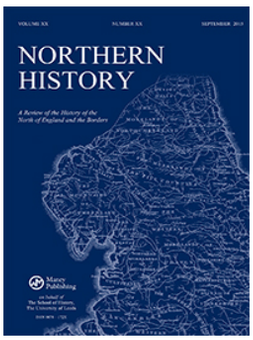

Northern History

ISSN: 0078-172X (Print) 1745-8706 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ynhi20

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To cite this article: Max Farrar, Christian Høgsbjerg, Louise Lavender, Mike McGrath, Sarah Perrigo & Tom Steele (2020): ‘Paris Today, Leeds Tomorrow!’ Remembering 1968 in Leeds, Northern History

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0078172X.2020.1747723

Published online: 06 May 2020.

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'PARIS TODAY, LEEDS TOMORROW!' REMEMBERING 1968 IN LEEDS

MAX FARRAR, CHRISTIAN HØGSBJERG, LOUISE LAVENDER, MIKE MCGRATH, SARAH PERRIGO AND TOM STEELE

In 1968, protests against the old order swept the world. From the general strike in France and the student occupations in Paris to the Tet offensive in Vietnam, and from the Black Panthers in the US to the Prague Spring, the movement was contagious. In Britain a wave of student protests and sit-ins took place, most famously at the LSE and Hornsey College of Art but also at a wide range of other campuses and colleges, including at Leeds University. On 31 May 2018, to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of 'May 1968', a meeting jointly sponsored by the Ford Maguire Society, *International Socialism* and Taking Soundings was held at the Swarthmore Centre in Leeds to remember what radical politics in 1968 in the city was like. The speakers at the meeting were all activists in 1968: Mike McGrath, Sarah Perrigo, Tom Steele, Lou Lavender and Max Farrar, and the meeting was kindly chaired by Gilda Petersen. This article brings together their recollections and reflections, with a transcript of some of the debate which followed. The introduction, editorial work, transcription and additional explanatory notes are by Christian Høgsbjerg.

Keywords: 1968; students; protest; social movements; Vietnam; Leeds

Introduction

IN 1968 PROTESTS AGAINST THE OLD ORDER swept the world. From the general strike in France and the student occupations in Paris to the Tet offensive in Vietnam, and from the Black Panthers in the US to the Prague Spring, the movement was contagious. In Britain a wave of student protests and sit-ins took place, most famously at the LSE and Hornsey College of Art but also at a wide range of other campuses and colleges, including at Leeds University.[1] The Leeds sit-in lasted four days from 25–28 June 1968, right at the end of the summer term, and was triggered by the revelations of files being kept on radical students by security staff (who included former police officers) and the wider issue of accountability (or the lack of it) of the university

[1] For a journalistic overview of British student protest that year (though without a discussion of Leeds), see David Caute *Sixty-Eight: The Year of the Barricades* (Paladin, 1988), pp. 302–329. For more scholarly reflections see Nick Thomas, 'Challenging the Myths of the 1960s: The Case of Student Protest in Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 13, 3 (2002) and Colin Barker, 'Some Reflections on Student Movements of the 1960s and Early 1970s', *Revista Critica de Ciencias Sociais*, 81 (July 2008). For contemporary Marxist analysis of the British student protests, see Chris Harman, Richard Kuper, Dave Clark, Andrew Sayers and Martin Shaw, *Education, Capitalism and the Student Revolt* (International Socialism, 1968), and Alexander Cockburn and Robin Blackburn (eds.), *Student Power: Problems, Diagnosis, Action* (Penguin, 1969).

management to students that it revealed. It was initially sparked by the visit of Patrick Wall, the Conservative MP for Haltemprice, a leading figure of the anti-Communist Monday Club and a champion of the racist regimes in Rhodesia and South Africa and a supporter of the Vietnam War, to the campus on 3 May 1968 at the request of Leeds University Union Conservative Association. His visit sparked a 400 strong student protest against him, with chants of 'Go home, racialist' and 'repatriate him', in which Wall was repeatedly heckled and questioned about his racism, spat at and Mrs Wall tripped over the legs of a demonstrator.[2] The protest was widely reported by the local and national media as a riot, with, as Nick Thomas notes, 'violence, including a much publicized, and yet seemingly fictitious, attack upon Mrs Wall'.[3] Even Labour home secretary James Callaghan 'deplored' the apparent behaviour of Leeds students.[4]

The university then appointed a disciplinary committee, co-opting six students alongside six staff members with the Vice-Chancellor Sir Roger Stevens with the casting vote, which ultimately decided to fine five students (three demonstrators and two Conservative stewards) £16.10 s. The lack of any democratic basis or trade union representation on this disciplinary committee—combined with allegations of files being kept on radical students by the security services and a demand from the Vice-Chancellor that external political speakers on campus be limited for the rest of the year—led to the formation of the 'May 3rd Committee'. This group of up to eighty or so students made four demands: the immediate abolition of the security files; the abolition of the unrepresentative disciplinary committee and its replacement by a democratic one consisting of students, staff, non-academic staff and a National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) representative; the dismissal of the heads of the security staff; the acceptance of the demands by the Vice-Chancellor or his immediate resignation; and called for a sit-in if the demands were not met. When the Vice-Chancellor did not respond to the demands for an inquiry into the security service made by an Ordinary General Meeting (OGM) of Leeds University Union (LUU), a sit-in was organized. As a LUU Executive Committee leaflet 'The Security Service—A case for an enquiry' dated 24 June 1968 put it, 'there is irrefutable evidence that the security advisor has been prying into students' political beliefs … political prying is a crime against democracy and the fundamental rights of the individual and we must fight this pernicious evil wherever we can … we must fight McCarthyism in our University! … If this is war then the University declared it!'[5] On Tuesday 25 June, 400–500 students organized a sit-in of the university administration in the Parkinson building, now with the support of Union President Jack Straw and even the *Union News* student paper, then edited by Paul Dacre (later to edit the *Daily Mail*).[6]

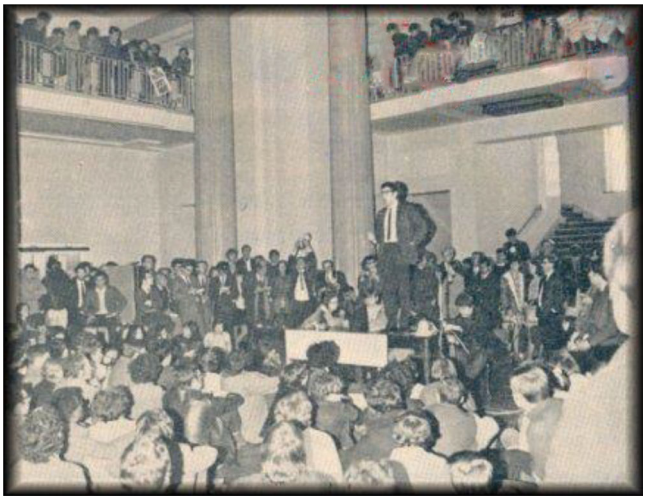
[2] On the protest against Wall and the subsequent sit-in, see The May 3rd Committee, *The June Sit-In* (May 3rd Committee, 1968). A copy of this invaluable document is available in the University of Leeds Library Special Collections, LUA / STU/ 025.

[3] Thomas, 'Challenging the Myths of the 1960s', p. 284.

[4] Chris Harman, *The Fire Last Time: 1968 and After* (Bookmarks, 1998), p. 147.

[5] LUU Executive Committee, 'The Security Service – A Case for an Enquiry', 24 June 1968, LUA / STU/ 025.

[6] Thomas, 'Challenging the Myths of the 1960s', p. 285. See also *Union News*, 21 June 1968 and *Union News*, 28 June, 1968.



Photograph of Jack Straw addressing the sit-in in the Parkinson building in June 1968, from *Union News*, issue 351, 28 June 1968.
https://web.archive.org/web/20061216104511/http://www.leeds.ac.uk/reporter/may68/

In his memoir *Last Man Standing* (2012) Jack Straw, who had just been elected NUS Vice-President for the academic year 1968–69, recalled the very clear evidence of collating evidence on radical students. 'The university security officer, a retired Leeds City Police superintendent, a parody of a bone-headed copper, had a large file marked "Reds"'. Straw recalls the sit-in, which he reluctantly supported, as a 'sober affair'. 'My main concern was to identify an exit strategy which would have us "winning," whatever (as the comrades would say) the objective reality. The university … happily obliged and seemingly conceded support for the demands they had earlier refused. Victory was proclaimed. We cleared up so well that the building had never looked so pristine, and went off for celebratory drinks in the pubs opposite'.[7] In reality, this 'victory' was far less clear cut—certainly to most of those protesters in the sit-in. Jack Straw at the end of the sit-in was quoted as admitting the impotence of the LUU Executive Committee: 'Almost without noticing it, instead of putting the views and demands of the student body forward in negotiations with authority we found ourselves becoming a channel of communication from authority to the students'.[8] As one member of the May 3rd Committee has recalled, 'far from celebrating a "victory" the May 3rd Committee began planning a new campaign for the following year … A sub-committee of the University Senate met during the summer to see whether there was a need for an independent

[7] Jack Straw, *Last Man Standing: Memoirs of a Political Survivor* (Macmillan, 2012), pp. 73–74. From 2000 to 2007, Jack Straw was banned from Leeds University Union and a plaque was erected outside the Union to this effect: 'This union believes that Jack Straw, as home secretary, has furthered government policies curtailing civil liberties. As a result, he is not welcome here.' http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/637850.stm

[8] John Quail, 'What sort of University do you want?' (LUU Education and Welfare Committee, 1968), p. 3. See LUA / STU / 025.

enquiry into the students allegations and concluded, shortly, that there was no need as the points that had not already been cleared up were "minor". So not only was there 'no independent enquiry into the students' allegations of political snooping by the Security Service (which was anyway a severe dilution of the original demands) but a summary dismissal of the students' grievances altogether'.[9] Yet as the May 3rd Committee put it afterwards in their booklet *The June Sit-In*:

> The actions of the Union executive pose a more complex problem. We have seen how the original demands were gradually eroded and replaced by the symbolic demand for an enquiry. All important decisions at the sit-in were taken at meetings constituted as Ordinary General Meetings of the Union. But the decisions of the OGM were carried out by the executive. And because of the intricacy of the negotiations, and the fact they were held 'in camera', the ordinary student had no means of knowing what was being conceded, what was being left out. At the final Friday meeting of the sit-in, Jack Straw talked of the 'Tio Pepe' [a brand of sherry] diplomacy he and other officials had indulged in over the years with the university … the problems raised by Jack's 'bureaucrat's lament' is one which only students themselves can solve.[10]

Thomas notes that later in 1968, 'a committee was established by the university to look into proposals for a new disciplinary procedure and new involvement of students in university government'.[11]

The fact that the mass protest at Wall involved some 400 students and the sit-in involved up to 650 students on a campus that at the time had a student population of around 6,000 students, including many science students (typically less political than arts or humanities students), gives some sense of the wider levels of radicalization and politicization among students in this tumultuous year.[12] The impact the events in France and especially Paris in May 1968 made on Leeds students as they occupied the Parkinson building means the sit-in was in reality far less 'sober' than Straw remembers. The May 3rd Committee in their account of 'the June Sit-In' describe how

> 'speeches from individual workers, encouraging us and urging an alliance of workers and students, brought the audience spontaneously to its feet … a French student and others from Hornsey and Hull spoke of their struggles … the whole atmosphere of the sit-in and the experience of the participants was a direct challenge to the accepted concept of the university: a paternalistic sausage-machine, stuffing in the rags and tatters of the "conventional wisdom", pulling out packaged plastic exam answers and rewarding docility with useless degrees'.

The May 3rd Committee describe 'lively discussions … the jazz, the folk, the experimental theatre, the showing of students' own films' and 'the visual metamorphosis wrought upon the Parkinson. The gaunt, ponderous building was humanised. Red flags and black flags, banners, posters and slogans, sprouted everywhere. Portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky and Bakunin looked down benignly upon the

[9] Tom Steele, personal communication, 12 August 2019.
[10] The May 3rd Committee, *The June Sit-In*, pp. 17–19. This booklet went on to praise the 'sit-in's transcendence of diplomacy'.
[11] Thomas, 'Challenging the Myths of the 1960s', p. 286.
[12] The May 3rd Committee, *The June Sit-In*, p. 14.

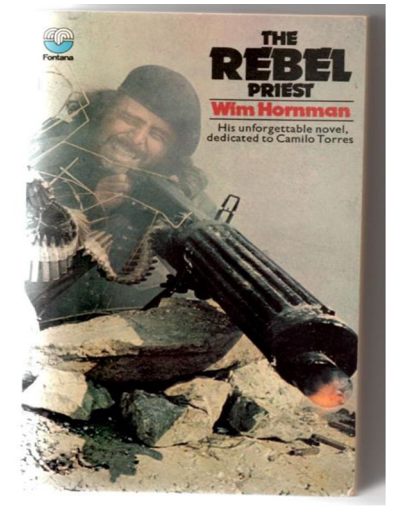
interminable discussions … "The educators", read a slogan on the front entrance, "must be educated"'.[13] *Union News* described the scenes during the sit-in on the first night: 'They talked and talked and talked … Lights were dimmed at 1.30 a.m. as students camped out as best they could on every floor. The anarchist flag flew high above the Parkinson'. By the third evening, 'A huge banner, reading, "STUDENTS DEMAND A PUBLIC INQUIRY" was hoisted over the entrance to the Parkinson Building … to supplement the mass of Left-Wing slogans chalked on the brickwork'.[14] A survey of Leeds students in January 1969 saw 15.5 percent identify themselves as 'politically active', which while it certainly seems to dispel the myth that 'everyone was political' in the 1960s, still corresponds to almost a thousand students, concentrated together on one campus.[15]

On 31 May 2018, to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of 'May 1968', a meeting jointly sponsored by the Ford Maguire Society, *International Socialism* and Taking Soundings was held at the Swarthmore Centre in Leeds with the aim of remembering what radical politics in 1968 was like. The speakers at the meeting were all activists in 1968 (and all either had, or would come to have, strong links to Leeds): Mike McGrath, Sarah Perrigo, Tom Steele, Lou Lavender and Max Farrar. The meeting was kindly chaired by Gilda Petersen. This article brings together their recollections and reflections, and also includes a transcript of some of the debate which followed.

Gilda Petersen [chair]: Welcome to all the 'soixante-huitards' and other people who have come along this evening. We have an erudite collection of those who were around in Leeds in the 1960s. I'm Gilda, and I am delighted to chair because I felt what happened to me in 1968 really affected my whole life, and has left me still active, still political and still hopeful, and I think it is an amazing gift just to be a young adult at that time. In 1968 itself I was in Birmingham, and we have some people who were in Leeds, a mixture here. I will just briefly introduce them. We have Mike McGrath, who was in London, Sarah Perrigo, who was also in London and at the LSE [London School of Economics], and then Tom Steele, Lou Lavender and Max Farrar, who were all in Leeds. So it is Leeds with some other bits of scene-setting …

To begin with Mike McGrath, who is now on and off member of the SWP [Socialist Workers' Party], a very short-lived member of the Labour Party once, I think it lasted a few weeks … He will tell you in a bit about what he was doing in 1968, his lesser known claims to fame are being an entrepreneurial pop concert promoter—something you wouldn't associate with Mike—and appearing with a beard bearing a machine gun looking remarkably like Che Guevara, for a book cover that he starred in in his early days when he was short of money.[16] So Mike …

[13] The May 3rd Committee, *The June Sit-In*, pp. 16–17.
[14] *Union News*, 28 June 1968. The Parkinson building, described as gaunt by the committee, is described by others as an august Grade II listed building, with a grand central court and spectacular circular library. Either way, the radical students understood its symbolism and the importance of re-engineering it for the revolution.
[15] Thomas, 'Challenging the Myths of the 1960s', p. 282.
[16] W. Hornman, *The Rebel Priest* (Fontana, 1973).



Mike McGrath past and present. Source: Christian Hogsbjerg.

Mike McGrath: Thank you chair. My experience of 1968 might be a bit unexpected. It is conditioned by being sacked from my white collar job in 1965 for organizing a union—an early lesson in real life politics. Hence I was unable to get a reference for another white collar job and so after labouring for a few months I re-trained as a bricklayer—a 6 month full time TOPS (Training Opportunities Scheme) course with a living wage and so I worked all of 1968 on a large council estate site in Tottenham, North London. That's really where my perspective came from. However, I was a member of the International Socialists—which became the SWP—and went to the sit-in lectures at the LSE, rubbing shoulders with long haired students from exotic and faraway places like Germany and Italy; some of whom stayed with us in our large flat in Stoke Newington, which also doubled up as the storeroom for thousands of French student posters which were distributed …

Perhaps my most relevant memory of 1968 is that although the building site I worked on was large—about 500 workers—and reasonably well organized I never heard discussion of the events in France, let alone those in UK universities. Whenever I raised the subject it was met with indifference or at most polite attention—as if thinking 'what on earth is a bricklayer doing being interested in university students?' My recent reading of conventional historians such as Dominic Sandbrook

and David Kynaston confirm that the events of '68 at least in the UK were confined mainly to the universities. Max Farrar in discussion with me recently referred to 'living in a bubble' at the time as students, which I think is an accurate description. So whilst work-place militancy was high in the UK—and rising—this rarely translated into overt political action.

So my main memory of '68 was actually the anti-war demos—in particular Grosvenor Square in April when many of us were confronted by the organized violence of the state for the first time in the shape of the Special Patrol Group and mounted police. This led to my life-long deep mistrust of the police and a clearer understanding of their role in society when things get tough—a role vividly described by both Lenin and more conventionally by Weber—who wrote that the state has the monopoly of the use of legitimate violence. For me that I think is the most enduring influence.

It's perhaps partly my age (too old for the Beatles but just right for Rock and Roll) but for me the experience of 1968 was a continuity of earlier developments as a result of the loosening of post-war austerity, particularly culture, writing, politics, fashion, sex and music. For example, I helped to organize 'Psychedelphia versus Ian Smith' at the Roundhouse—then a derelict railway turning shed in Camden Town—in 1966—Ian Smith for those who don't know was the leader of the breakaway white government in Southern Rhodesia in 1965. The gig was attended by 3000, pound a head, ravers; it was broken up by the police at 2 in the morning as I was paying the Pink Floyd £30—a lot of money in 1966 I'll have you know, I thought the £50 they asked for was too much. If only I had known then .... I'm also reminded when looking at a poster for the event on the internet that 'drag was optional' a dramatic example of the loosening of moral constraints taking place as early as 1966.

In thinking about that time in contrast to today, I have been struck by one overwhelming thought. In 1968 I did not, even for a moment, think we were on the brink of revolution—I might have thought that if I was in Paris, but I didn't think that being in London—laying bricks every day in Tottenham kept my feet firmly on the ground. But that didn't depress me—life was good, I was young, the sun was shining, I had a well-paid job, and the International Socialists was very exciting. But the contrast with today is enormous. I think we now need fundamental revolutionary change more than ever. It is now obvious that capitalism is destroying the planet through a combination of global warming and resource exhaustion; as well as pollution and environmental degradation. These 'four horseman' have been caused by its consumption-ist strategy developed after the war. The need to replace capitalism with a different world—some call it socialism—is now desperately urgent. This was a far off problem in 1968 but now one that must be resolved in the next 20–30 years if we are to survive as a species. We've lived through the most extraordinary epoch which is rapidly coming to a close and so for me whilst 1968 was a year to celebrate in the UK, 2018 requires revolutionary transformation at a time when the left unfortunately is historically weak. Not a good note to end on, but I am always heartened by the quote from that great Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci: We must have 'Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will', and that is one of my watchwords.

Gilda Petersen: Now we have Sarah Perrigo, who was at LSE, so she was right in the heart of the matter. People know she was a Senior Lecturer in Peace Studies at the University of Bradford for a long time, a former Labour councillor, long-time activist in the Labour Party and indeed foregoing a Labour Party selection meeting tonight to be here with us.

Sarah Perrigo speaking at the 2018 anniversary meeting while Mike McGrath, Gilda Peterson, Tom Steele and Louise Lavender look on. Source: Christian Hogsbjerg.

Sarah Perrigo: Thank you. Much has been written recently about the events of May 1968 on the 50th anniversary of the Paris events—some positive and others rather negative. I want to talk a bit about my experience of being a student heavily involved in the student activism of the period, with some brief analysis of why it happened, how it changed me personally and what in my view was the significance, long term of this period.

I was a student at the LSE from 1966–1970, from the beginning of the student movement in the UK to its slow decline in the 1970s. Characterized by demonstrations, sit-ins and fervent debate it represented a revolt against mainstream ideas around culture, politics and economics. It utterly changed my life and how I saw the world. I went to LSE to read law with a view to becoming a barrister. It was my experience at LSE and the ways in which that experience challenged my core values and beliefs that led me to transfer to study politics and in the end to become an academic and lifelong political activist.

Britain before the Mid-60s and the Changes Underlying Revolt

This revolt did not come out of the blue. Post-war Britain was changing in radical ways during the 50s and 60s.

If you look back to the 1950s Britain was a really conservative place; traditional and deferential. There was a stable social order with everyone in their place. Class was the dominant political cleavage but class relations were marked by deference and paternalism. Class was defined in terms that were assumed to be white and male.

Society was extremely patriarchal with clearly defined separate spheres and racism and imperialism were ubiquitous! The state was authoritarian and elitist. Democracy meant voting and little else. Ideas of citizenship and human rights were conspicuous by their absence from debate. I remember reading an article when I was at LSE called 'In defence of apathy'[17] which summed up the attitude of conventional political science—except for voting people should stay out of politics and allow elites to act on their behalf!

The Labour Party was socially and culturally conservative with a small 'c' with pronounced paternalistic and imperialist views and dominated by men and patriarchal attitudes.

However profound social economic and political changes were happening creating turbulence, new conflicts and a profound cultural questioning of everything.

Universities remained bastions of privilege—when I went to LSE in 1966 only around 6% of the population went to university. However universities were expanding rapidly after the Robbins report which meant more students were going to university and from more diverse backgrounds. The post war expansion of the state and welfare also meant a huge demand for professional white collar work primarily in the public sector—in education, the health service etc resulting in a new educated middle class. A shortage of labour post war also saw increasing numbers of married women in the workforce and a growth of immigration from the Commonwealth. The 1960s also saw the emergence of a new youth culture, challenging deference and authority—think back to rock and roll, mods and rockers for example. There were new cultural shifts in art and in the cinema—remember Truffaut and Jean Luc Goddard for example questioning established social mores. The demand for de-colonisation and anti-imperialist movements of the 1960s were leading to new criticisms and questioning of the role of Britain and the 'west' in the so called 'third world 'and growing criticisms for example of the US intervention in Vietnam and Smiths declaration of UDI in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). These events along with the growth of the civil rights movement in the USA and the assassination of Martin Luther King was leading to not only a questioning of imperialism and racism but to a critique of conventional economistic versions of Marxism and a turn towards concepts of political domination, oppression, subjectivity and liberation as well as the rise and development of what has been called 'the new left'.

The LSE

The LSE of which I was a part from 1966–1970 was a cauldron for the new ideas / questioning that were surfacing at this time and it witnessed the first students' occupation in 1967.

In many ways it should not come as a surprise that student revolt happened here first. LSE is a social science university whose role includes critical questioning of prevailing social, economic and political systems. It had a reputation for radical

[17] W.H. Morris Jones, 'In Defence of Apathy: Some Doubts on the Duty to Vote', *Political Studies*, 2, 1 (1954).

thinking. (In fact by the time I went there it was nowhere nearly as radical in terms of its faculty than it may have been in the past with of course some notable exceptions). Further a large percentage of its students were postgraduates from all over the world including students from the USA opposed to Vietnam and experience of the civil rights movement and students from countries where imperialism and colonialism were not just an academic concern but part of their lived reality, including students from apartheid South Africa and students from Rhodesia fleeing Smith's UDI. Geography was also crucial! LSE is in the heart of London, Fleet Street is just down the road, Bush House which was then the headquarters of the BBC was round the corner as were the embassies of South Africa, Rhodesia and the USA. It was easy to protest and demonstrate, and also very easy to gain publicity.

From the mid-1960s there were demonstrations over South Africa, Vietnam and Rhodesia. In 1967 there was the occupation of the Greek embassy by a group of LSE students plus members of the direct action committee of CND and some militant trade unionists who broadcast freedom messages to Athens against the military coup. As well as being instrumental in the organization of the huge demonstrations against the war in Vietnam we also marched against the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union in August 1968.

Student revolt spread to other universities and I remember travelling to universities across the country talking about our activities and demands and encouraging others to join with us. The organization, 'Students for a Democratic Society' was formed and provided a venue for coordinated actions.

Although LSE may have been one of the first to engage in student protest the movement was also international. American universities were also in turmoil and students in Germany and Holland and France were also in revolt. I remember in particular hosting German students from Berlin in 1968 and was impressed by their theoretical knowledge and discipline!

The issue that led to the first sit-in in a British university was over Rhodesia and UDI which had been declared in late 1965 and began the sequence of events that followed over the next few years. The LSE was to appoint a new director in 1967 to succeed Sir Sidney Caine. In their wisdom they chose to appoint Sir Walter Adams who had been the Vice Chancellor of University College Rhodesia. At UDI he failed to protect students who demonstrated against UDI. One of the students at LSE was Bhasker Vashee who had been a student at University College Rhodesia had been imprisoned by the Rhodesian regime and later exiled to the UK. The student union called a meeting to discuss the appointment of Adams but at the last minute the meeting was cancelled by the order of the Director and the doors to the lecture theatre were locked. Sidney Caine came down and told the students 'you are students and you have no right to discuss this issue'.

I found this all profoundly shocking. I went to LSE with a great faith in the liberal establishment and that faith was deeply shaken. I still have a badge made at the time which said we have no rights. The university attempt to punish the student union officials who had called the meeting led to the first sit-in which lasted for several months. The banning of the meeting and then the patronizing and punitive attitude of the senior academics raised huge issues for me and many other students. Our slogan in that sit-in

was 'Down with pedagogic gerontocracy' which sums it up really. We began to develop demands for free speech, democratizing the university and a say in our curriculum and its content. We developed a critique of the authoritarian and paternalistic university which mirrored critiques of dominant political institutions.

My memory of my time at LSE is dominated by the vibrancy and intensity of the debates and discussions that took place. It was truly exciting and I learned an enormous amount from participating in these debates and giving speeches in the LSE 'Old Theatre'. It gave me a confidence to speak in public as well as a thirst for knowledge and a commitment to contribute to changing the world. The student refectory and the 'Three Tuns' bar were hot beds of radical questioning, critique and argumentation. Primarily this was amongst students but also included many members of the faculty for example, John Griffiths and Michael Zander in the law department, Ralph Miliband in the department of government, Robin Blackburn in sociology (also a founder of *New Left Review*). Some eminent academics such as John Griffiths professor of administrative Law were blackballed and shunned by other academics in the university who took a less sympathetic attitude toward our actions and demands.

When the university attempted in 1969 to install gates at strategic places in the LSE buildings to prevent further occupations a student union decision was made to take the gates down. Some students and three members of academic staff (including Blackburn and the economist Lawrence Harris) dismantled the gates. This action led to one of the most damaging and upsetting situation that I experienced in all my time at the LSE. After the gates had been dismantled we went to the Three Tuns Bar to celebrate. Much wine and beer was consumed. At around closing time as we went to leave the bar we were confronted by the police and a group of senior academics. The academics pointed out those they thought were guilty of taking down the gates and they were taken away and arrested. Those of us who were not arrested then marched to Bow Street police station and sat down in the road where further arrests took place. In retrospect we were naïve in not expecting the university to retaliate and bring in the police but for me the sight of senior professors and university administrators pointing out students for arrest was very chilling and reinforced my disillusionment with the liberal establishment. The LSE was closed for over three weeks after this incidence. Legal action was taken against 13 people including the three staff. It marked the beginning of the end of the student revolt at the LSE.

The events in May 1968 in Paris and elsewhere in France have to be seen in part at least in the context of the wider international student movement. What perhaps made the Paris events unique was it temporarily bringing together of student protest with workers grievances that almost brought down De Gaulle and the whole 5th republic. (In LSE though there were attempts to build alliances with the trade unions and workers militancy, particularly through International Socialism (IS) which was particularly strong in LSE politics but for most students that was not the key focus).

I remember watching events in Paris unfold from London and vividly recall thinking that De Gaulle would fall and that anything was possible. There was an article written by Zolberg in 1972 on May 68 called 'Moments of madness'[18] when a

[18] A. R. Zolberg 'Moments of Madness', *Politics Society* (1972).

conjuncture of events seem to make real alternatives really possible. These moments are rare and they are fleeting and are probably illusory?

Impact of 68 and All That

This is a complex question. We clearly did not change the world! In the short term some of us went into academia, some into conventional politics. Others took more extreme and violent paths—the Weathermen in the USA and the Baader Meinhof and the Angry Brigade in Germany and Britain respectively but in my view many of the concerns, issues and problems that we thought important for a good society and were raised by us still remain prerequisites for a radical and progressive politics. Active citizenship, deepening democracy and participation, human rights, cultural change, human rights to name but a few. Out of the 68 generation came the second wave of feminism, anti-racism and multi-nationalism, internationalism, the environment movement and the peace movement and critiques of neo-colonial domination and authoritarianism. That these ideas have not gone away in the face of the entrenched economic and political power that exists is testimony to our success.

My experience of participating in the Momentum-organized 'The World Transformed' in the last two years reminded me in many ways of what I experienced at LSE and how inspiring and energizing debate, dialogue and critical questioning can be in resisting the view that there is no alternative to the present unjust and morally bankrupt system.

Gilda Petersen: Now we are jumping from the LSE and Paris to Leeds, with Tom Steele, who was at university and then became an academic and has written several books on cultural history, and he is now in the Labour Party and back in Otley having finished as a Reader in the History and Theory of Adult Education, so he has stayed with the working class all the way through.

Tom Steele:

I did my best. I want to start with two slogans from Paris in May 1968:

'Look! Under the streets, the beaches!'

'Demand the Impossible!'

1968 for me was the apex of a trajectory that began in when I arrived in Leeds as an undergraduate in 1964 and felt an immediate affinity. It was my first encounter with sophisticated metropolitans, Marxist intellectuals, anarchists, bohemian artists from the School of Art, an assertive working class movement and cannabis resin. *Private Eye* was the only news organ you could rely on. I went to a lunchtime talk by the great debater, Alan Hunt, on 'Why I am a Communist' and thought yes, but.

I started doing Law (in the same year group as Jack Straw) but changed a year later to do Philosophy and English where I met John Quail, charismatic leader of the Direct Action group, and other anarchists. I was also influenced by Martin Milligan the blind Communist philosopher, more by his character and humanity than his

politics, who was my personal tutor, and Edwin Yeats an inspirational Gramsciist and leader of the New Left, in English Literature. I joined Drama Society drawing posters for Brecht's *Fear and Misery in the Third Reich*, and later painted scenery for Whiting's *The Devils* (with Alan Yentob in lead role as Grandier, and Carol Hayman as a very erotic nun). There were the bacchanalian, beer sodden, Saturday night dances with every great British rock band you could imagine from Gino Washington to the Rolling Stones and the occasional American Tamla bands like Wilson Pickett. Permanent political seminars took place in the back room of the Pack Horse and the Eldon with, occasionally, Jake Thackeray singing.

A signal moment for me outside of Leeds was the Poets International Conference at Albert Hall in 1965 with a gin drenched Alan Ginsburg, and some of the Beat Poets like Gregory Corso and Laurence Ferlinghetti; there were German concrete poets hissing and spitting, and the Russian dissident poet Andrei Voznesenky, but I guess personally the revelation for me was Adrian Mitchell, a small illuminated figure in the pit of the arena, reading his poem 'Tell me Lies about Vietnam' and suddenly the underground seem to have erupted onto central stage and it all made sense.

Our Direct Action group which came out of the dissident CND breakaway, Committee of a Hundred, was heavily involved in the anti-Vietnam War demonstrations, as well as occupying new buildings in town and hanging out our slogan banner 'People before Profits' in support of the Squatters movement. We went on big demos in Sheffield and London and Jack Straw contemptuously dismissed us as 'demonstration fodder'. DA meetings sometimes included speakers like Jeff Nuttall whose book *Bomb Culture* was a celebration of the libertarian spirit of resistance we imagined would change the world.

I missed the first demonstration at Leeds University against the apartheid supporting Tory MP, Patrick Wall, where his wife tripped over a demonstrator and lost a little of her fragrance, which incensed the tabloids and *Telegraph* to demand retribution. To which Leeds University responded with a not too subtle inquiry into students' politics which led ultimately to the sit-in of June. The march from the Students' Union, led by the President Jack Straw, where we had taken the vote to occupy the administrative block of the Parkinson Building seemed an extraordinary moment of transgression, as barriers and security guards were vaulted, to occupy the administrative balcony in the Parkinson Building. Fuelled by images of the Paris insurrection of May and the occupation of the LSE, the student movement seemed unstoppable. There were inspirational seminars (with sympathetic staff) about transforming the university and running the sit-in with direct participation. A young Harold Best, later MP for North West Leeds and consistent rebel against Blairite policies, brought us the Leeds Trades Council banner and declared solidarity between workers and students! But it was stoppable as Jack Straw soon sold us out to the VC Sir Roger Stevens.

After the Fall

By the Autumn of '68 after summer break and despite plastering the university and the streets around with posters and slogans like 'Paris today Leeds tomorrow!' and

'Who watches you?' (referring to the files we believed were being kept on student activists) it became clear the revolutionary moment had not materialized and we were in for the long haul. I left Direct Action and signed up to the Leeds New Left, Mayday Manifesto group, reading Andre Gorz on 'revolutionary reformism', Perry Anderson's 'Components of the national culture' and other analyses of the Left's failure to seize the time. At the national conference of the May Day Manifesto, the Leeds group called for a new Socialist Party but, although it won the day, found itself isolated from the metropolitan leadership. However, a number of us from the old Direct Action group including John Quail, Louise Lavender, Andrew and Jan Lloyd, Manuel and Shirley Moreno and most importantly since he was the only one who actually knew how to run a newspaper, Dave Williams, decided to start an oppositional organ to the dire *Evening Post* (then owned by Yorkshire Conservative Newspapers). And so the *Other Paper* was born, the precursor to the—much more professional—*Leeds Other Paper* some years later.

We saw the need for a cultural revolution to underpin the political struggle—'Politics by other means', critique of bourgeois hegemony, history from below, long march through the institutions etc. I graduated in 1969 and started a Master's dissertation on TS Eliot's literary conservativism that led (very) eventually to my book on *Alfred Orage and the Leeds Arts Club* (1990) twenty years later, that revealed Leeds had a radical underbelly that, once understood, might revitalise a radical local politics.

While working through these ideas at a snail's pace, it could be said, I was fortunate to be appointed as a Tutor Organiser for the Workers' Educational Organisation in Swarthmore (1973–1988). The WEA had long been the educational arm of the Labour Movement and Yorkshire (North) had always been its most radical district, particularly under its charismatic founding District Secretary, George Thompson (1914–1947). E.P. Thompson (no relation) had written *The Making of the English Working Class* while teaching WEA/Leeds University joint committee courses here and many other radical teachers and intellectuals had taught classes at Swarthmore including the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre and the psychoanalyst Harry Guntrip. But in the post war years the WEA had lost much of its radical edge. The Russell Report of 1975 however had tried to re-centre its commitment to the working class through trade union education and work with 'the deprived'—what Thompson's successor, Fred Sedgwick who appointed me and had written the bulk of the WEA's submission to the report, called the 'unfinished business' of working-class education. So the Leeds WEA branch set about trying to turn back the tide and offered courses about radical politics, anti-imperialism, peace studies, women's liberation, Marxist political economy, trade union day schools, ecology, anti-racism, radical psychology, political philosophy, cultural studies … and of course, birdwatching. The Pavilion women's photography space, the first of its kind, was developed from the critical art history courses taught by Shirley Moreno, Dinah Clarke, Caroline Taylor and Griselda Pollock.

Then, when Ralph Miliband was appointed Prof. of Politics at Leeds University in 1975 or thereabouts [1972], a number of us started a Centre for Marxist Education at Swarthmore, drawing over 100 people a week to Ralph's Lectures, with *Capital* reading groups, and Women and Marxism groups, writing groups and

various other seminars and activities. We got some satisfaction when the *Evening Post* declared us a disgrace and encouraged the citizens of Leeds to make their objections plain (none did).

After fifteen years with the WEA, I left to become an independent researcher and then in 1990, joined Leeds University's Department of Adult and Continuing Education as a Research Fellow and then lecturer. Here I worked with Dick Taylor on a number of projects and did the research which culminated in *The Emergence of Cultural Studies* (1996) in which I tried to show that the foundations of what had become the academic field called Cultural Studies could be found in the radical interdisciplinary and counter-hegemonic practices of WEA adult education. These were developed in the 1920s and 30s, in which the Yorkshire District played a leading role, especially through George Thompson's pamphlet, 'The Field of Study for WEA Courses', and were later consolidated after WWII in the works of WEA/Extra Mural teachers such as E.P. Thompson's *Making*, Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society* and Leeds-born Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*. To mark its commitment to its civic responsibilities, the university closed the department around 2004.

I joined Glasgow University's Department of Continuing Education in 1996 where we developed a Masters in Adult and Community Education centred in Gramscian and Freireian theory. Despite its successful recruitment of community adult educators and widespread provision of liberal arts courses, this department was also closed a few years later as surplus to requirements. From enjoying a fertile collaboration with the European Society for Research into the Education of Adults (ESREA), I wrote *Knowledge is Power! the Rise and Fall of Popular Education Movements 1848–1939* (2007). As an unrepentant *soixante-huitard*, I've always tried to put the oppositional spirit of 1968 and the consequent critique of bourgeois forms of hegemony and proletarian resistance into my work and writing to show there are *always* alternatives to the culture of individualistic consumption and oppressive wage slavery. In the Centre for Marxist Education we adopted the slogan 'Educate yourselves for we need all our intelligence! Organise yourselves for we need all our strength!' I don't think it has dated.

In conclusion, the last words must go to John Quail (now Dr. John), whose message from his Scottish estate to the meeting at Swarthmore, embodies to perfection the spirit of '68:

> 'Please give fraternal greetings to the assembled veterans. Remind them of the importance of seizing the moment and the importance of mobility rather than set piece confrontation in situations where occupation and the creation of zones libres are not possible. Point out to them the importance when turning over cars to form a barricade, the underside of the car should be facing the forces of the state. (We practiced this, do you remember?) Note also the more recent use of locked chains of shopping trolleys on their side as suitable for preventing the use of police horses. Tell them also to practice combat moves with their zimmer frames and walking sticks and explore the use of Boadicea type knives tied to the wheels of their mobility scooters. Also to have their medication with them at all times. Be realistic: demand the impossible!'

Gilda Petersen: Thank you Tom. We heard a bit about anarchism and feminism in Leeds there, so now onto Lou Lavender, to tell us more about that.

Louise Lavender speaking. Source: Christian Hogsbjerg.

Louise Lavender: I can't tell you how fortunate I have been in my life, but one of the greatest strokes of fortune was a) to end up at Leeds University, and b) be 22 in 1968. It was the most fabulous, exciting, exhilarating time and like everybody else who was there it really set off my entire life, but a life lived as a political life with politics being part of everyday life—not politics 'out there', or just in an organization, but in everything you do and say, and it all started there.

In 1968 we had already had a lot of practice demonstrating. We demonstrated against the Vietnam War which then had started, so we were quite well versed in that. I arrived in Leeds in 1964, the same year as Tom. I remember demonstrating against Harold Wilson being made Chancellor of the new Bradford University in 1966. It was good to be out there on the streets. That became a bug that I relished.

I had a very exciting time last night going on the internet, because my memory is so bad. A lot of things happened in 1968. We were demonstrating already against the Vietnam War, so we were looking at the United States in that way, and January 30 1968—the Tet Offensive—this was big news—and this the first televised war and this seemed like a very big deal for us, and the recent series on Vietnam shows that it was.[19] It was interesting that in the end it failed, but we thought it was going to succeed, and might be the beginning of something moving. We had a lot of visiting students from America so we were well in touch with what was going on on the campuses, we were getting politicized and we paid great attention to students being teargassed, being arrested and dragged away in front of cameras on the TV news. That was all new. The world out there was quite a dangerous place… assassinations—Martin Luther King April the 4th, Bobby Kennedy, June the 5th, this was not looking good, this was the arm of the state. We were organizing boycotts of South African goods and campaigns against investment companies there. We were not travelling to Spain, Rumania, Bulgaria, Greece. August 20th I was in Belgrade, and I woke up to the sound of tanks rolling through the streets, we all went to the window to see Yugoslavian tanks rolling along the streets, and it turned out they were going to the Yugoslavian borders in case the Soviets decided to come that way as well as

[19] Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, *The Vietnam War* (2017). See http://kenburns.com/films/vietnam/

going into Czechoslovakia, because Tito really was running a very liberal state at the time.

Closer to home, we have to remember the strong arm of the law. The police brutality was excessive. Not just Grosvenor Square, but the following year David Oluwale was the first black man to die in police custody, and we all marched down to Millgarth police station, which has now been pulled down, there was a big street demonstration going down to Millgarth and we just stood outside and chanted 'Oluwale, Oluwale, Oluwale'.[20] We really thought that we could change things, and there was enough indication that though the state was very strong and very violent against us, there was enough going on to make you think you could actually make a difference.

Being at Leeds University was particularly good. The guys coming back from the Second World War, who survived, were older and when they came to Leeds, they set up a university union building that was independent of the University, and University staff had no rights of entry into that building. They also set up *Union News* as an independent student newspaper, so there was never any question of the University censoring anything that was said in the *Union News*. When I started my sociology course, a hot bed of socialism, Professor Grebenik said in his opening address to us about what you are not to do—and we were *not* to join Drama Soc and *Union News*, so we all went off and joined Drama Soc and *Union News*, and that was very good because the *Union News* experience was very useful when we set up our own independent paper. Drama Soc was wonderful, we visited the international student drama festival, one year it was in Istanbul, but mostly it was in various towns in Yugoslavia. When the war happened in Yugoslavia I couldn't believe it, and felt completely shell shocked because what we experienced then was a great coming together of people our age, in Yugoslavia, and we thought it was the most wonderful place.

West Yorkshire was the region the ILP started, before our time. Leeds was the city Owen Latimore came to, to set up a Chinese department when he had been thrown out of the US by the House Un-America Activities Committee. As Tom said, we had a strong Drama Soc, with Alan Yentob featuring prominently in it. And we had a tradition of huge, well attended student debates in the Riley Smith Hall. They were always completely packed out and the political persuasions were marked by departments. So Sociology, English, Drama, the Arts, or the Humanities, we were on the Left. And then to the accompaniment of boos as they came in, because they never politically did anything else, was Chemistry, Physics, Engineering, trooping down the road, and that was the arena where was a big debate about Patrick Wall. The Tories were very strong, the socialists were very strong, the anarchists were very strong, and the Communist Party was very strong. So it was a very very politicized place. If you got onto 'Ents' (Entertainment) you were on a winner. If you go to the Refectory now, they have lined the walls with posters with the bands that came to play at Refec, year after year after year, and it is completely gobsmacking. The Who *Live at Leeds*, 1970, the best live band album ever. Because we were in this vibrant student union, we got to travel a lot, with Drama Soc but I also went with a group

[20] A memorial campaign for David Oluwale has been established in Leeds www.rememberoluwale.org

organized by the Communist Party to visit Dresden. The attraction of that was to get behind the Iron Curtain, I thought when else in my life am I going to get there, and that was very interesting, a bunch of students going on a work camp in Dresden and hearing about what the British had done. In Bradford at the University Albert Hunt ran a very vibrant, political drama department, and he did do a play about the firestorm that was caused in Dresden, and he did do a play about Bomber Harris as well, so sometimes we were looking back and re-evaluating the last war. When we travelled to Yugoslavia we found that the Brits were in favour, when we travelled to Athens, the Brits were spat on, because Churchill had backed the right wing. In Yugoslavia the SOE [Special Operations Executive] had actually supported the partisans, so one campsite we turned up at very late at night, the camp director heard us speaking and thought we were German, and found us a place and set us up, and then came over and joined us and listened a bit more and said, 'I'm very sorry I thought you were German, the price is very different if you are English'. By compensation he organized a trip for us out in a speedboat to an island owned by the municipality and had seafood cooked in an outdoor oven and got drunk on slivovitza all day, in the blazing sun, a marvellous day.

The sit-in at Parkinson court was packed, we were sleeping there overnight, we sleeping up on the balcony. The big banner said 'Revolution'. The biggest frisson was when someone said 'The Renault workers have come out in support of the students' and that was May 19th, and that was truly exciting, that was a game changer, and we were not seeing anything like that in this country.

With hindsight, I think it's fairly obvious, what failed was that politics begins at home. It took a long time to persuade men of this fact and it involved women liberating themselves, sharpening up their own identity, using the skills that they learnt while they were organizing in the left, using them for our own purposes. We were already politicized, we could organize and we had learnt about public speaking and to be wary of leadership, and we had learned to be wary of oratory, and we had woken up to the fact that when you say 'Revolution' you have to treat that term with wariness as well, because the sexual revolution, one of the outcomes was that it gave men more access to women's bodies, and took time for that message to get across as well.

Tom Steele: I remember arguing with you at the time, saying 'It was a diversion from the class struggle' … sorry!

Gilda Petersen: Anyway, we survived … Max. Lots of people know Max, he has done all sorts, freelance photography, Chapeltown activist, academic, now Emeritus Professor at Leeds Beckett University, set up Taking Soundings and Leeds for Change.

Max Farrar speaking while Louise Lavender looks on. Source: Christian Hogsbjerg.

Max Farrar: What was it like to be in Leeds in 1968? I arrived here in October 1968, having just turned 19, to study sociology. Immediately I was excited by the revolutionary spirit in Leeds because the fine old buildings that made up the university campus had been painted in white capitals with slogans supporting the REVOLUTIONARY SOCIALIST STUDENT FEDERATION (RSSF). I now hear the Tom was one of the people who painted those inspiring slogans! I expect Louise was out there too.

I'd been radicalized in the mid-1960s by the American civil rights movement and some of its books, particularly James Baldwin's novels and essays and Malcolm X's autobiography. I'd applauded British Black Power radicals at Speakers' Corner in London and then was electrified by the May 1968 events in France that I watched on the family TV while doing my A levels in Hemel Hempstead. I really thought there could be a revolution and I wanted to be in there. In my naivety I assumed the RSSF graffiti meant that there was a huge revolutionary movement in Leeds.

The university campus amazed me in another way: apparently, there was this huge building devoted only to students' activities. I was gob-smacked. We actually control this building? Every Monday lunch-time the foyer of the Students' Union was lined with tables each offering the papers and pamphlets of a myriad of political organizations from the Conservatives to the far left. Each table had piles of one-page duplicated bulletins that cost 1 penny (old money) and set out the views of each sect. I read them all. The Trotskyists wrote in double-dutch and the anarchists wrote in mockney and made me laugh. So I teamed up with the anarchists and went to the first meeting of the RSSF.

The Swan with Two Nicks [Necks] in Woodhouse (I'm sure that was its original name) was absolutely packed and I remember feeling completely baffled by all the speeches, but John Quail, the most vociferous of the anarchists impressed me

most.[21] Then I didn't hear anything more about the RSSF. No address lists circulated—those in the know stayed in the know, and I didn't know anything.

But it was exciting and it proved that revolution was in the air, and I booked a seat on the coach for the anti-Vietnam war demonstration arranged for later that month. I remember hearing that John Quail had gone into training by running around Hyde Park [Woodhouse Moor in Leeds] wearing heavy boots. He was intending to join the Maoist faction that would attack the US embassy in Grosvenor Square. Jane and I took the moderate course and stayed with Tariq Ali and the main demo. We marched behind an enormous red banner from Hornsey College of Art that said STORM THE REALITY STUDIO—RETAKE THE UNIVERSE. Later, I found out this was the Situationist section of the demo, and I was glad I'd been with them. I wrote about some of this not so long ago and I asked John Quail what happened to the Leeds branch of the RSSF. Now this will really surprise you: it collapsed within a couple of months. And the reason will surprise you even more: no-one could agree about anything.

For me, there were two great things about this period. I was swept up in a radical movement that gave me enormous confidence. Too much confidence, I now see. We really believed that we could force this moribund country of ours, and the rest of the world, to change. We started from where we were at, in the university, and pushed for important changes. And we actively supported anti-imperialist revolutionaries like the Viet Cong.

Secondly, I met some beautiful people. 'Beautiful people' were something you read about in the underground press, and here they were. Two of whom are here tonight. Tom Steele was the best-dressed man in the students' union and he told me that Britain was still waiting for its bourgeois revolution. I didn't know what that meant but I was mightily impressed. Here was a handsome thinker. I learned much later that this was the view of Tom Nairn and Perry Anderson's New Left group, and I think I now understand what they were on about. Tom Steele also sold me for about six pence copies of home-made literary magazines with titles like Revolver. He saw that good politics required great cultural creativity. I think that's a good idea that the 1960s pushed forward.

John Quail wrote plays and he let me writhe about on stage in a show called Onan Isle Ate which I suspect should have been banned, but so free were those days that no-one objected. He made speeches that combined a proper ranting voice with great knowledge and a true disrespect for authority. Louise Lavender was a postgrad student whose contributions to the staff-student sociology committee were always the best and she was gorgeous to boot. As she still is.

They were all in their twenties and so they were really grown-up. I'd read the Yippie epithet 'Never Trust A Man Over Thirty' (the gendered language is significant) and I believed it. I visited the communal house in Brudenell Road where Louise lived and saw Maureen Kennedy sawing a plank of wood to make some furniture. So this was the women's liberation that I was hearing about. I wanted some of that too and I had enough sense to listen to what they had to say and read their pamphlets. Louise and her friends formed the first women's liberation group in Leeds and the city was all the better

[21] The 'Swan with Two Necks' was a public house on Raglan Road, LS6.

for that. By no means all the men in these 1968 days were listening to what these inspiring women were saying, but some of us tried to, and we're still learning.

I mention these people because they were some of the vivid examples of actual, sentient revolutionaries whose lives, thoughts and feelings I could identify with. It's a cliché, but it's the people you meet at crucial moments who really make you change. I was so lucky to meet people like these.

What of 1968 is Relevant Today?

Some of you might have read a recent article on 1968 by Tariq Ali in the *London Review of Books*.[22] There's lots of interesting stuff in it, but the point I want to highlight is his argument that real change will only come when there are huge social movements combined with some kind of left party. I left the anarchists, and I left the Leeds Libertarians that formed in the early 1970s, with no affection for Tariq's Fourth International and its delusions of being The Party, but I had become frustrated with the parochialism of the libertarians and their belief that only local, small organizations had any political value. I wanted to be in some kind of national organization that would think collectively and intervene in every type of struggle with practical ideas derived from its learning in class struggles and from contemporary theory.

I joined a tiny revolutionary socialist and feminist organization, with distinct libertarian tendencies, called Big Flame. We too tried to combine culture and politics, to combine the personal and the political, and to resist the self-aggrandising tendencies of the Trotskyists and Leninists. We pioneered what is now called intersectional theory and practice. I think Big Flame was right not to claim to lead, but to learn, and to offer its energy and ideas to help grow the movements. Its libertarian, feminist, anti-racist and internationalist principles were born in Generation 68 and have stood the test of time.[23]

Big Flame failed, of course, but I remain committed to its central idea, that a broad alliance of social movements, including working class people, and people of other classes, of all colours, abilities, sexual orientations and genders must be the spearhead of real change. This too is a very 1968 idea. I now see that some of these movements are unstable and somewhat serendipitous; more significantly, they have much less social weight in Britain than they did in the 1960s, 70s and 80s.

And I now believe (as Big Flame was beginning to) that the movements need a party that supports their aspirations and can gain legitimacy through the ballot box. A party that learns from the movements and channels their dreams and demands. In this sense I've departed from my 1968 self: I don't want a 'seizure of power' by the workers and students, I want democratic transitions that take the majority with them, knowingly and willingly. Power is not to be seized, it's to be grown, democratically, with all voices and feelings included. To employ the Gramscian idea that Stuart Hall and others have championed, we need to achieve hegemony for our

[22] 'That was the year that was: Tariq Ali talks to David Edgar', *London Review of Books*, 24 May 2018.
[23] See Max Farrar and Kevin McDonnell, *Big Flame: Rethinking Radical Politics* (Merlin Press, forthcoming).

dream of radical equality, freedom and people's power. The movements at their best exemplify that dream. I doubt that Corbyn's Labour can be the party we need, but I've joined it just in case.

Questions from the Floor

Question: This is a question for Louise—you suggested that the revolution failed because it wasn't inclusive enough—is that still an issue today?

Louise: Oh yes. Look how long it took for the #MeToo and #TimesUp movement—and that is absolutely revolutionary what has happened there, and that has been on slow boil. Feminists were saying this stuff fifty years ago, seriously, and it is only because you have to keep on—it is not a revolution, it's a plod, it really is—you have got to do it long-term and not give up. That is why I meant that your politics has got to be part of your everyday life, don't give up even though it's hard, with Trump and Brexit—but remember what it was like. Police used to beat you up with truncheons at the drop of a hat—it was tough, but we did make a lot of differences.

Question: When was the LSE occupied in 1968?

Tom: October 1968.

Sarah: I found myself standing on the edge of Grosvenor Square right by the US Embassy with a friend of mine, we had somehow got through the barricades and we looked behind us and there were all these big mounted police with students behind them. The two of us just looked at each other and said 'what do we do now?', as there were just two of us, right by the US Embassy surrounded by police, an amazing experience.

Gilda: There were the two anti-Vietnam War demonstrations, the first there was quite a lot of violence from the police. I do recollect the student leaders coming out and saying 'All Out' for the October one, and we thought we would get millions on the street, this is a peaceful mass movement, this is not a punch up, this is real. I went on that, it was huge, it was incredibly peaceful, I thought 'that will show them'. Lets look at the press tomorrow—they will have to eat their words—I looked at the press the next day—it just said there were six people doing something. Someone mentioned the day they lost their faith in the police that is when I lost any of my faith in the press. I go on many demonstrations still now and I was saying to somebody the other day, and you think where are the people who cracked the windows at Harrods now, because we get no coverage for your protests when nothing happens.

Question: Is there any photographic evidence of the sit-in in Leeds Parkinson court?

Max: The Brotherton Library has a complete set of *Union News* which subsequently became *Leeds Student* [and is now *The Gryphon*] and they were quite decent student

newspapers with photographers I am sure there would be photos of the 1968 occupation. There was another occupation in 1971 as well, on a completely trumped up premise, everyone else was having occupations so we had to have one, we had no good reason at all but it lasted a week though. I can't remember now what we were occupying for in 1971.

Sarah: On the press thing, the *Morning Star* had a photograph of a demonstration, and my friend and I were at the front of this demonstration, and so every time there was a future demonstration the *Morning Star* just used the same photograph again …

Contribution [Tony Harcup]: I am slightly younger than you all and in 1968 I was starting secondary school in East London. My experience of 1968 was very different—there were other things going on—it was Enoch Powell's Rivers of Blood speech in April 1968, and that set an atmosphere in the area I was hanging about which was nothing to do with revolution and insurrection, but there were some marches, unfortunately by dock workers and market workers, in London saying 'Enoch was right'. So there was mobilization in support of racism by white working class people going on, so we shouldn't pretend it was all kind of incredibly positive. But more positively even though I as a school kid didn't pick up what was happening in terms of progressive stuff in Paris, or the LSE at the time, but I did feel that over the next few years the effects of it as it go on, people go on and do other things, become teachers and so on, so the ripples of 1968 go on. The people who set up *Leeds Other Paper* for example a few years later had the knowledge and knew it was possible as other people had set up the *Other Paper* and people in the United States had done this.

Louise: It is also true that the *Other Paper* was part of a movement across the country, with small, local, independent, alternative radical newspapers. I was astounded the *Highlands and Islands Press* went on for years and years and years, and is still going, it must be the only ones left.

Sarah: When the dockers marched in support of Powell, at the LSE we had some students who argued that you should support the dockers because they were in a trade union—and I was actually appalled by that. It led to a big division among us at the time. The question of where people went afterwards is really fascinating. I was friends with some of the SDS [Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund—Socialist German Students Union] in Germany, some of whom later became part of the Baader Meinhof group. You had the Angry Brigade in Britain, the Weathermen in America, and you had the Black Panthers, all committed in some form to violence—and then you had other people like Jack Straw who went into conventional politics, some of us went into academia. For me one of the biggest things that came out of it was then called the New Social Movements, which was the women's movement, the environment movement, the peace movement and the way in which they began to rethink politics too in terms of grassroots democracy, no hierarchy, giving people a voice, no membership—that kind of radical democracy which came right through

and started in the 1960s and went into Greenham Common—and the women's liberation movement, and so that notion of liberation continued through.

Contribution [Alex Platt]: Talking about the ripples from 1968, I went to Leeds University in 1997, and for me that was very much a low point in the sense students were generally not interested in politics, so for me 1968 didn't really seem much of the consciousness of my generation at all. To be more positive, I think the past year or so has for me politically been the most exciting time in the sense that compared to 1997 now everything is up for grabs, and I think for those who are 18 and starting university now the possibilities are there.

Contribution [Barry Winter]: I was also a student in Leeds in 1968, originally coming to study Philosophy and Politics. However, I found the first year so incredibly boring that I changed to Sociology. The pompous Politics lecturer really put me off. He once declared: 'There's is no poverty in Britain today, apart from the 0.25% of the population who are mentally retarded'. As a former student teacher in Stoke, I'd taught kids coming to school in their slippers. So I thought what does this guy know about the world?'

But what really fired me up politically was the student occupation during my Masters year. It lasted for about five days and was in response to the VC's use of security staff to spy on left-wing students and the books they had on their shelves. During the occupation, I was in a group where many saw the renowned John Quail as our leader. Wanting us to think for ourselves, he kept saying 'I am not your leader!' On the first day of the occupation, I still recall excitedly taking down a notice which read 'No unauthorised persons beyond this point'. It felt empowering because it was challenging that restricted, smug, conservative 1960s world of deference … and it put me in touch with trouble-makers like you!

Contribution [Sam Kirk]: I was too young to remember 1968, but I was also a student at Leeds University, but during the miners' strike [1984–85] and the effect that campaign had on a whole generation of us was absolutely amazing. Me and my friend we were outside Morrisons every single Monday with our buckets, collecting, going and visiting the picket lines to deliver the money—and the impact of the workers on the students was massive and had a huge impact. I remember the Riley Smith Hall, every Tuesday at 1 pm we had our OGM, absolutely fantastic, genuine debates with some horrific Tories, but the left was strong as well. I remember we wrote a motion to ban the *Sun* from the shops in the University and we got it passed. I am convinced we got that passed because we had the confidence from what the miners were doing and what the miners' wives were doing—all those things were joined together.

My son is now at University and I am horrified that they don't have student union meetings, that the elections are done on the internet, there are no debates to have for people to get elected, and at Huddersfield University I understand that all political organizations are banned. Now that is an absolutely terrible situation for our young people to have where they don't get to debate ideas, but it doesn't have to stay like that if there are thousands and thousands of young people inspired by Corbyn and

are interested in politics. My son again has been inspired, and been absolutely brilliant in getting other students to support the UCU members who have been on strike recently—and in general student have supported their lecturers which is fantastic because they realize the impact of neoliberalism on their education as well, and I am absolutely confident that one day the students will get back the Riley Smith Hall for what it is designed for—political debate.

Contribution [Roger Kojan]: I was at Durham University in 1968 but got thrown out in 1969 for various activities including organizing coaches to Vietnam demonstrations, both March and October. There was a big counter-cultural thing which overlapped with the political events. I remember going to watch Pink Floyd playing for free to 15,000 people, and at the end I clearly remember everyone picked up all the litter and put it in the bins—so there was an environmental consciousness going on around at the same time. In Northern Ireland there was the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association formed in 1967 and I was very conscious about that—and obviously there are still ramifications from that today we could think about as well.

Contribution [Stuart Stanton]: To my mind the most important act of direct action on the British mainland actually happened in 1969 when the Welsh Language society tried to blow up the railway line—not the train—to stop Prince Charles getting to Caernarfon. It was a really serious attempt at direct action against the British establishment—but I have no idea about the links between Welsh nationalism and 1968 but it was all part of the same struggle. I was at Bingley College of Education in 1968 and we went on strike as well and had people arrested in London at the October Grosvenor Square demonstration. Recently I had a sense of the spirit of 1968 when I went to a big Momentum event in Liverpool the year before last, 'The World Transformed', in terms of the completely chaotic nature of the thing organizationally, but also the serious level of debate. It reminded me a bit of the meetings at the LSE I went down to in 1968.

Sarah: I agree—the Momentum 'World Transformed' events I went to were the closest I have felt again to the LSE in 1968, so the possibilities may still be there despite everything …

Contribution [Christian Høgsbjerg]: Thanks to all the speakers for their fascinating talks which really gave us a flavour of the revolutionary spirit of 1968. In terms of the Labour Party, in 1968 I think just about the only prominent young person who joined Labour that year on the left was Ken Livingstone—everyone else was leaving given Harold Wilson's verbal support for the Vietnam War, I am thinking of the Ralph Steadman cartoon …

Tom Steele: Wilson didn't send troops though, and it was the Seamen's Strike of 1966 that was the big issue.

Max: We weren't very in favour of the Labour Party then though, that is true.

Christian: Another contrast is how lecturers have gone from being a 'pedagogic gerontocracy' to being proletarianized over the past fifty years, and recently we have had the magnificent fourteen days of UCU strikes which shook the world of higher education. In terms of students in 1968, back then there were full grants, completely free education—back when he was a student leader Jack Straw I think once gave a speech about how 'students had to choose between a book and their lunch'—well thanks to Jack Straw and New Labour students now have had tuition fees and massive debts. So while students were quite a relatively privileged layer in 1968 and cut off from the working class, now students have to work much more—that is partly why it is harder to get radical political activity going, as they have to work all the time, and all the stress that comes with that, but the potentiality for links now to form between workers and students when you do see either workers struggling or students struggling—it is much more automatic and organic now in a way that back in 1968 it was more of an aspiration and harder to get in reality. A final point—when we heard about how Leeds University Union and *Union News* was set up and free from censorship from the University authorities, that was such a contrast with the student paper now—and the Student Union—which are both completely in sync with what the University wants. I went to Leeds University in 1998 and you still had a glimpse then of what the student union and its newspaper was meant to be about—you would walk into the union and see political posters everywhere, the union was serious about campaigning for students and with the paper investigating and exposing things the University would rather students didn't know about—now I am afraid all that has completely gone. I guess though it could come back one day …

Louise: It could come back though, yes, you have to wait for something to ignite the student population, and there were some tremendous marches of students in support of the lecturers recently from the campus down into town. What I find though is that my generation were all feminists and identified as such and the younger generation are not. Now the girls are not engaged, they keep saying 'we thought the battle was won', when it patently isn't. This is not because they have had bad mothers—but there is that swing factor, isn't there. When Trump was elected there was a radio series about reactions to this, and the swing factor, first one way and then the other—and I think that is an important perspective to have on politics, when you are feeling despairing, the road isn't straight, things will turn again …

Gilda: It is about the tiny struggles that are going on, they are the little tiny bonfires that you warm yourself on, whether it's a march, or a protest or a strike or supporting it—it gives people a sense of 'frisson', of potency to change things, and that feeling never quite leaves you once you have experienced it. Some of the struggles in 1968 were about really little things, not Vietnam or big issues, but little issues to do with democracy in the University, but whether it was Vietnam, or the miners' strike, or anti-apartheid, or the current victory around abortion rights in Ireland, or the recent UCU strike, there are always struggles going on that people can unite around.

Louise: To give you an example of what Gilda is talking about, I volunteer at Feminist Archive North, which is housed in Special Collections in the Brotherton Library, and we have a huge collection of materials for those not familiar with it, and every year we have an exhibition for International Women's Day. So we had one this year in the Sheppard Room with two whole boards with examples of the #MeToo campaign and for example we had a quote from Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan saying 'women's genitals should be cut out if they transgress'. A young woman came in at the end, with her boyfriend, and she stood there looking at this board, and I realized that she was in tears. And so I said, 'oh, gosh is there something here that has sparked it off?' and she said 'I just hadn't realised there was so much of it'. I don't know how she had not seen it, but if you don't buy a paper maybe, I don't know, but it was just the impact of it. So it was just a small thing, but it made us feel that we could make sense of something, that felt we had made some sense for that young woman's world.