s: women's liberation, environmentalism, a revival of peace and nuclear disarmament activism, gay rights, etc. In many societies, this later effected the formation of new parties, for example green ones, but also of armed underground groups engaging in extreme forms of voluntarist revolutionary vanguardism. The story of this long 1968 can be told with only slight variations about different societies—France, Italy, West Germany, and, with some reservations, the United States of America.

How does Britain fit into this story? In some respects, its story seems similar, in others quite different. Changes in academic life resembled those elsewhere. Especially at recently founded higher education institutions young academics and students experimented with new forms of collaborative work, challenged canonical knowledge, and designed innovative, often interdisciplinary, academic projects. Britain does have a green party (the oldest in Europe) but its origin cannot be traced back to 1968. Many British 1968ers rather joined the Labour Party (at around the same time when their counterparts in West Germany formed the Greens) and became known as the New Labour Left—they wanted to defend society against the onslaught of Thatcherite neoconservatism but at the same time sought to democratise decision-making in the party and eventually in society as a whole. Over the last couple of years, and after a long spell of disaffection with newer forms of Labour, many returned to the party and became the old generation among those that supported the Corbyn project. Back in the day, a new style of workplace activism seemed to be particularly prominent in Britain. A radical shop stewards movement challenged not only the management of industry but also traditional trade union leaderships. The linked crises of Fordism and Keynesianism hit Britain harder than other highly industrialised countries and

this radical wing of the labour movement saw democratisation of the mixed economy—workers' control—as a way forward. Hence, the long 1968 definitely left its mark on Britain as it did on other societies.

Still, it often seems as if 1968 did not happen in Britain or at least as a much more low-key affair than elsewhere. The question is why. We contend that there is more than one answer. And we contend that possibly the observation as such depends on a particular point of view from which it is made, particular assumptions about what counts as politically relevant and historically significant. This perspective should at least be questioned, if not qualified. Obviously, the British generation of 1968 did not have to come to terms with their parents' (and their professors') Nazi past. Neither did the country engage in a protracted and bloody anti-communist war as the USA did in Vietnam (though Britain's governments supported the United States, not only morally, but practically). However, a very different answer seems to lie in a hegemonic political culture (meaning the ensemble of normalised political discourses and practices) that was less conservative and more liberal—the wave of nationalism fuelled by Enoch Powell in 1968 notwithstanding. Hence, in Britain, 1968 came out as less of a turning point. A political culture of the left had continuously existed in Britain in the twentieth century (and before). It was not cut off and forced into exile or underground in the interwar years (as in Germany and Italy) or in the Second World War (as in France). This political left in post-war Britain had engaged in proto-new social movement activity long before 1968, it was visible even in the British army during the Second World War. It is no coincidence that the 'New Left' in Britain stands for a formation of heterodox Marxists and various other socialists originating in 1956, whereas in other societies the term is synonymous with 1968. The British New Left helped shape activity in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, in the movement for colonial freedom in the 1950s as well as in the new higher education institutions that were already founded in the early 1960s. The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, which became a trendsetter for interdisciplinary research, was set up by New Left activists in 1964. Trotskyism was a small, but, especially via its bases in some trade unions, stable and vocal force within the ensemble of the political left. The Labour Party, unlike the West-German SPD still officially committed to the socialisation of the means of production, backed (though sometimes hesitantly) the legalisation of homosexuality, the liberalisation of abortion law, the reduction of the voting age, and the implementation of pieces of anti-racist legislation. All came earlier than elsewhere in Western Europe. In the British case, speaking of a long 1968 means taking into account the time before as well as the time since.

All this does not mean that the 'typical' events of the years around 1968 did not occur in Britain. They certainly did. And it does not mean that they did not have effects. They certainly had, as all the contributions to this issue show. These effects included public shock waves (as in the case of the events at the University of Stirling), new fields of investigation and discussion (for example at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies), or modified perspectives on what counts as the political (as

exemplified in the eye witnesses'/participants' accounts). Hence, taking the long view of 1968 in Britain in this issue, Holger Nehring investigates how a case of 1968-triggered student activism (like many others in Britain and indeed elsewhere) built up and culminated in the early 1970s, centring on issues of "what university democracy meant and on questions concerning student housing and the campus community more generally", i. e. how '68-inspired students reacted to top-down planning and power structures, while Ian Gwinn looks into the ways in which post-1968 intellectual work and academic scholarship, at least on the left, developed more "democratic and collective aspirations". Gwinn notes how, after 1968, there was a growing elision of the difference between scholarship and activism as intellectual individuals and collectives reacted to, not just the constraints of dominant society, but also the practices and ideas of a pre-'68 generation of New Left thinkers.

Focusing on the short, rather than long, 1968 in Britain, and countering common versions of a more or less uneventful or insignificant year in that country, in this issue the views of three political intellectuals and activists who were involved in the debates, protests, and activities of '68 characterise the time as one of intense political campaigning and protesting (Logie Barrow), as life-changing and consciousness-raising (Mica Nava), as a "revolutionary moment" of freedom (Anthony Barnett) that, however, had mixed, if not adverse, consequences. In their personal pieces, the activists thus validate the significance of (the short) 1968 in Britain, while doing so from a long-term perspective, contextualising their memories within reflections on longer and more global variants of 1968. Pointing out the importance of integrating elements of subjective and collective experience into a historical reconstruction of the British '68, Claus-Ulrich Viol seeks to argue that the historical perception of 1968 in Britain as uneventful may have been an effect of Whiggish discourse and national mythology, and would thus gain from a discourse-critical reading of both the historical events and historical accounts of that year. Happening in comparatively liberal social and political circumstances, being read in consistently liberal ways, and having had comparatively long-term implications, it turns out that (the shorter) 1968 in Britain might only appear less spectacular than in other countries and cultures, but is definitely as interesting, impactful, and important.

Sebastian Berg works as Associate Professor of British Social and Cultural Studies at Ruhr University Bochum, Germany. His research focuses on social movements, political parties, and discourse analysis and tries to combine approaches from political theory, political economy, and political sociology.

Claus-Ulrich Viol works as a Senior Lecturer in British Cultural Studies at Ruhr University Bochum, Germany. His main fields of interest, apart from British political culture, are the James Bond phenomenon, psychoanalysis, and stereotype research. He is co-editor of the *Journal for the Study of British Cultures*.