Introduction

“[A]fter more than forty years of counterrevolutionary history,” proclaimed the journal *Internationale Situationniste* in late 1969, “the revolution is being reborn everywhere, striking terror into the hearts of the masters of the East as well as those of the West, attacking them both in their differences and in their deep affinity.”\(^1\) The immediate concern of the piece was the crushing of the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia the previous year. The Situationists diagnosed the event as a product of the “advanced decay of Stalinism,” although they had no idea at the time how many decades it would take for the rot to become fatal.\(^2\) The Situationist International exerted a sometimes-hidden, sometimes-overt influence on the moment of continent-spanning rebellion of which the Prague Spring was a part – the revolt of “1968.”\(^3\) Across Western and Central Europe, small groups of anarchist-bohemian cultural saboteurs used the Situationist toolkit of cultural provocation to catalyze more broadly based rebellions. Under the state socialist dictatorships of Eastern Europe, the toolkit was less useful; as the West German student leader Rudi Dutschke, himself an émigré from East Germany, once observed: “I was never a Situationist, in the GDR I didn’t have the opportunity.”\(^4\) Yet, if Situationist tactics of provocation were difficult to transfer into the more closed societies of the East, Situationist analysis nevertheless encompassed both sides of the East-West divide. Identifying the deep logics underlying the surface antagonisms of the Cold War binary, the Situationists rejected both capitalism and state socialism as two sides of the same oppressive coin. Their position – that despite being formally opposed to one another, both capitalism and state socialism produced

2 “Reform and counter-reform in bureaucratic power.”
parallel states of alienation and un-freedom – was a central and widely shared insight of the rebellions of 1968.

The antiauthoritarian rebellion to which the Situationists referred assumed its symbolic importance in part through the spectacular impression left by two events of the year 1968: the “French May” and the “Prague Spring.”\(^5\) The former was a spontaneous uprising in which a short-lived but powerful alliance between students and workers came close to bringing the French state to its knees. The latter was a movement of reform within the ruling Communist Party that expanded into a radical-democratic explosion that was only suppressed by Soviet force of arms. Together, they mounted a two-fold challenge to the reigning orthodoxies of the Cold War, leaving an indelible mark on the radical imagination of the 1960s. These rebellions were significant in the first instance for offering ideas and slogans – “all power to the imagination,” “socialism with a human face” – that pointed to the possibility of a radically different arrangement of daily life stretching across the Cold War divide. More broadly, they were significant as part of a globe-spanning rebellion stretching from Berkeley to Beijing, from Tokyo to Tunis, from Turin to Tashkent. The Prague Spring and the French May occurred in the year 1968, but it was the global context that made them part of “1968.”\(^6\)

The sheer scope of the rebellion revealed in the latest research, as well as a recognition of the differing timelines from country to country and region to region, has led scholars increasingly to speak less of “1968” than of a “global 1960s.” New and emerging scholarship on the global 1960s has been marked by interest in the relationship of Europe and North America to the Global South, or in the terminology of the era, the Third World. In some cases, the focus on this relationship has threatened to devolve into an argument about where the “real” 1968 was located – that is, has threatened to become an argument around the proposition that it was events like the French May that were epiphenomenal to anticolonial rebellions in the Third World and not the other way around.\(^7\)

Europe’s key importance in the global 1960s is nevertheless undeniable, not least because it functioned, in Martin Klimke and Joachim

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\(^7\) A tendency notable in the 2016 conferences at NYU Shanghai and NYU Abu Dhabi that gave rise to *The Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties*. 
Scharloth’s words, as “a microcosm for global political events.”

Europe was the region in which the Cold War scenario was generated, and it forcefully experienced its effects, not least in the physical and psychic partition of the continent; Europe was the region responsible for colonialism, and thus a sensitive register of the effects of its dismantling, and Europe was a crucial generator of the ideas of 1968, alongside America – in the form of the counterculture and the Free Speech and Civil Rights Movements – and the Third World, via the writings of Castro, Che, Mao, and other leading theorists of anticolonial national liberation. Above all, Europe was, along with America, a key repository of postmaterialist values that arose as a significant force primarily only in settings where basic questions of national sovereignty were already settled (i.e. the First and Second Worlds) and without reference to which any reading of 1968 is partial at best.

Even at the level of the “local” (variously defined), 1968 was not a unitary phenomenon. The globality of 1968 was less a matter of geographic scope than of the intersection of globalizing influences across local terrains. “Global,” as a leading scholar has pointed out, “does not mean everywhere.”

Wherever they might lie across the terrain of the “three worlds,” all 1968s were simultaneously local and global. The collapsing of space, not just through transnational mobility but through the creation of alternative geographies of radical belonging, is, consequently, a central theme of this book.

Another is the telescoping of time. In Paris and Prague, scenes of barricades and insurrectionary graffiti called up rich associations with revolutionary traditions stretching back to 1789. But the Situationists’ response to the Prague Spring touched on a specific historical conflict, stretching back to the Russian Revolution, in which competing versions of socialism were at odds: one radical-democratic, bottom up, valorizing spontaneity and self-determination; the other centralized, bureaucratic, and monopolistic. To posit, as the Situationists did before the fact, the existence of an uprising like 1968, or to explain it once it had broken out, was to disrupt the Bolshevik teleology of history in which 1917 loomed.


large while other dates were erased. To analyze its content, simultaneously, was to reclaim Marxism from state-sanctioned dialectical materialism while insisting on the links between revolution and daily life. As the statement of a “Yugoslav comrade” circulated in Western radical circles around 1968 put it: “To change the conditions of life, to know how to die, to practice free love, to live one’s daily life, to hope for despair, is to understand 1905, Kronstadt, Catalonia, Budapest 1956.”

This invocation of great insurrectionary moments in history – liminal moments of refusal (Russia 1905), mass democracy (Russia 1921), workers’ self-management (Spain 1936), and heroic resistance against authoritarianism (Hungary 1956) – did more than pay respect to the revolutionary lost causes of the past; it insisted on the utopian possibility in the present. Highlighting the linkage between these moments and the possibility of a transformative rupture in ways of living, moreover, it insisted on the importance of what had been lost in much of what remained of the so-called Old Left and what was central to the New Left: the possibility of a creative utopia free of hierarchy, bureaucracy, and lies. The centrality of this utopian urge helps account for the importance of culture in 1968, which was due not just to new and expanding possibilities of mass media or the worldwide spread of new forms of youth culture and popular culture in the postwar decades but to a convergence of radical politics and radical art. Actively pursued by the Situationists, among many others, this convergence sought to channel a widespread and powerful urge to create new and authentic ways of living and being in the world.

In this way, the Situationists captured the zeitgeist of a rebellion that ranged itself simultaneously against all forms of domination and unjust authority on both sides of the “Iron Curtain.” Here, they occupied analytic terrain that remains important today, for 1968 was a response to longstanding issues and dilemmas regarding the organization of human societies, a response that refused to conform to the artificial boundaries of the Cold War. The dissident Polish intellectual Leszek Kołakowski touched on this point in his reflections on the meaning and tasks of the political left. To be “left,” he suggested, was to establish a radical independence of thought that rejected two “rights” – the one represented by “Stalinist inertia,” the other by “the inertia of capitalism.”


must, he wrote, simultaneously “reject socialist phraseology as a façade for police states and democratic phraseology as a disguise for bourgeois rule.”

It was precisely because 1968 reopened longstanding questions about the organization of human society that its shape and content were so bewildering to contemporaries and to scholars. Far from being a monolithic phenomenon, 1968 channeled a multiplicity of impulses and energies pursued by actors with frequently contradictory goals and competing ideas about how to achieve them. If the core impulse of 1968 was antiauthoritarianism – the unifying principle that underpinned radical energies on both sides of the Cold War divide – the content of that impulse had to be filled through active processes of knowledge creation. It is unsurprising that the writings of the German-American philosopher Herbert Marcuse were so popular on both sides of the East-West divide during the 1960s. Marcuse’s notion of a “great refusal” captured the radical imagination in a moment of widespread resistance to totalizing, bloc-spanning systems of control and domination. The question of the means by which Marcuse’s refusal was to be carried out, however – that is, the question of the concrete politics through which a sensibility would be enacted – was open. Everyone was talking about “cultural revolution” around 1968, but what cultural revolution actually meant was the subject of heated dispute.

The story of sixties radicalism is by and large not one of fixed groups linked to distinct ideological positions; rather, radical activism involved the working through of concepts and organizational forms, some new, some drawn from revolutionary moments past. This recapitulative gesture, by which a profusion of doctrines and approaches were tried on for size, lent sixties radicalism a strongly syncretic character. It also made sixties radicalism very much about the definition of political terms. Radicals around 1968 had a well-developed understanding of what the political “right” was – it was generally pro-capitalist (true of liberalism as well); fought colonial wars like the American one in Southeast Asia; supported various types of traditional hierarchy established in terms of gender, race, and class; was “top down” instead of “bottom up”; and stood in opposition to impulses toward democratic participation. In short, the right rejected all or part of the tripartite goal of human emancipation – liberty, fraternity, and equality – elaborated in the French Revolution of 1789.

Kolakowski, “The concept of the left.”

What did it mean, by contrast, to be on the “left”? The answer to this question was the sought-after prize of 1968, the attempt to find it the ideological task that underpinned all others. In Western Europe, under capitalist systems that defined themselves to a greater or lesser degree in opposition to the socialist tradition(s), the tasks of the left were at least partly defined by circumstances, even if the correct means of accomplishing them was open to debate. It was the great analytic failure of a minority on the Western left to take state socialism’s emancipatory claims at face value, while it was the analytic success of others to recognize in revolts against state socialism (Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968) the drive toward socialist emancipation that had stalled in Russia practically even before its influence was felt in the rest of Europe. In Eastern Europe, the question of what “left” meant was complicated by a formally left-wing context that made the task of establishing the parameters of a truly emancipatory politics all the more urgent and difficult, but everywhere, the attempt to uncover the form and content of an effective emancipatory politics was the central ideological and organizational task of 1968.

Analyses of the Soviet Union played a key role in determining understandings of the left political landscape. At stake was the question of what a “revolution” was and whether the Bolsheviks had successfully enacted one. For followers of the exiled Bolshevik militant Leon Trotsky – “Trotskyists” – the Bolshevik regime instituted in 1917 actually was a form of the socialism predicted by Marx, but it had become a “degenerated workers state” under Stalin. Adherents of Chairman Mao Zedong – “Maoists” – interpreted the USSR in accordance with Chinese Communist orthodoxy as a revisionist state that had given up its revolutionary credentials through peaceful coexistence with the West. Traditions such as left communism and council communism – the latter associated especially with figures such as Cornelius Castoriadis and Anton Pannekoek – argued that the Soviet Union was not a true workers state but a form of “state capitalism” in which a bureaucracy had replaced a capital class as the owners of the means of production. Anarchists (“libertarian socialists”) meanwhile rejected a Bolshevik regime that

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15 See Anton Pannekoek, “State Capitalism and Dictatorship,” Rätekorrespondenz, 1936. English translation: International Council Correspondence, vol. 3, no. 1, January 1937. The “state capitalism” thesis originated with dissident Trotskyists who disagreed with Trotsky’s contention that the USSR’s nationalization of property established its credentials as a “workers’ state” no matter its subsequent bureaucratic “degeneration.” The thesis was also central to the development of Marxist humanism through the work of figures like Raya Dunayevskaya, C. L. R. James, and Tony Cliff.

16 The term “libertarian socialist” deserves special comment. In the European tradition, a libertarian is not, as in the modern American sense, an individualist advocate of free market capitalism; rather, a “libertarian” is an anarchist: a socialist who rejects the state in
had crushed rank-and-file socialist militancy whenever it threatened party rule, notably in the suppression of the 1921 rebellion in the Baltic Sea naval base of Kronstadt. The Situationists inherited the anarchist critique. In their uncompromising parlance, “bureaucracy” was a synonym for “state socialism” on the Soviet model, while “bureaucrat” – the Situationist insult *par excellence* – served to dismiss Stalinist apparatchiks and their camp followers in the Communist parties of the West simultaneously. As much as anything else, as we shall see in the following pages, 1968 was about the definition of terms.

This book does not assume an even terrain across Europe. Taking as a given that the energies of 1968 manifested differently in different locations in response to unique circumstances, it follows the emerging scholarly consensus in claiming that there were characteristic features of 1968 that were able to become more or less universal while others were stillborn in locations where authoritarian political structures could not be overcome.

The study thus does not offer a survey of all European nation states, something that has already been accomplished in varying configurations in a number of fine essay collections. While some nation states receive dedicated treatment in this study, others instead appear throughout the text where aspects of their histories highlight issues of transnational reception or shed light on particular historiographical or theoretical points that illuminate sixties Europe as a whole. Focusing instead on favor of democratically organized, anticapitalist mass action from below. In accordance with European terminological convention, *libertarian socialism* in this study is a synonym for anarchism. Anarchism was important in the 1960s in an individualist or countercultural iteration consonant with “doing your own thing,” but it was equally important for serious political theorists on the left in its collectivist iteration, as a synonym for workplace democracy, an impulse for which, for sixties radicals, “Spain 1936” and “Hungary 1956” operated as key metonyms.


18 Here the study follows the precedent of an important recent collection of essays on the Global Sixties that, by placing “nation-building” alongside “protest” in its title, acknowledges that the priorities and repertoires associated with 1968, while present in various degrees around the globe, were not available in their full range in situations where first-order problems of national self-determination – or of basic democratic rights – were yet to be resolved; Jian, et al. (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties*.

19 Readers interested in such a comparative approach would do well to refer to Klimke and Scharloth, *1968 in Europe*. 
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classical problems of revolutionary theory and organization as they were manifested in sixties Europe, the study gives pride of place to cases where those were manifested most forcefully and consequentially.

The first chapter of this book examines how “1968” or “the sixties” has been constructed in the scholarship, situating the events the terms describe within their spatial and temporal coordinates. Chapter 2 examines the prehistory of the revolt, showing how it grew out of and continued to draw upon both older histories of war and revolution and a developing context of decolonization and superpower conflict. Chapter 3 traces 1968’s origins to the realm of culture, examining the sphere of social action and cultural production populated by artists and anarchists, drop-outs and youth rebels with a cause. Chapter 4 examines the development of fully fledged political movements in Europe on both sides of the Cold War divide, showing how youth and student rebellion intersected with powerful impulses for workers’ democracy with deep historical roots and strong ongoing relevance around 1968. Finally, Chapter 5 explores a post-1968 moment characterized by a continued search for effective means of social action involving new actors, strategies, and goals.