

## Making a Long Story Longer: Eastern Europe and 1968 as a Global Moment, Fifty Years Later

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As I was leaving a conference organized in Milwaukee on the fortieth anniversary of 1968, the taxi driver asked me what I was doing in their parts. When I replied that I came for a conference on 1968, he frowned and said: “Why? What happened in ’68?” He patiently listened for a while when I started talking about the student movements and the “hot” May in Paris, then he said: “who cares about Paris? 1968 was about Czechoslovakia, and the only thing I cared about was whether we were going to intervene west or south.” He was a Russian Jewish émigré who had served on a Soviet Army airbase in the Baltics when he had heard military jets take off in the early hours of a late August day in 1968. The only relevant issue for him was whether they were flying southwest or southeast, and thus whether the Soviets would intervene in eastern Europe or the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> He was almost relieved to learn that they were going to Czechoslovakia.

Consider, on the other hand, philosopher Agnes Heller’s reminiscence about the exhilaration she felt on January 1, 1968: “as soon as I woke up, I rushed out to the street to see with my own eyes the unparalleled miracle that one product can have different prices. Stores were of course closed, so I tried a café. I rejoiced when I saw that coffee was ten fillers more expensive in one café than in another. Here was the market. Competition had arrived finally!”<sup>2</sup>

Both stories are rather atypical recollections of ’68, very personal and locally specific. Nevertheless, they also point beyond themselves to broader connections and thus intimate a more variegated and complex understanding of ’68. Heller’s enthusiasm over the introduction of market mechanisms, which was a minor paradigm shift in socialist Hungary’s economic policy, certainly would not have resonated with the student movements in the west that came to define the meaning and iconic legacy of 1968.<sup>3</sup> The Prague Spring

I am grateful to the IWM (Institute for Human Sciences) in Vienna, where my term as Visiting Fellow allowed me to think about ’68 more globally, discuss it with some of the authors of this Critical Forum, and write this essay.

1. The “unofficial” War of Attrition (1967–70) that followed the Six Day War expanded with the Egyptian bombardment of the Israeli front line in the Suez Canal in June 1968.

2. The significance of the New Economic Mechanism came to be overwritten in Heller’s personal recollections by subsequent events during the year, but the NEM still remained a defining moment of economic history, see <http://www.c3.hu/scripta/beszelo/97/11/13.htm> (last accessed October 1, 2018).

3. The New Economic Mechanism represented “the most radical postwar change ... in the economic system of any COMECON country.” It was heralded as a major shift to decentralization and a mixture of market elements and central planning under the unquestionable aegis of planning, see David Granick, “The Hungarian Economic Reform,” *World Politics* 25, no. 3 (April 1973): 414–29, 414.

*Slavic Review* 77, no. 4 (Winter 2018)

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doi: 10.1017/slr.2018.284

and the attempts at socialism with a human face in Czechoslovakia did not seem to fit the revolutionary agenda either, and encountered limited interest outside eastern Europe until they came to an end with the Soviet invasion, which then became a major geopolitical concern. In many respects, what happened in eastern Europe was at odds with the slogans of '68 in the west.<sup>4</sup>

In western Europe, students were reacting to postwar consumer capitalism, which delivered goods and a sense of security but became increasingly technocratic and bureaucratic, and thus alienating and boring. They rebelled against what they saw as the accompanying process of depoliticization, “the liberal, self-consciously ‘post-ideological’ and ‘de-radicalized’ consensus politics of the 1950s and 1960s.”<sup>5</sup> Students were radical and spoke the language of revolution. Compared to them, east Europeans—even though they were equally convinced that they were more rebellious and distinctive in their style, music, and thinking than the previous generation, and even followed the same trends as their western counterparts (see Szemere on the “Great Generation” in this forum)—seemed restrained, did not feel stupefied by consumerism, and spoke the language of reform.

Many observed that the defining events of 1968 were distinct in western and eastern Europe. As Milan Kundera famously noted: “The Parisian May was an explosion of revolutionary lyricism. The Prague Spring was the explosion of post-revolutionary skepticism.”<sup>6</sup> Following Kundera’s adage, Jacques Rupnik makes a similar juxtaposition of the two springs of 1968: “While in the West, the ‘New Left’ wanted to renew Marxism by ridding it of its Stalinist dross, the Czechs were doing their best to water it down as much as they could.”<sup>7</sup>

Was what they were doing and what they thought they were doing so different in east from west? The urban festivals, which looked like enactments of the ideas of Henri Lefebvre, Guy Debord, and the Situationists had strikingly similar elements in Paris and Prague, and many other cities.<sup>8</sup> The streets acquired importance in their capacity for “disruptive and militant spontaneity” against the “society of the spectacle”: they became the stage for spectacular “counter-spectacles.”<sup>9</sup> The Situationists were content that with the strike and

4. See some of the slogans that were painted on the walls of Paris, especially the following: “When the last sociologist has been hung with the guts of the last bureaucrat, will we still have ‘problems’?” or “Down with consumer society,” at <http://www.bopsecrets.org/CF/graffiti.htm> (last accessed October 1, 2018).

5. Jan-Werner Müller, “What Did They Think They Were Doing? The Political Thought of (the West European) 1968 Revisited,” in Vladimir Tismaneanu, ed., *Promises of 1968: Crisis, Illusion, and Utopia* (Budapest, 2011), 75.

6. Milan Kundera, Preface to the French edition to Josef Skvorecky’s *Mirakl* (Paris, 1978), 4.

7. Jacques Rupnik, “1968: The year of two springs” *Eurozine* (May 16, 2008), available at <https://www.eurozine.com/1968-the-year-of-two-springs/> (last accessed October 1, 2018). Originally in *Transit* 35 (Summer 2008): 133.

8. The Situationist International was an organization and movement of avant-garde artists and revolutionaries in Europe from 1957 to 1972. Critical of capitalism, they were interested in developing tools for the liberation of everyday life, which included urban tactics such as *détournement* and *dérive*. Guy Debord was a founding member and a leading theoretician of the group.

9. Judit Bodnar, “What’s Left of the Right to the City?” in Jasmine Alinder, A. Aneesh, Daniel Sherman, and Ruud van Dijk, eds., *The Long 1968: Revisions and New Perspectives*

the breakdown of the machinery of urban life in Paris, the counter-spectacle became the greatest disruption of postwar routine, a grand *détournement* (diversion)—the implementation of a tactic they had proposed against the programmed operation of the city. Prague during the occupation looked no less like a localized manifestation of the Situationist International's ideas. People pulled down street signs, signposts disappeared, citizens changed street names, and took down house numbers. In short, they made the city their own: accessible to those who knew it and excluding those who did not belong, such as the occupying Soviet Army. Prague was transformed into an “urban labyrinth,” and its walls were inscribed with May '68-style slogans. The actors, however, were quite oblivious to the ideas of Lefebvre, Debord, and the Situationists, who ruled in France. The Situationists' initial reaction to the Prague spectacle was quite dogmatic. It was puzzling for them that “distinctly revolutionary methods of struggle” were taken up for the defense of a “reformist bureaucracy.” For the Situationist International, “socialism with a human face” was still bureaucratic socialism, and they came to admit only later that Prague was a “perfect example of the revolutionary *détournement* of repressive urbanism.”<sup>10</sup> Repressive urbanism and popular resistance, however, still had different faces, tones, aims, and trajectories. How can we then analyze these instances in a unified framework?

As noted earlier, Kundera and Rupnik set up a productive comparison of the two instances of 1968 by juxtaposing Paris and Prague ten and forty years after the events, respectively. On the fiftieth anniversary, we may take this inspiration further and move beyond Paris and Prague, and the east—west divide, tout court. I propose that we extend the understanding of 1968 in a threefold manner in order to have a more adequate grasp of eastern Europe's '68:

1. A temporal extension of 1968—the “action” in 1968—follows earlier debates on the timeframe of the events: Arthur Marwick's long sixties stretch from 1958 to 1974, Gerd-Rainer Horn's from 1966 to 1976, while Chris Marker's film *A Grin without a Cat* includes the period 1967–77.<sup>11</sup>
2. A temporal extension into the future includes the legacy and changing interpretations of 1968. Retrospective wisdom recasts the events, their meaning and significance: “To be important or significant is to be pregnant with the future. Now, it is possible to argue that 1968 was pregnant with 1989,” wrote Charles Maier on the fortieth anniversary.<sup>12</sup> On the fiftieth, we may be in a position to nuance the understanding of that “pregnancy.” We can see more

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(Bloomington, 2013), 73–90.

10. “Reforme et contre-reforme dans le pouvoir bureaucratique,” *Internationale situationniste* #12, Paris, September 1969, trans. Ken Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology*, 2006. No copyright. Cited in Bodnar, “What's Left of the Right to the City?”

11. Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy and the United States, c.1958-c.1974* (Oxford, 1998); Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The Spirit of '68: Rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956–1976* (Oxford, 2007); *A Grin without a Cat*. Directed by Chris Marker. Paris: Dovidis, 1977.

12. Charles S. Maier, “Conclusion: 1968—Did It Matter?” in Vladimir Tismaneanu, ed., *Promises of 1968: Crisis, Illusion, and Utopia* (Budapest, 2011), 417.

- clearly the bizarre responsibility of the class of '68 not only in '89 but also in fostering certain traits of neoliberalism and the "new spirit of capitalism."<sup>13</sup>
3. A spatial-geographical expansion, which makes the triangulation of '68 between east, west, and south possible, can disturb both our east European parochialism and a more general *methodological regionalism*, with its conventional tripartite distinction about the meaning of '68: a New Left project in the west, reform(ed) socialism in the east, and national liberation in the south. A geographical extension is also bound to discover that nothing significant may have happened in many places and that many were unaffected by the events, putting in doubt the viability of the thesis that '68 was a global *annus mirabilis*.

With these extensions, it becomes apparent that 1968 did not begin in Paris. What happened on US campuses and cities around 1965 with the Vietnam protests, the Free Speech Movement, the teach-ins and the sit-ins had a formative influence on the 1968 events. Even the former Parisian student leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit admitted: "the revolt was far more American in origin than the Europeans cared to admit."<sup>14</sup> By extending the temporal framework, we also discover the shadow of 1956 in the introduction of the Hungarian New Economic Mechanism; notice the three-pronged economic, federalist, and cultural process starting in the early 1960s in Czechoslovakia (Rupnik in this forum); the role of the Yugoslav changes in 1961–66, the general de-Stalinization after 1956, and the split with China in the Prague Spring. Prague comes to occupy a special place in the general history of the liberalization of state socialism and the renewed search for its possible varieties.

These extensions immediately complicate the genealogy of '68 as well as its sites, meaning, effects, and commemoration. A geographical extension brings new, partially-similar instances into the orbit of analysis, contributing to an understanding that it was a worldwide social turbulence. As Eric Hobsbawm observed on the tenth anniversary of the events:

The year 1968 almost looks as though it had been designed to serve as a signpost. There is hardly any region of the world in which it is not marked by spectacular and dramatic events which were to have profound repercussions on the history of the country in which they occurred and, as often as not, globally. This is true of the developed and industrialized capitalist countries, of the socialist world, and of the so-called "third world."<sup>15</sup>

The impression that it was a veritable turning point has only become more prevalent by the fiftieth anniversary of the events—'89 could definitely not have been foreseen on the tenth anniversary—while the globalization of its meaning has not been without criticism. Through such extensions, we can also identify curious absences, and our historical instincts not to draw generalizations are reinvigorated. Does '68 have a global history at all? If so, how can we tell it? The ambition here is to go beyond the sheer encyclopedic task of

13. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London, 2005 [1999]).

14. Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Claus Leggewie, "1968: Power to the Imagination" *New York Review of Books*, May 10, 2018, 4–6.

15. Eric Hobsbawm, "1968—A Retrospect," *Marxism Today* 22 (May 1978): 130.

listing what happened in various places. It entails more than acknowledging that some local histories had relevance beyond the boundaries of a narrowly confined nation-state, or simply tracing how things, activists, and ideas travelled from one place to the other, and where they originated. All of these may be the legitimate objects of transnational or entangled historical analyses.<sup>16</sup> I am more interested in understanding '68 as a key moment in global history. This in turn requires searching for connections between the events, making comparisons and outlining explanations while steering between continuity and synchronicity.<sup>17</sup> The main task of such an approach is to understand and explain how the global moment emerges, how it brings together national and regional histories, which are otherwise part of different trajectories, and how this conjuncture shapes their paths.

If we treat '68 as a global moment in which separate national histories converge, we can draw together such puzzlingly different moments as the Paris May, the Prague Spring and its violent suppression, the New Economic Mechanism in Hungary, the urban riots in US cities following Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, the Occupy College Street movement in Kolkata, the agenda of Polish and Mexican protesting students that looked distinctly "non-revolutionary" by western standards, and the Mexico City pre-Olympic massacre. Even more perplexing events can be included, such as the boycott and occupation movement in Turkey, triggered by the expulsion of a female student who insisted on wearing a headscarf to classes at the Divinity School of the University of Ankara. The trajectories as well as the concrete demands were different, and while there were common references, their relative importance varied greatly. As a former participant of the Kolkata Occupy movement recounts:

While the Paris upsurge (the general strike more than the students' revolt) was well-known and the students probably wanted to imitate it, our attitude towards the Prague Spring was indecisive. We were "Maoists," we opposed the entry of Soviet troops. The deployment of Soviet troops was evidence of the "socialist imperialist" nature of the Soviet Union. While the Soviet Union represented socialist imperialism, the socialist road was represented by China. We were skeptical of liberal values and charters, and thought that they led to the restoration of bourgeois rule. Thus, "socialism with a human face" had no appeal. It attracted derision. I distinctly remember the quarrels among us as to the stance we should take on the unrest in eastern Europe ... . In our practical politics, it was Vietnam and China that exercised decisive influence. May 1968 was also followed very closely in Kolkata. In the case of Prague, it was the entry of Soviet troops that attracted attention to a far greater extent than the nature of the "Spring" itself.<sup>18</sup>

The global moment of '68 builds on trajectories influenced by earlier patterns of development. It seems so full of possibilities that it can accommodate even contradictory and divergent agendas. It assembles Maoists, New Left radicals,

16. See for example, Gerd-Rainer Horn and Padraic Kenney, eds., *Transnational Moments of Change: Europe 1945, 1968, 1989* (Lanham, 2003).

17. Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* (Princeton, 2016).

18. Correspondence with Ranabir Samaddar, May 31, 2018.

socialist reformers, Islamic nationalists, and cosmopolitans, whose involvement intensifies in the simultaneity of the '68 events. These then lose momentum, and separate trajectories continue along diverse historical paths. Yet, these trajectories are influenced by the "moment," and people as diverse as creative art directors, liberal and neo-liberal politicians, east European and Chinese reform economists, EU bureaucrats, eighty-niners, conservative as well as leftist university professors, Islamic nationalists, trade union leaders in the Kanoria Jute Mill in Kolkata (Samaddar in this forum), or even the Garibaldi of the Caucasus (Derluguian in this forum) could claim to be the offspring of '68.

A serious extension of 1968 complicates its status as a historical marker: the widely shared experience that "everyday life after 1968 differed from everyday life before that year" does not hold up to global scrutiny.<sup>19</sup> In western Europe and North America, as Arif Dirlik argues:

The intensification of the student activity in the immediate years leading up to 1968, and its seemingly irreversible decline thereafter, yields an impression of 1968 as a distinct historical marker. This is not so in the Third World. The prior history of intellectuals' involvement in national liberation struggles blurs the distinctiveness of 1968, as does the intensification of radical activity in many places *after* 1968.<sup>20</sup>

If '68 is not equally significant as a historical signpost everywhere, as Hobsbawm claims, can it still have global status? Was the synchronicity of events merely accidental? Were the protests "united only by a sort of competitive dramaturgy" that displayed veritable variation?<sup>21</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein insists that "the revolution of 1968 was a revolution; it was a single revolution . . . in and of the world-system," and as a genuine global phenomenon, it cannot be analyzed only locally.<sup>22</sup> Life may not have changed everywhere with '68, but global capitalism slowly reached a new phase that had repercussions for all, foreshadowing '89, the advent of neoliberalism, the loss of trust in the state as a representative of the common good, and debates concerning the end of modernity.<sup>23</sup>

Simply disaggregating the global into the old geopolitical containers of the triadic scheme does not stand up to the temporal and geographic extensions: the First World did not only experience New Left revolts; Second World attempts at reformed socialism were not so distinct; and the Third World did not solely revolve around national liberation. Prague had strong resemblances

19. Quote in Agnes Heller, "The Year 1968 and Its Results: An East European Perspective" in Vladimir Tismaneanu, ed., *Promises of 1968*, 159.

20. Arif Dirlik, "The Third World in 1968" in Carole Fink, Philipp Gassert, and Detlev Junker, eds., *1968: The World Transformed* (Washington, D.C., 1998) 296.

21. Charles S. Maier, "Conclusion: 1968—Did It Matter?" in Tismaneanu, ed., *Promises of 1968*, 421–22.

22. Immanuel Wallerstein, *Geopolitics and Geoculture: Essays on the Changing World-system* (Cambridge, Eng., 1991), 65. In a somewhat similar vein, George Katsiaficas, *The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968* (Boston, 1987) extends the understanding of the New Left beyond the west as a world-historical movement, and makes it the defining feature of a global '68.

23. On the latter, see Derluguian in this forum.

to the ambitions of national liberation struggles, the Cultural Revolution had nothing to do with the liberalization of socialism, the New Left agenda was not confined to the west, and the counter-cultural movement resonated in the east just as much, if not more, than in the west. The Belgrade student protests directed against the “red bourgeoisie” demanding more equality and liberty, and even “socialism with a human face” exhibited elements of the New Left project. There was also Maoist influence, however insignificant, among well-informed intellectuals in eastern Europe, who were prosecuted nevertheless. The Naxalite movement in India shared the revolutionary idealism of the New Left as well as its rejection of both Soviet Marxism and the parliamentary left, but it had a more significant non-student base, and an emphasis on agricultural relations, unseen in the First or the Second World. The Occupy movement in Kolkata, even though it built on the tradition of anti-colonial struggle, was not primarily about national liberation and used the New Left tactic of massive occupation of public space—equally inspired by US and French university examples as well as the local history of *gherao* (encirclement)—as a means of claim-making (Samaddar in this forum).<sup>24</sup> If, following Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, we treat 1968 as a combination of an artistic and a social critique of the system, the only part of the tripartite division that remains significant is perhaps that the artistic critique seemed more pronounced in the west, less so in the east, while the social critique was more prominent in the south, where—encountering more repressive states—it attracted more violence.<sup>25</sup>

What was common to the various agendas—other than a broadly defined antiwar sentiment—was a critique of the status quo that can best be captured in abstract terms, in ideals and utopias in which “the impossible becomes real.” Realities differ, however, along with the envisioning of the impossible. Young people “attacked privilege, autocracy, and hierarchy in the name of justice, equality and self-determination.”<sup>26</sup> These diverse attacks, in many cases not directly related, were amplified by their simultaneity. What came to be known as ‘68 shook a world connected through the culture of the Cold War, the dichotomous logic of which immediately compartmentalized what happened in Paris and Prague.<sup>27</sup>

Global moments are important. The synchronicity of events generates an increased consciousness of the rest of the world, however superficial or naive it sometimes is (as the emerging “Third Worldism” of western intellectuals was in the 1960s). In global moments, the outlines of larger structures and connections become more visible, both for contemporaries and analysts. With the explosion of global consciousness, such moments offer a chance to

24. *Gherao* is a tactic applied by Indian labor activists; they surround their employer and prevent him from leaving the premises until their demands are met. The tactic has been so widespread that the originally Hindi term came to be included in the Oxford Dictionary in 2004.

25. On the artistic and social critique, see Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Their geographical distribution is my argument.

26. Horn, *The Spirit of '68*, 238.

27. On the world connected by the Cold War, see Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003).

understand the world better, and '68 has done precisely that. 1968 holds up as a historical marker only at the global scale, albeit not for all regions and not for all national histories. Writing its national histories does not make sense in this regard. Telling its story is bound to oscillate between looking for similarities and pointing at its diverse pre- and post-histories. There are no shortcuts: the story is long.

The following essays seek to contribute to this process. The positionality of the collection is unique in the literature on '68: it starts from a parochial site, eastern Europe, which is not the one that produced the iconic images of '68, then reaches out to an even less known site and story in Kolkata in an attempt to think about the meaning of 1968 as a global moment. The selection of articles hopes to inspire the triple extension of the '68 story that was proposed earlier. Anna Szemere works with a temporal extension and captures the sixties feeling through music, the most powerful art form of the period. Could the lyrics and the music of a singer who looked and sounded very French but sang in Hungarian resonate beyond the so-called Great Generation, beyond Hungary and eastern Europe? This may be one of the first tests of global history. Jacques Rupnik and Georgi Derluguian extend '68 up to 1989 and take up two different interpretations of how '68 led to '89, which in turn recalibrates the understanding of '68 and its commemoration. The former writes from Prague, a place that came to define the meaning of '68 for eastern Europe, the latter from the former Soviet periphery of the Caucuses, which was marginal to '68 but nonetheless shaped by it. Ranabir Samaddar's examination of the occupation of Presidency College in Kolkata—a global revolutionary tactic—extends the story spatially and shows striking similarities and just as remarkable differences in the reading of '68 events and strategies, but most importantly demonstrates that 1968 was neither the beginning nor the culmination of the movement.

Is there an east European history to narrate? We can see it only in retrospect, in the aftermath of '89, that '68 constituted the “midlife crisis” of European state socialism, which lasted from roughly 1945–47 to 1989, when it finally collapsed, in spite of its resistance to decentralization and variegation during the “long 1968.” The historical juncture of '68 entertained both liberal and socialist ambitions, but the failure of socialism with a human face paved the way for restrictive nationalism—the early signs of which could be detected in Yugoslavia, the anti-Semitic turn in Polish politics, or Ceaușescu's famous balcony speech condemning the occupation of Czechoslovakia—which in combination with the intelligentsia's reactive turn toward liberalism eventually led to the end of European state socialism in '89. This history, however, cannot be accounted for without referencing historical events beyond the region, and without the broader historical context of the end of global Fordism, not only in the sense of assembly line production, expanding security, and consumption, but also as a form of subjectivity, regimentation, and authority.