

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Sixties Europe by Timothy Scott Brown

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*Sixties Europe*. By Timothy Scott Brown. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. ix+241 pp.

1968 and the “long sixties” have been at the forefront of scholarly and public interest since their rediscovery in 2008, on the 40th anniversary of perhaps the most salient year of the decade. This is true in no small part because “1968,” as a kind of shorthand, is a way to refer to the transnational and global character of contemporary culture and politics. Timothy Scott Brown, professor of history at Northeastern University, Boston, is one of the most important historians of this period, and his contributions have been paramount to dismantling the national framings of the 1960s protests and revolts and the reframing of 1968 in a global setting.<sup>1</sup> His new book, *Sixties Europe*, continues and revisits themes he has touched on before. This book adheres firmly to a discussion of 1968 as a range of cross-national and interconnected struggles and affirms the deeply shared, global nature of its concerns. Admitting the relevance of anti-colonial struggles, particularly, Vietnam for radicals in Europe and their connections to extra-European activists, Brown nonetheless makes an important revisionist claim that Europe was central in shaping the forms and content of 1960s activism worldwide and that 1968 was a deeply European project. In Brown’s words, Europe provided the most important pool of postmaterialist values, movements in Europe rendered ways of living and the role of culture central for any critique of society and it was the most important site of negotiating the ways of organization of societies (p.3).

Brown makes three important points when he explains why Europe was of central importance in making 1968 a global event. First, he argues that politics was the emphatic concern of the revolt of the 1960s. Second, he highlights that 1968 presumed the transformation of everyday life as a condition for political change and strove for a coalition of movements in art, ways of life, and politics proper. Third, Brown considers the European scenes as vital in transforming decolonization and the antiimperialist struggles into a genuine global issue. However, while it is impossible to cover everything in equal depth, the narrative which he presents seems to miss a few important points. It ignores the fact that one of the crucial motors of the revolt of the 1960s was a generational shift. The book also underestimates the centrality of the Third World in making 1968

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1 West Germany and the Global Sixties: The Anti-Authoritarian Revolt, 1962–1978 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

a genuine political revolt. The similarity of rebellion in the West and in the East is often taken for granted too hastily. Last, violence and gender, perhaps, were more important in shaping 1968 than Brown seems to assume.

Brown explores the intensification of personal encounters of activists from various countries and the emergence of international networks. Nonetheless, as the book argues, internationalism for 1968 activists meant more than the physical crossing of national borders. As Brown convincingly shows, activists in Europe were deeply convinced that “all struggles were connected” and that their revolt in Europe against their national establishments were parallel with the anti-imperialist fights overseas. The apparently shared concerns to fight oppression and authority led activists both in the West and in the East to believe that rebellion in Paris or Prague and the war in Vietnam were interconnected, they were parts of the same struggle against imperialism outside of Europe and exploitation at home, and they also saw themselves as members of the same international army of revolution.

Social criticism (ideology) and action furthering social change (politics) went hand in hand in the 1960s. One of the book’s most original points is that these programs were sensitive to history. Brown explores how various groups and movements evoked historical antecedents of revolt, particularly the anarchist and libertarian communist traditions of Rosa Luxemburg, the Kronstadt mutiny, the Spanish Republic, or the workers’ councils in 1956 Budapest. The revival of suppressed knowledge of alternative forms of social organization provided intellectual and political ammunition in the assault against both capitalism in the West and official socialism in the East. Brown emphasizes that the politics of 1968 was inherently a politics of the left, and as such, it embraced ideas like liberation from exploitation, self-determination, and social organization based on solidarity. This left, the “New Left,” as Brown highlights, was based on knowledge suppressed both by capitalist and official socialist establishments. Hence, it represented alternative socialisms.

1968 activists had to reconcile anti-capitalism and the abrogation of private ownership of capital and means of production with the emancipation of the individual, who apparently was not alienated only amidst the soul-breaking routines of factory production in the West, but also living under the overly bureaucratic labor regimes of collectivist state ownership in the socialist dictatorships of Eastern Europe. Brown argues that such tensions explain why the question of what the left really was in this new context became inevitable for 1968. Notwithstanding the broad consensus in the East and the West that

the new left must be defined against the Stalinist type of official socialism in the East and like-minded communist parties in the West, the character of the left in the 1960s was seen as most clearly discernible in the field of culture in a broad sense. The most typical forms of organization were various movements of lifestyle, famously, the communes of K1 in West Berlin and their followers across Europe. Brown is keen to establish that 1968 activism understood political liberation from authority and oppression as a fundamental liberation of the self, which included experimentations with new forms of living, work, leisure, sexuality, and womanhood.

Brown is shrewd to note that the move beyond the conventional frames of politics was not always peaceful. Protesters in France, Italy, and Yugoslavia were not reluctant to attack police squads, party headquarters, or office buildings of the press. Brown argues that activists were prone to see their violence as defensive and as a response to the violence of oppression used by the authorities. In this perspective, they understood violence as a strategic choice of resistance: to fight against oppression and authority sustained by inherent forms of violence, one needed to become violent, too. Post-1968 terrorism in Europe should be considered in this context, Brown argues. Whereas many discovered the possibility of change in the field of everyday life when the direct political protest began to flag in the West and was clamped down in the East, some embraced clandestine urban guerrilla violence as the proper form of triggering change in an ever-narrowing field of political opposition.

Brown's discussion of violence and feminism suggests that both were conclusions to the story of 1968. Nonetheless, the story of these components as presented by Brown opens up new perspective from which to approach the history of activism in the 1960s. How important was gender in shaping the character of 1968? What were the implications of staging of the revolution as men's affair and the iconic macho image of 1968 portrayed by Cohn-Bendit, Dutschke, or Che for reconsiderations of the meanings of revolt, resistance, and protest? Similarly, how was violence important in shaping the politics of 1968? How did the legacies of revolutionary cultures which embraced the violent smashing of the system shape activists' programs and expectations? These questions suggest that both violence and gender may have been core constituents of 1968 activism, rather than elements of its outcome.

Connections with the extra-European world were crucial here. Radicals in Europe swiftly became passionate about what they perceived as the intransigent commitment to revolutionary change: wars of liberation in the extra-European

world. This, however, provided more than simple templates for the use of violence at home, and it did more than prompt global solidarities in Europe, as Brown seems to argue. Wars of liberation and anti-imperialist revolutions in Asia, Africa and Latin-America were evidence for young revisionists, new left radicals, and, in some ways, old left elites of the validity of class-based revolutionary theories and the vitality of socialism. In short, the left (in its many groupings) saw the revolutionary struggles of Europe coming to new life in the jungles of Vietnam and the mountains of Cuba. Links to the Global South were crucial to a narrative of the politics of 1968 in the language of the left. In turn, one may wonder if the demise of the left in Europe and the loss of belief in viable anti-capitalist alternatives were linked more to the dissolution of the promises of decolonization as a cradle for possibly more just and democratic states in these regions. 1968 was a global event not simply because it was made so in Europe, but rather because the extra-European world had crucial agency in making 1968 a leftist project worldwide.

Whereas the Czechoslovak and to some extent the Polish cases may fit the portrait of 1968 as painted by Brown, other societies in Eastern Europe, particularly, Hungary, Romania, and Yugoslavia, were different in many important ways. Several major concerns of the left, such as working-class autonomy, third worldism, and the power of art, helped mobilize activism in these countries, as well. But many activists were motivated by different reasons. Some activists in Hungary were keen on protecting national sovereignty and allegedly authentic, traditional village lifestyles, issues which tend to have more resonance with the populist and conservative right than with a revolutionary left. Nationalism and national self-determination were crucial concerns of the Croatian Spring movement, too. Furthermore, religious activism was important in both Hungary and Poland. This activism strove to reform Christian culture and render it more flexible and socially concerned, including Christian practices such as the introduction of beat music and modern popular culture. Thus, the groups and scenes of 1968 were connected by a solid idea and the consensus of generation, which went beyond political comradeship.

Timothy Brown's book proves that 1968, as a shorthand term for the complex process of reshaping contemporary Europe and the world, was an immensely multifaceted moment in history which cries for a plurality of approaches and interpretations. *Sixties Europe* pinpoints extremely important aspects of this history, such as the roles of politics, the global imagination, the reinterpretation of the agendas of the left, and communication across various

areas of the world. It renders this history open to contestation and also offers a persuasive illustration of the potentials of polyphonic narratives of the past. It thus constitutes a work worthy of the admiration of any historian.

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