

1968: Global or Local?

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We can speak of three major historical moments when revolutionary movements became global by transcending national borders in unexpected ways: 1848, 1968, and 1989. If one of its distinguishing aspects that renders 1968 different from the other two important dates is its inability to stage successful revolutions, the other one is its being a global and worldwide phenomenon of an incomparable degree in contrast to 1848 which is limited to Europe, and 1989 which is limited to East Europe. Such that, there is almost no place in the world which has not lived a "68"¹ except a section of Sub-Saharan Africa, the south of the Arabian Peninsula, and several East European countries.²

It is not possible to assert that completely satisfying answers have been given by historians to the question what are the basic dynamics that make 68 so global. How countries with thoroughly different political and economic conditions could, around the same years, witness radical student movements and an accompanying radical ethos is still a critical discussion and research topic.

Since we are faced with a global phenomenon, the first explanation that comes to mind can be driven through the detection of global dynamics. Viewed from this perspective, the dynamics that need to be detected at first hand are as follows: 1) The almost universal explosion in the number of students in the 1960's. 2) Significant events like the Cuban Revolution, Vietnam, and the Prague Spring that shaped world politics with their impacts. 3) The proliferation of media organs such as press, radio, and television. Yet the main question is whether these three dynamics suffice to explain such radical and global movements or not. In fact, every explanation concerning 68, especially to the extent that it does not build up a narrative that puts the stress on its own national dynamics but tries to make do with the "global" explanation in question, finds itself to be deficient, weak, and far from persuasiveness. Since such is the case, is it more rational to speak of the contingent juxtaposition of movements produced by different localities and local experiences?

Of course it is possible to ask the same question not only in terms of the determinant dynamics but also at the empirical and descriptive level. Was there a single 68? Or did every country live its own 68? What was common to the 68 of the West and the 68 of the Third World? Let us begin with searching answers to these questions.

How many 68s are there?

Undoubtedly there are many qualities of 68 that make it both common and particular to every single country. In Arif Dirlik's words, the 68 student movements were using a common vocabulary but working according to the logic of a different grammar.³ Then, can we argue that there were different demands and concerns underlying numerous common slogans and symbols like Che and Vietnam? To begin with, we can broach the subject with the most pervasive conviction, by mentioning the difference between the 68 of the West and that of the Third World.

In this respect, a brief overview of the history of student movements can be helpful. According to Edward Shils, what rendered the 60s distinctive was not the emergence of student movements in those years. Both in Europe and in the Third World, student movements had entered the stage of

¹ It should be noted that when we say "68" we are not talking about a single year. We should emphasize that even though 1968 is indisputably the year when the protests have been the most intense, the "68" of some countries happened in different years (for instance, the 1973 Polytechnic uprising in Greece), and therefore we use "68" more as a symbolic year. In this sense, 68 may be considered a long year that covers 1965-73. For a similar discussion see, Kostis Kornetis, "Everything Links? Temporality, Territoriality and cultural Transfer in the '68 Protest Movements," *Historiein*, n. 9, 2009, p. 34-45.

² Michael Kidron and Roland Segal *The State of the World Atlas* (London, 1981), cited in Carole Fink, Detlef Junker, and Philipp Gassert "Introduction" *1968 The World Transformed* (Washington D.C.: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 14-5.

³ Arif Dirlik "The Third World in 1968", *The World Transformed*, *ibid.* pp. 295-320.

history long ago.⁴ For example, in the 1930s there was a noteworthy left student movement in England.⁵ As for the Third World, student movements were very powerful since the beginning of the century. Such that, in some countries they reached their peak not in 1968, but well in advance. Argentina in 1918, Egypt in 1937, and India in the independence war years witnessed the most massive and radical student agencies.⁶

Still, there was something that distinguished the 60s. First of all, contrary to the dispersed and relatively weak movements of the previous years, a movement of unprecedented extensiveness and simultaneity emerged in the USA and Western Europe. And in the Third World, even though the student movements in many countries had reached their climax in different years as mentioned above, in the 60s there was a significant intensification.

According to Shils, what rendered the 60s different was a qualitative change rather than a quantitative one. Previous movements had mostly functioned within a traditional left framework, as extensions of the political lines of the "big" parties. The political activity of the youth movements which had internalized the traditional revolutionary political lines were generally under the command or in the shadow of the communist parties (or the leftist-nationalist parties in the Third World). 68 was strikingly different in this sense. To begin with, the youth was now absolutely refusing the tutelage of any "big" or "paternal" party, and on top of that, they were also declaredly disavowing the conception of politics represented by these parties. The Communist Parties evoked as much disgust with their bureaucratic structures as the traditional bourgeoisie parties. New politics was much more anarchistic, decentralized, and spontaneous. The youth wanted to start the revolution here and now in their daily lives; they replaced all forms bureaucratic transformation imaginations with spontaneity and the emancipatory force of revolt.

According to Wallerstein, Hopkins, and Arrighi, in this sense 68 was exactly the death notice of traditional radical-populist politics. In view of these writers, both the radical parties in the West and the left-nationalist movements in the Third World had gradually fell far from keeping their promises; they had not been able to bring about any significant transformation in the countries they had come to power. Therefore, 68 was a reaction against "paternal" politics and the bankruptcy of old school revolutionism.⁷ It had become obvious that the revolution was not going to take place with the appropriation of the power apparatus. Hence, the revolution had to be initiated in ourselves, our everyday lives, and somewhere outside the power of the state.

This distinction which sets forth the qualitative difference of the 60s is rather illuminating. However, this is so only in the case of Western Europe. As for the Third World, it contains some misleading elements. No doubt a shared generation experience and the rejection of the tutelage of "paternal" parties were in effect also in the Third World; however, this rejection never reached the level of disowning the conception of politics of these parties. In other words, the radical student movements of the Third World were a continuation of the traditional radical politics and social movements. These movements were angry at the reformist or left-nationalist parties for not doing anything after seizing power; but this anger did not bring about the radical questioning of the conception of politics held by these parties. On the contrary, what had to be done was to repeat what had previously tried to be done in a more radical and genuine way.

And there was nothing surprising in this. For the radical leaders who acted within a socio-political context in which poverty was still a major problem, industrialization was the most important

⁴ Edward Shils "Dreams of Plentitude, Nightmares of Scarcity" in *Students in Revolt*, (eds.) Seymour Martin Lipset and Philip G. Altbach (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969), 1-35.

⁵ Brian Simon "The Student Movement in England and Wales during the 1930s," *The State and Educational Change* (collected essays by) Brian Simon (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1994), 103-126.

⁶ For Argentina see Richard J. Walter, *Student Politics in Argentina: The University Reform and Its Effects 1918-1964*, (Basic Books, 1968). For Egypt, Ahmad Abdalla, *The Student Movement and National Politics in Egypt 1923-1973* (London: Al Saqi Books, 1985). For India, Philip G. Altbach "Student Politics and Higher Education in India," in *Students in Revolt*, *ibid.* 235-257.

⁷ Giovanni Arrighi, Terence Hopkins, Immanuel Wallerstein, *Sistem Karşıtı Hareketler* [Antisystemic Movements], (Istanbul: Metis, 2004), pp. 96-100.

common goal and populist politics had not completely exhausted itself, the state was still a vital leverage and there was much to achieve by taking control of the state. While in the West 68 marked the beginning of anti-modernist movements, in the Third World modernization was definitely an unfinished project and the state continued to be the motor of modernization.

Surely it is extremely suspect to draw this differentiation in a rigid way. Definitely there were many student groups in the West who maintained their traditional political lines just as outside the West there were student circles who experienced the cultural revolution dimension of the 68. We will try to touch on these points below.

Therefore, despite all its vulgarity and the unfair generalizations it implies and, even more crucially, despite the border examples where the two categories intersect (such as Italy where counter-cultural movements were weak compared with the classical revolutionary movements) a differentiation can be made between the 68 of the developed countries and that of the Third World⁸; albeit without forgetting the common features and qualities that render 68 indisputably global beyond this differentiation.

Anti-imperialism was the most prominent of these features. Even though anti-imperialism was a much more dominant emphasis in the Third World, one of the elemental agendas of the developed countries was anti-imperialism and the most important symbol that held the 68 of the world together was definitely Vietnam. The slogan that united almost all of the student movements that constituted the 68 movement was "One, two, three, four! We don't want your fucking war!" Both the Red Army Faction in Germany and the guerilla groups in Latin America, and the People's Liberation Army of Turkey had chosen the American military bases as their prior targets and they had reckoned the weakening of American imperialism as a pre-condition of the liberation of the world's peoples.

Another global characteristic of 68 was that almost everywhere in the world it was lived as a generation experience involving a dimension of generation conflict. Above, we had mentioned the break from the "paternal" parties and political movements. Even in the Third World where the foundational lines of this "paternal" politics were not questioned, the youth organizations quickly became autonomous and declared their independence. One of the most striking examples of this was Turkey's student movement's initial rupture from the gerontocratic structure of the Turkish Labor Party and, ensuing that, its refusal of the leadership of another "father," Mihri Belli. The ideological and political leaders of the youth were figures who had not passed the age of twenty five.

A third commonality was voluntarism in high dose which left its mark on the movement and the belief in both the effectiveness and the remedial power of violence.⁹ Political violence was both an effective tool of revolution in the hands of a voluntarist avant-garde group and it was emancipatory and healing in itself. While the instrumental aspect of violence was more in the fore in the Third World, in the West, the experiencing of violence as a practice of existence and revolt by closed groups which had detached themselves from the pacifist counter-culture movements was more frequently observed. However, all these different perceptions of violence held by these movements intersected at a Fanonist sublimation of violence.

Causes

We can make the categorizations we have made above at the empirical level at the plane of causality as well. In other words, we can distinguish between global dynamics and dynamics specific to their own categories that guided the movements. First of all, we should proceed from a common finding. The precondition of youth movements is the existence of an influential youth or student identity or culture in the national context in question. Meyer and Rubinson, as well as others, had detected a significant correlation between the rates of the recognition of the

⁸ Arif Dirlik, *ibid.*

⁹ Kostis Kornetis, *ibid.*, p. 39.

studentship status at the cultural, juridical or official levels and the intensity of student movements in all the sample countries they had examined.¹⁰ Therefore, both in the West and in the Third World we can take the existence of a strong youth/student culture as the pre-condition of student politics. However, it seems that this condition has been shaped in different ways and under different historical conditions in the cases of these two categories.

The emergence of “youth” as a pervasive category in the developed countries coincides with the rise of the consumerist society after World War 2. In these countries youth was originally a category discovered and put into circulation by the market. The post-war welfare state and the wealth produced by the golden age of capitalism had made it possible for the households to subsist on the income of a single member (that is, the father), and as a result the urgency to join the workforce on the part of the youth had been removed. Above all, the “youth” period of not only the middle classes but also the working class was prolonged to at least age 18, before when they did not work. Moreover, these youngsters had the opportunity to cultivate a consumption pattern suitable to their tastes with the allowance they got from their fathers.¹¹ Thus the market discovered a new consumer group, “the youth,” a category that was highly distinct and innovative with its tastes and habits. Throughout the 50s, the youth had turned into a sociological category with the accessories they used (leather jacket), the vehicles they drove (motorcycle), the music they listened to (rock ‘n roll) and the way they spent their leisure time. And the youth culture of the 60s was the product of the radicalization of the apolitical yet rebellious culture of ten years ago by an intellectual-political youth (that is, the university youth).

As for the developing world, the youth identity had been produced in a completely different way. In these countries where the processes of the construction of the nation and the national identity still set the agenda, the state itself played a major role in the production of “the university youth” identity. The youth was the source from which to nurture the future ruling elites, the guarantee of the country. So they had to be educated but even during their education they had to be placed at a privileged position and treated as the future elites, rulers, and bearers of national culture. Moreover, they were needed not only in the future but also in the present day. In time of a possible war they were the ones to be recruited first with their dynamism, physical capacities, and patriotism. Therefore, in these countries, the youth became the privileged subject of a nationalist-militarist (and at times revolutionary) discourse. The youth was brave, pure and uncorrupt, idealist and ready to fight in the name of these ideals... Just as Mustafa Kemal had defined it in his “Address to Youth” and even in the much more controversial “Bursa Oration.”¹² In parallel to this, in developing countries the youth usually not only had a strong identity but also powerful representation mechanisms and semi-corporatist organizations.

Surely, the politicization and radicalization of this powerful student identity had required certain conditions. These conditions were mainly the political conflicts which, to a large extent, concurrently cut through the Third World in the post-war period and were the products of the Cold War atmosphere. From Latin America to Asia, reformist, industry-oriented political platforms dependent on educated middle classes had exerted dominance over the political lives of these countries in the post-war era. These political movements defined themselves as against rich land oligarchies; they designed partial nationalizations, notably land reform, and radical actions for the development of a national industry. The natural rivals of these groups which tried to rest on a worker-peasant-middle class alliance were land owners and peasants dependent on them through patronage, a considerable part of the bourgeoisie, and after the 60s the military.¹³ The radicalization of these conflicts under Cold War conditions led to the politicization of

¹⁰ Meyer, John W. and Richard Rubinson “Structural Determinants of Student Political Activity: A Comparative Interpretation,” *Sociology of Education*, 45 (1) (Winter, 1972): 23-46.

¹¹ For a good summary of this explanation see Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), p. 346-48.

¹² Leyla Neyzi “Object or Subject? The Paradox of ‘Youth’ in Turkey,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 33, no. 3, (August 2001), 411-432.

¹³ Especially in Latin America, until the end of the 1950s, the armies had supported the reformist middle class parties and had even carried them to power in some countries, but later on when these movements were radicalized and had begun to move further to the left the armies had taken sides with the oligarchic powers and the bourgeoisie.

students. At times through the conscious mobilization of the reformist parties in question, and at times through a more spontaneous process the university youth entered the political scene as the natural ally of these middle class parties. These young “intellectuals” who used their powerful and prestigious positions in society participated in the social conflicts due to their national responsibilities and took sides with the modernizing powers as required by their education and missions; however, in time, they quickly became independent of these “paternal” political movements.

Well then, how come these two different dynamics in the West and in the Third World merged in the 60s? Why did these two socio-political dynamics, whose intersection seemed to be in no way a necessity, cause a global explosion in the sixties? We can reply by recalling the three fundamental dynamics we had mentioned in the beginning: Almost a universal explosion in the number of student in the 60s; significant events like the Cuban Revolution, Vietnam, and the Prague Spring that determined international politics with their impacts; the quick dissemination of action forms and symbols by means of the press, radio, and television.

It was truly difficult to find a country that did not double its number of university students throughout the 60s.¹⁴ The welfare state administrations in the developed world, and the efforts towards import-substitution industrialization policy in the developing world had caused a boost in the demand for technocrats, engineers, and social workers; which had in return resulted in a growth in the number of students. While the increase in the number of students even further augmented the social visibility of the youth in the West, in the developing world, the increase in the number of students who had begun to become politicized many years ago automatically translated as a growth in a mass that was ready to become politicized.

In the meantime, the national liberation movements which left their mark on the 50s and 60s were inspiring and encouraging especially the Third World youth about conducting an anti-imperialist struggle. As for the Cuban Revolution, by demonstrating the effective outcome of a revolutionary struggle initiated by an avant-garde force first in Latin America, then in the whole world, it turned guerilla war into a widespread strategy on a global scale.

And, needless to say, Vietnam was expeditiously agitating both the USA youth who was under the risk of being conscripted and the Third World youth ripe with anti-imperialist sentiments. The dispersed student radicalizations at different time intervals converged, intensified, and sharpened as if coordinated by an invisible hand in the second half of the 60s with the emergence of common global causes in international politics.

When the protest repertoires, imaginative inventions, and slogans of different national movements were spread quickly by the media organs these movements attained a common vocabulary as well. Even though besides this common repertory there were specific words used by youth movements in each country and sometimes the same words signified different things, a language by means of which the whole world youth could more or less communicate had quickly spread.¹⁵

Therefore, it was unavoidable for the characters of the youth movements of two separate worlds stemming from diverse socio-political dynamics to be different even though they converged around common symbols and causes. While the Western youth movements bore a life-style-oriented and counter-cultural tone, those in the Third World were more political and nation-centered. For this reason, the 68 of the West moved side by side with a cultural revolution and generated new social movements which placed new conflicts at the center of politics, whereas the 68 of the Third World generally left its trace on the political sphere rather than the cultural one.

¹⁴ John W. Meyer, Francisco O. Ramirez, Richard Rubinson, John Boli-Bennett, “The World Educational Revolution, 1950-1970,” *Sociology of Education*, vol. 50, no. 4 (October 1977), 242-258.

¹⁵ There is a highly advanced literature on the spread of the protests and protest forms by surpassing the national borders. As an example see Dough McAdam and Dieter Rucht “Cross-national Diffusion of Movement Ideas,” *Annals of the American Academy of the Political and Social Science*, 528, 1993, p. 56-74.

Cultural revolution?

In Europe and the USA a cultural revolution took place in the 60s and 70s.¹⁶ A fast transition into a more tolerant society in which moral criteria was changing, taboos were being shaken one by one, sexuality was lived more freely, warmth replaced formality in relations, easiness, sincerity and freeness replaced a puritan self-control morality, and the authoritarian remnants of the former society were erased was in process. The question whether this cultural revolution created 68 or 68 gave birth to this cultural transformation is debated. Even if according to many writers the beginning of this cultural transformation could be traced back to the 1955s, and even earlier, and even if it was rightly claimed that 68 had risen on the grounds of this cultural revolution¹⁷, undoubtedly, the social dynamic engendered by 68 had further radicalized this cultural transformation and carried it even further.

Actually, this transformation was the natural consequence of the conscious provocations of the students of 68. The radical student groups of the time were aiming to disclose the authoritarian faces of the official and respectable institutions and their representatives, and to bring down their democrat masks, which they used as a Cold War rhetoric, by deliberately trying their patience and provoking them. And to a large extent they had succeeded in cleaning the European public life from bumptious formality, authoritarianism, and religious morality – mainly remnants of aristocracy.

We had said that 68 was rather political outside the West. In these countries cultural struggle yielded more complicated results. For example, the 68 of Ethiopia had effloresced as a reaction to the parade of the models in a fashion show that took place in the university, and all throughout the movement the mini skirt and all kinds of sexual freedom ideas, which were the symbols of Western imperialism, were condemned.¹⁸ The cultural revolution motifs which were the symbols of emancipation in the West could be taken in the Third World as the attempts on the part of the degenerate Western world to invade the local culture.

But not everywhere was like this. For instance in Turkey, at least until 1969, rock, the rebel music of the West, the mini skirt, the symbol of casualness and disobedience in the way of dressing, long hair, and accessories in general had gradually gained wide currency among the left leaning youth. The situation in Mexico was more or less the same. New trends were being adopted by the youth; to consume these symbols while at the same time being anti-imperialist and leftist was not considered to be a contradiction even though a significant section of the youth was doing so with completely apolitical intentions.¹⁹

Principally, marking especially the years between 1965 and 1968 in Turkey was a cultural revival besides the universalization of the symbols in question. The launching of the literary magazine *Yeni Dergi*, the establishment of **Cinematheque**, the emergence of the Anatolian Pop movement, and the quickly increasing number of translations were creating an unprecedented air of cultural abundance for the young generations. Many witnesses conveyed that in this period the precondition of being a leftist was reading literature. In the summer of 1968 this cultural climate met with the rebellion of the university students and that was a unique summer of liberation.

However, this atmosphere was short-lived. The urgency, currency, and gravity of political struggle put the cultural pursuits and transformations on the back burner. The preoccupation with reaching out to the people and meeting with the people as the requirement of a radical politics tended towards rediscovering the authentic, and reuniting with the folk culture instead of discovering the culturally new. Just like in Mexico, before long rock was forgotten because of folk

¹⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, *Aşırıliklar Çağı [The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century], 1914-1991*, (İstanbul: Sarmal Publications, 1996), p. 372-399.

¹⁷ Arthur Marwick *The Sixties: The Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c. 1958-c. 1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

¹⁸ Arif Dirlik, *ibid.*

¹⁹ For the Mexico example see Eric Zolov *Refried Elvis: The Rise of the Mexican Counterculture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

music. Mini skirts were thrown aside, long-haired students were taken out of demonstrations, and symbols militarized.

Hence 68 did not become the turning point of a new cultural and artistic transformation in Turkey. 68 was the sign of neither a new modernism nor the beginning of an avant-garde wave. Artistic pursuits inclined towards new realisms, or the rediscovery and recovery of the true folk culture with new tools, or the balancing of avant-garde forms with a more left and populist content. Neither were the results of the kind to be made light of nor did the new experiments fall short of the new quests of the Western modernism. However, there was not a turning point, a radical rupture in view.

Conclusion, or what remains behind

As we have mentioned above the imprints of the Western 68 on daily life and culture have been much more permanent and deep. As for the 68 of the Third World, it mainly witnessed the suppression of the social movements it had encouraged and pioneered by military coups and authoritarian regimes. In these lands, the political traces of the 68 were delicately and mercilessly erased by the reactionary regimes. It was not only left political movements and culture that suffered from this. The crushing of the youth had paved the way for the recovery of the gerontocratic regimes. Indisputably Turkey was one of the places where this could be observed most clearly. The September 12 coup one by one took away from the youth all its prestige and areas of freedom. The education system was re-disciplined with an archaic authoritarianism and a new period had begun in which the “anarchic” memories from the past were reminisced as nightmares, and the authority of the teacher, the school master, and the disciplinary board who became sources of fear and terror were unshakably constructed. The youth-politics relationship was decisively disrupted. Anyway, the new liberal order had already eroded the identity of students as intellectuals responsible for the future of the country and transformed them into competitive investors who were compelled to increase their human capital in order to survive in the work-force market. From now on, the youth was far from being a political category or subject.

As for the political heritage of the 68 in Turkey, it is highly controversial. Both the radical Marxist politics of the day and nationalist Kemalism, and even some of the liberal intellectuals (even though the majority of them cannot desist from furiously attacking 68) claim their roots to be in 68. It is very hard to argue that any one of them is wrong. The 68 of Turkey was indisputably Marxist and revolutionary; but at the same time it was defining this revolutionism with a discourse that was interpenetrated with an anti-imperialist, nationalist Kemalism. And the majority of today’s liberal intellectuals were brought up in the school of 68. Apparently, when asking the question how many 68s are there, one needs to take into consideration not only the different 68s lived by different countries but also the different ways how 68 is remembered today.

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