GREAT BRITAIN: “NO PLACE FOR A STREET FIGHTING MAN”

Hans Kundnani

In the summer of 1968, Mick Jagger looked with envy across the English Channel, where France had been brought to a standstill by the “événements” in Paris, and wrote the following lines: “Everywhere I hear the sound of marching, charging feet, boy / 'Cause summer’s here and the time is right for fighting in the street, boy / But what can a poor boy do / Except to sing for a rock ‘n’ roll band / 'Cause in sleepy London town / There’s just no place for a street fighting man.”

The lyrics to the Rolling Stones’ “Street Fighting Man,” which was released that August on the album *Beggars Banquet*, pretty much says it all about 1968 in Britain. London may have been “swinging” in the 1960s, but in political terms, it was—compared to Prague, Paris, or West Berlin—relatively tranquil.

**Frustration about British sleepiness**

The previous March 17, Jagger had taken part in the famous London demonstration against the Vietnam War that was violently broken up by mounted police. The demonstration had begun peacefully in Trafalgar Square, where an estimated 10,000 people had assembled. The initial mood suddenly changed when the demonstration moved from Trafalgar Square to the American embassy in Grosvenor Square. The first frictions occurred when the mass of protesters came up against the police, who had created a blockade.

Deciding against retreat, the demonstrators broke through the blockade at isolated places with the aim of approaching the embassy building. The situation escalated and street fighting broke out between mounted police and demonstrators. The use of stones, firecrackers, and other objects as missiles left many injured on both sides. The violence of the British police toward the protesters led afterwards to controversy in the media.

Also among the protesters was John Scarlett, then an Oxford student and later head of MI6, the British foreign intelligence service. But this—a protest directed against the American, not the British, government—was about the closest Britain (though not the UK) came to fighting in the streets during the “year of the barricades.” With
the exception of Northern Ireland, where civil rights protests by the Catholic community began what became the “Troubles” that lasted for the next thirty years, there was little of the tremendous political upheaval that shook continental Europe.

Rudi Dutschke, the icon of the West German student movement, echoed Jagger’s frustration about British sleepiness when he and his American wife Gretchen moved to London after he was shot in West Berlin in April 1968. He was disappointed to find that there was little enthusiasm for a full-scale revolution in the Britain of Prime Minister Harold Wilson and, using his usual Marxist jargon, complained in his diary of the “absolute lack of the subjective factor of revolutionary action in England.” Dutschke would later be forced to leave the UK after he was denied a residency permit; he and his family finally settled in Denmark.

Differences in the generational conflict

The reasons behind this lack of revolutionary consciousness in Britain may have something to do with differences in the generational conflict that was everywhere at the heart of what became “1968.” In West Germany, that conflict was sharpened by the postwar generation’s consciousness of its parents’ responsibility for Nazism and its sense of being “the children of mass murderers.” Tariq Ali, one of the leaders of the British Vietnam Solidarity Campaign and probably the “Street Fighting Man” Jagger had in mind when he wrote the song, remembers meeting Ulrike Meinhof, then a columnist and later to become notorious as a member of the West German terrorist group, the Red Army Faction. “You don’t understand the issue with our parents,” she told him.

In Britain, the generational conflict had none of that intensity. Whereas the Federal Republic was a fragile, fledgling democracy, which the student movement saw as a continuation of Nazism, Britain was a relatively intact society that had prevailed against Nazism. In fact, although Britain had emerged from World War II financially bankrupt, it was, if anything, morally strengthened. Nor
did British young people have a Vietnam War to fuel their rage at their own government as their American counterparts did (Prime Minister Wilson had refused to send British troops to Southeast Asia). Like their Utopian comrades everywhere else, young people in Britain dreamt of a better world in which, in Ali’s words, “people should be measured not by success or material possessions but by the humanity of their aspirations,” but they were simply not as tormented or angry as their fellow activists in Berlin or Berkeley.

**Creative boom instead of a revolution**

In 1968, there were sit-ins at universities like the London School of Economics and confrontations at art colleges that paralleled the student rebellions elsewhere. But in France and West Germany, protests about conditions in higher education (which had had to rapidly expand to accommodate the baby-boomer generation) quickly expanded into a critique of “authoritarian” society as a whole. In Britain, radical left-wing organizations like the International Marxist Group, to which Ali belonged, never had the influence that the German Socialist Student League (Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund (SDS)) in West Germany did. Britain’s postwar generation rebelled in different ways.

By and large, young people in Britain expressed themselves through culture, above all music and fashion, rather than politics—even the student movement in Britain, if you can call it that, was most vibrant in the art colleges. Instead of a revolution, an extraordinary creative boom took place in Britain in the 1960s. Whereas 1968 in Berlin was all about the Frankfurt School and fascism, in London it was all about Hendrix and hemlines.

**Dramatic changes during the 1960s**

The legacy of “1968” in Britain is therefore harder to pinpoint than in some other countries. Britain certainly went through dramatic social changes during the ’60s—its class structure loosened, it became more individualistic, and old values like deference and decency gave way to new ones like self-expression and tolerance—but these were soft changes, manifested in attitudes and lifestyles, which happened gradually and beneath the surface rather than convulsively, as in France in 1968.

In Germany, the postmodern values that came out of the ’60s came to be represented, above all, by the Green Party, where many of the “68ers,” including future foreign minister Joschka Fischer, ultimately
landed. But in Britain, with its majority voting system, no significant political party emerged from the protest movements of the 60s. Forty years on, our political landscape remains much the same as it was then. In the end, the most memorable thing to come out of Britain in 1968 was a song—albeit one about revolution.

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