

## 1968 in Retrospect

*Also by Gurminder K. Bhambra*

RETHINKING MODERNITY: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination

SILENCING HUMAN RIGHTS: Critical Engagements with a Contested Project  
*(co-edited with Robbie Shilliam)*

# 1968 in Retrospect

*History, Theory, Alterity*

Edited by

Gurminder K. Bhabra

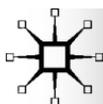
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**Sarah Hornstein** is a PhD student in the Department of Sociology at York University in Toronto, Canada. She completed her Master's degree in Sociology at Simon Fraser University. Her primary interest is German social theory, particularly that of the Frankfurt School. She is currently planning a dissertation focusing on the Frankfurt School's theorization of totalitarianism and its relevance for understanding the dynamics of contemporary liberal democracy.

**William Outhwaite** studied at the Universities of Oxford and Sussex. He taught at the University of Sussex from 1973 until 2007, at which point he took up the position of Professor of Sociology at Newcastle University. His research has engaged with debates in critical theory, the philosophy of social science, the history of social thought and contemporary Europe. His recent publications include *The Future of Society* (2006), and (with Larry Ray) *Social Theory and Postcommunism* (2005). He is the author of the book *European Society* (2008) and is planning further work on social change in Europe since 1989.

**Mihnea Panu** teaches sociology at Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada. He is interested in the mutually constitutive relations between truth, liberal governing and the formation of identity and in the possibilities for opening political spaces within this densely populated field. His present research analyses the relations between subjectivization and the governing of reproduction in the US.

**Ken Plummer** arrived at Essex in January 1975 to teach Social Psychology and the Sociology of Deviance. The following year he started a longstanding link with the Sociology Department at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he also taught for many years. He has held many roles at Essex including Graduate Director and Head of Department, and has researched and written widely on sexuality. He has written or edited around fifteen books and over a hundred articles, including *Sexual Stigma* (1975); *The Making of the Modern Homosexual* (1981); *Symbolic Interactionism Vols 1 and 2* (1991); *Modern Homosexualities Fragments of Lesbian and Gay Experience* (1992); *Chicago Sociology: Critical Assessments* (1997; 4 vols); *Telling Sexual Stories* (1995); *Sexualities* (2002; 4 vols); *Documents of Life-2: An Invitation to a Critical Humanism* (2001); *Intimate Citizenship* (2003); and (with John Macionis) *Sociology: A Global Introduction* (4th edn, 2008). In 1996, he set up the journal *Sexualities* and remains its editor.

**Lynne Segal** is Anniversary Professor of Psychology and Gender Studies at Birkbeck. Her research is in the interdisciplinary domain of gender studies and addresses the diversity of feminist scholarship, psychoanalytic dialogue and critical theory. She tackles issues of sexual difference, masculinity and its discontents, sexualities and culture, political identifications and cultural belongings. Her books include *Is the Future Female? Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism*; *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men*; *Straight Sex: The Politics of Pleasure*; *Why*

*Feminism? Gender, Psychology, Politics*. Her book, *Making Trouble: Life & Politics* (2007), is a form of collective memoir covering her political generation of postwar rebels and dreamers who earlier helped to pioneer many of the contemporary ways of thinking about culture, politics and people, and today face dilemmas that highlight the paradoxical nature of all radical traditions and generational legacies.

**Tracey Skillington** has been in the Department of Sociology, University College Cork since September 2006. She is a former member of the Centre for European Social Research where she worked on a number of EU-funded international projects. Her interests include critical theory, cosmopolitanism, social movements, solidarity and collective learning. She is currently one of the editors of the *Irish Journal of Sociology*. She is the author of 'A critical comparison of the investigative gaze in three approaches to text analysis' in A. Bora and H. Hausendorf (eds) *Analyzing Citizenship Talk* (2006). Her forthcoming publications include 'Linking knowledge, communication and social learning: Critical theory's imminent critique of the administrative state' in S. O'Tuama (ed.) *Critical Turns in Critical Theory: New Directions in Social and Political Thought* (2009).

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# Introduction: 1968 in Retrospect<sup>1</sup>

*Gurminder K. Bhambra and Ipek Demir*

What is the meaning of 1968? A tricky question. The editors weren't born, and those we've asked for advice claim to have been there and, therefore, their memories must be suspect!<sup>2</sup> Yet, 1968 figures large in the social imaginary, perhaps especially that of sociology. The 1960s was the period when sociology had its first major expansion in the United Kingdom and, if that had taken place earlier in other Western European countries and the United States, it was also a period of expansion (Turner and Turner 1990). The wave of sociologists appointed in this period have related to 1968 in different ways; all carrying its memory, some its dreams and ambitions, and some defining themselves against its very premises. The sixties and '1968', in particular, have come to be seen as framing the 'culture wars' of the ensuing decades. As 1968 recedes into the past, however, it also becomes an object of historical enquiries that frequently challenge the (necessarily selective) memory of those who were part of it and, in the process, redefine the cultural contestations of that period and their connections to our present times. This volume addresses that mix of reflection upon past expectations alongside the identification of surprising new connections unnoticed at the time.

In one common representation of the past, the 1960s followed on from a period of social conformity and constraint in Western societies that had experienced the disruptions of war and the privations of the immediate post-war period. A generation born into subsequent affluence, the 'baby-boomers', came of age in their entry to institutions like the university which had hardly seemed to have caught up with the changing realities. The new universities in Britain created in the 1960s often mimicked the college forms of Oxford and Cambridge, but were soon to become centres of unrest, critical of what their universities sought to represent (see Thompson 1970). These new realities were also being shaped by the emerging women's and lesbian and gay movements' attempt to enlarge the scope of personal freedoms, while the availability of the contraceptive pill, among other things, furthered the transformation of both intimate relationships as well as cross-generational ones.

The relative affluence of their condition (with no fees to worry about and full grants, including, in the United Kingdom at least, housing allowances over the summer vacation!), and the belief in the secure future that awaited them, made it easier for students to vent their frustrations with a system that seemed to be at odds with their ideas and ideals (see Miles 1973; Outhwaite 2005).<sup>3</sup> The causes of dissatisfaction were different in different places, but the emerging protests seemed to spark off each other and exacerbate what was seen to be a general condition of the older generation just 'not getting' what the 'new' world was about. In Paris, for example, students protested at being treated like children with courses that had not been updated for decades and which did not appear relevant to understanding the profound social changes that were manifestly underway. 'Professors you are old and so is your culture' was one particularly pertinent comment on the perceived problems of the day! The generational struggle was also captured in Dylan's 'Times they are a changing' – 'don't criticize what you can't understand' – and The Who's 'My generation' – 'hope I die before I get old' – which provided the soundtrack of the period.<sup>4</sup>

The perception of society being at the brink of dramatic social change, however, did not come to pass in quite the way that had been expected. The leftist aspirations of the student protestors were dashed with the rise of the new right in the 1970s and 1980s. Thatcher and Reagan, for example, were seen as embodying this shift and provoked an almost visceral reaction in those who opposed them. Mrs Thatcher's famous comment, made in an interview in a British women's magazine, that there was 'no such thing as society, only individuals and their families' captured both the nature of a conservative reaction around family values and the possible displacement of sociology along with its object of study. 'What went wrong?' has often been the question associated with attempts to understand 1968 and its neoliberal aftermath. What went wrong such that it was the 'new right' that inherited the mantle in the period after what were seen as the most significant social protests of the time? (see Holmwood 1999)? The narrative trajectory that culminates in this question, however, is too simple and its simplicity obscures the other narratives that may help us to reframe the question asked and thus come to a different understanding both of that time and of its implications for ours.

The post-war period was also a period of movements of liberation from colonial rule and the creation of new states: new states which promised, even if they did not ultimately deliver, a new dawn for their peoples and for humanity and the bringing about of new opportunities

and new experiences. As Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, said on the eve of independence at midnight on 14 August 1947,

Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance. It is fitting that at this solemn moment we take the pledge of dedication to the service of India and her people and to the still larger cause of humanity.

Newly independent countries and peoples, as well as those continuing to struggle for liberation from external oppressors and internal oppressions, were not afflicted with the same degree of solipsism as could be attributed to the students of the 1968 movements. Further, while the student movements might appear to be linked to new 'colonial' adventures such as the Vietnam War, their immediate context was also the ongoing 'old' colonial adventures. There was a war of independence in Europe, of Algeria from France and by implication from the European Community; movements against the Unilateral Declaration of Independence of Rhodesia and the establishment of a white supremacist regime in place of a colonial regime; as well as struggles for equality and liberty embodied in the US Black Civil Rights Movement. In this context, colonial struggles of liberation, broadly understood, become the central phenomenon of the post-war period, albeit one not typically addressed as constituting the context for the events of 1968.

This volume emerged out of a conference celebrating the 40th anniversary of 'the events' and re-examining 1968 in *global* perspective. In addressing the events of 1968, this volume seeks both to displace the dominant narratives of that period as well as to call into question the linear trajectories of history based on the attribution of significance to particular events in particular places. The displacement of 'centres', and a shift of attention to the 'peripheries', is a first step in the subsequent endeavour. Where the histories of 1968 have generally focused on the activism of white, male, heterosexual students, focusing on the activities of African American students in the United States, African students in Senegal and the Congo, on women's movements, on the emerging movements around sexuality and transgender issues, as well as on the activities of migrant labour in the metropolises, is a necessary corrective.

A global history organized by the markers of European and Western events is not, however, a *global* history and the extent to which the organizing framework, within which these new narratives are located, remains that of the 1968 of the West could be considered problematic. Yet, at the same time, we cannot simply do away with the markers of the old world. These markers have been, and are, significant for a reason – and those reasons need to be addressed in any subsequent reordering of them. Further, as the recent turn to global history demonstrates, particular events are always abstracted out of more complex and interconnected processes. Acknowledging the significance of ‘1968’, then, is also to acknowledge the significance of a world structured around the dominance of the West and Western narratives. Seeing 1968 as a key moment in the history and narratives of freedom and protest is at once to privilege the actions of particular actors while also further silencing those actors and activities that are not (yet) recognized as ‘world historical’ (see Chapter 11, this volume).

The contributions to this volume are organized in terms of three different, but related, perspectives on 1968: history, politics and alterity. These perspectives tell the untold stories, forgotten aspects and unexplored accounts of 1968, and provide a different flavour of the time than that which is usually found within the standard narratives. More importantly, however, these narratives are as much about ‘today’ as they are about ‘then’ and link the relatively neglected histories of 1968 to our understandings and experiences of today. The first part addresses alternative historical narratives of 1968 which combine analyses of the politics and identity of race, gender and sexuality with personal reflections of the participants’ own involvement in the events. The second part takes issue with selected theoretical debates which have been central to interpretations of the events and provides innovative re-readings and reinterpretations of them. The final part addresses 1968 from the perspective of peoples and places that have been neglected in the standard interpretations, as well as offering a chapter questioning the very positioning of ‘other’ narratives.

Patricia Hill Collins’s chapter takes the activism of 1960s African-American youth and links it to the political activism of contemporary youth in the United States. She starts off by providing an analysis of, and identifying themes related to, the US Black student activism in the 1960s. Her chapter then uses this analysis both to inform her reading of contemporary youth activism associated with Barack Obama’s presidential campaign and to illustrate continuing trends as well as differences between 1968 and 2008. She discusses how youth political activism

takes place in many settings, depending on social constraints; how gender, race, class and age intersect and how these intersections need to be analysed in order to recognize the way in which multiple standpoints can contribute to an overall analysis and, at times, common politics. Further, she emphasizes the point about how the activism of youth needs to be understood in relation to political praxis. According to Collins, the reduced risks associated with being a political activist today, as well as the creative ways in which communications technologies enable contemporary youth to become citizen-journalists, are among the many differences which distinguish the political activism of 2008 from that of 1968.

Lynne Segal's chapter also sees continuities as well as ruptures in women's activism over the decades. Despite their historical invisibility in many accounts of the 1960s, women as a group were active in that period and women's liberation was clearly emerging in 1968. Her focus is on the struggles for women's liberation and its 'lagged' effect in the context of other political activities of the time. She argues, somewhat paradoxically, that women would become 'the decade's most decisive victors', even if some aspects of that victory could be seen more ambivalently today. In her chapter, Segal also pays attention to the way in which women and their activism have been erased from the subsequent accounts of that period. According to Segal, the 1960s was the seedbed for women's liberation and is implicated in the rising significance attached to gender, even if its political fruits were enjoyed much later and not necessarily in the terms initially fought for. In a similar vein, Ken Plummer explicitly links his personal experiences of the period with wider cultural changes that have occurred since the 1960s. His chapter starts off with a poem 'The Year That Enid Blyton Died' which delightfully describes and charts the texture and atmosphere of 1968 as well as providing an impression of what ensued, including an account of sociology's past and its 'heroes'. Plummer then moves on to discuss how the history of 1968 can be told in a multiplicity of ways. His story locates his own life in subterranean traditions, suggesting how the 'deviant imagination' of 1968 made possible certain conditions for the contemporary gains in gay rights and queer issues.

The second part addresses important, and perhaps neglected, aspects of theoretical developments associated with 1968. John Holmwood's chapter focuses on concepts which have dominated not only sociology, but also the consciousness and frame of mind of the 1968 generation, namely structure, conflict, action and change. Holmwood, however, tells an unexpected story examining how the theoretical shifts made

by Habermas end up reproducing Parsonsian categories, even though Habermas had initially set out to oppose the structural-functionalist approach of Parsons. He puts forward the argument that Habermas's attempts to oppose the conservative and conformist undertones of Parsons by embracing agency, conflict and change failed as the initial Marxian voice in Habermas's writings was transformed into a Parsonsian one. The Habermasian effort to enhance 'communicative action' and to make ideas of agency, conflict and change, the hallmarks of the 1968 spirit, central to the sociological endeavour, has instead left a Parsonsian conservative stamp on sociology.

Tracey Skillington's and Sarah Hornstein's chapters, on the other hand, embrace the explicit theories of 1968, especially critical theory and its Frankfurt School origins. Skillington, for example, praises critical theory for its critique of instrumental reason and its reintroduction of normativity, drawing on the similarities between the May Movement and today's anti-globalization movements, such as Global Exchange. She is positive about critical theory's attempts to reconcile the universalistic elements of 'reason' with its situated, particular manifestations, and her chapter highlights how the struggles of 1968 embody this reconciliation and continue to live on in the anti-capitalist struggles of today. Hornstein's chapter, meanwhile, focuses on Herbert Marcuse who, for some, was *the* social theorist of 1968. Hornstein highlights the continuing relevance of Marcuse by engaging with the totalitarian quality of technological rationality. By way of differentiating between terroristic technocracies and non-terroristic technocracies, and by way of using Marcusean concepts of 'matter-of-factness', 'psychological neutrality' and 'repressive desublimation', Hornstein aims to highlight the continuing presence of domination and repression in 'democratic' advanced capitalist societies and, in so doing, brings to our attention the contemporary relevance of Marcuse and the possibility and the impossibility of freedom and revolution in 2008.

Stephen Frosh's chapter addresses the limitations and dilemmas of revolutionary activity by focusing on Lacan and 1968. Describing Lacan's frustration with 'rebellious' students, whom he saw as part of the system, Frosh tells us how Lacan considered psychoanalysis as the only revolutionary practice, one which was best placed to oppose totalization through allowing for a divided subject and through subverting the master's knowledge. But, when it came down to it, Lacan's apparent attempt to institute a radically democratic approach to psychoanalytic education foundered on the imaginary identifications others had with him, and perhaps on his own enjoyment of this identification. Like

many revolutionary leaders, perhaps, he embodied the very mastery his movement was supposedly opposing.

The chapters in the third part on alterity take our engagement with untold stories and unheard accounts of 1968 a step further. In her chapter, Maud Anne Bracke examines the encounters between North African immigrants and the predominantly white student and union movements in France. Her chapter considers what the 1960s meant to immigrants themselves and argues that the events gave rise to an immigrant identity. Writing the story from their perspective, Bracke's chapter examines immigrant activism both during and after 1968, highlighting how the immigrant workers tried new forms of action to deal with their particular concerns and how the need for autonomous immigrant organizations emerged subsequently. Demands for non-discrimination at the workplace surfaced and came to be linked to broader, non-work-related issues such as racism and housing. By shifting the focus to immigrants themselves, Bracke also brings to our attention the contradictions between Orientalized (and romanticized) views of difference at the time and the universalized views of the left that held sway among the students and the trade unions in the 1960s.

Leo Zeilig's chapter focuses on student activists and social movements in Africa in the 1960s. He examines the role of the student-intelligentsia in the post-independence period in different African countries and also addresses the nature of their association with movements in Europe. Zeilig looks at how, a relatively privileged, student activism linked to wider social forces and, in the process, opened up the space for a new politics. The limitations of that convergence, however, were only fully made apparent in the subsequent decades in the struggles against neo-liberalism and structural adjustment programmes. The 1968 generation, then, was not only motivated by different concerns in different places, but also had very different political trajectories and developments.

In her chapter, Sally Hines highlights the role of transgender people in the activism of the 1960s in the United States by discussing two events, the 'Compton's Cafeteria Riots' of 1966 in San Francisco and the 'Stonewall Riots' of 1969 in New York. She explores the active involvement of transgender people in the struggles of feminist, lesbian and gay activism and discusses the establishment of alliances between marginalized gender-identity groups. Her contribution also highlights the exclusions faced by transgender people from many lesbian and gay organizations in the 1960s, and the way in which the fragile alliances between these groups were disrupted, as well as emphasizing the creation of transgender-specific support services. In addition,

Hines considers the questions transgender theorizing and politics raise for today, including examining the gender and sexual binary model, the ontology of sex and gender, and the marginalization of those who are happy to occupy the gender boundary rather than deconstruct it.

The final chapter in this part questions the very notion of alterity privileged in the 1960s and the way in which this particular reading of it has structured what it is possible to say about 'others' and their place in the world and its histories. Mihnea Panu provocatively argues that the social imaginary of 1968, and its continuing legacy within social theoretical debates, works to maintain the very relations of power and domination that are ostensibly criticized within such debates. By focusing on Europe as the producer of the events of world-historical importance and structuring all other histories in relation to what occurs in Europe, we perpetuate the relations of domination established through Europe's colonial past. Panu links this theoretical perspective to a discussion of the politics of identity formation and the (limited) possibilities of ever moving beyond the structuring discourses of our times.

William Outhwaite, in conclusion, reflects on the different 'endings' of 1968 that have been articulated in dominant discourses as well as the endings that are implicit in the contributors' own narratives. He reflects on the nature of 1968 as a 'memory', beginning with the wry observation (that must be true for many) of what it was like to be there, sharing many of the motivations of other participants, but not be there, in the sense of missing where it was happening (or had happened) and just learning about it as reportage and 'newly minted' myth. However, 1968 differed from other key dates like 1989 with its vivid and defining event of the destruction of the Berlin Wall, or the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. For Outhwaite, 1968 is more like 1848, another date that seemed only to inaugurate disappointment and yet lived on as a memory of the 'peoples' spring', more resonant, perhaps, because there were no specific consequences that could yield up a sense of betrayal of the values that had brought them into being. For Outhwaite, 1968's lasting significance, then, is its hope.

Fittingly, Barack Obama's political testament is called *The Audacity of Hope*. His election as President of the United States took place between the date of the conference and the publication of this volume of chapters. The election of the first Black president to a country scarred in its recent past by the legacies of slavery and social, economic and political apartheid is historic. Obama was seven years old in 1968 and is the first president since 1968 not himself to have been directly formed by the politics of the 1960s. The successful mobilization of young voters

suggests that a generational change is underway and that politics has moved beyond the 'culture wars' of the earlier period. There appears to be a sense both that the baton has passed across generations and that the politics of the future will be significantly affected by the idealism of a new younger generation. Since it was 1968 that made the significance of generational politics so resonant, perhaps the election of Obama truly marks the end of 1968 as we have known it and allows for the possibilities of different histories and futures to be written.

## Notes

1. The conference marked the relaunch of the British Sociological Association's Theory Study Group. Over 90 papers were presented, with 6 keynote speakers and close on 200 participants. The chapters collected here are indicative of the spread and quality of the debate over those two days in London and present, in different ways, one of the key themes under discussion: that of 'other' stories of 1968. We would like to thank our co-organizers, Helen Gregory, Stephen Kemp, Maki Kimura and Sasha Roseneil, as well as the administrative staff at the British Sociological Association, for their contribution in making this a successful event.
2. In writing this Introduction, we were assisted by the reflections of two people who *were* there and claim to remember – John Holmwood and William Outhwaite. We would like to acknowledge their contributions to this Introduction and absolve them of any responsibility for remaining errors: they have admitted to being there and so our reliance on their memory is solely our responsibility!
3. Although it must be recognized that this was the condition of the largely white, middle-class student movement; other student protests had different motivations (see Chapter 1, this volume).
4. A soundtrack of the conference was provided by Ste Nunn's mix of covers of tracks of the period as a tribute to the 'children of the revolution'.