

PROMISES OF 1968: CRISIS ILLUSION UTOPIA

Washington D.C., November 6-7, 2008

The year 2008 marks the anniversary of 40 years since the tumultuous months of 1968, which radically influenced the social, political, and cultural landscape of Euro-Atlantic world. The Center for the Study of Post-Communist Societies (under the directorship of Prof. Vladimir Tismaneanu) at the University of Maryland (College Park) in collaboration with the Romanian Cultural Institute would like to put forward an academic event that will discuss and revisit the complex aspects implied by the shocks and transformations brought about by the '68 phenomenon. The conference is part of a multi-year project (started in 2007), envisaged by Prof. Tismaneanu to provide, by means of reflecting on watershed moments of post-1945 history, an overview of the global dynamics characteristic for the 20th century and its lessons and impact upon the 21st.

In the context of the Cold War, 1968 was a transnational moment of revolt against the status-quo regardless of the East-West divide. It represents a turning point in world history that brought about a sweeping axiological reassessment of politics. From France to Czechoslovakia, from Germany to Poland, from Spain to Italy, from the United States to the Soviet Union, the second half of the sixties was defined by challenges of, with varying degrees of participation and representation, society against the state. The fundamental factor of differentiation among these movements was their attitude towards *utopia* with crucial consequences upon the re-conceptualization of the *political* in all these countries. If some were anti-ideological, others were against established structures of authority, but all were variants of an activism advocating the new societal differentiations developed in the aftermath of the Second World War. The circumstances of bipolarism imposed, however, a significant difference in rationale: if in the West, the logic of 1968 was of politically emancipating spaces previously exempt from public scrutiny, in the East, it was about humanizing Leninism, breaking its ideologically-driven monopolistic grip on society.

In the Soviet bloc, 1968 symbolized both the protest against the so-called "red-bourgeoisie" (predated by the "Open Letter" addressed by Jacek Kuron and Karol Modzelewski to the leaders of the Polish United Workers' Party) and of the last attempts at reforming state socialism. After the crushing of the Prague Spring, few denizens of the East European countries retained illusions that communism could be reformed through benign experiments initiated by a liberal wing of the party elite. It became clear that the Soviet Union would not permit any new experimentation with the subversive idea of socialism with a human face. The Soviet leaders showed, through the "Brezhnev doctrine" and the condemnation of Marxist revisionism, their determination in maintaining monopoly over the interpretation of Marxism-Leninism. In June 1969, at the last world communist conference, Leonid Brezhnev engaged in an overall attack on neo-Marxist revisionism, identifying it as a subversive, anti-socialist force in Europe, Latin America, etc. At the same time, the critical intellectuals in this area of Europe understood that real demands of society could not be limited to the restrictive program formulated by the communist party's "liberals". The year 1968, in the Soviet bloc, was the signal of the retreat from revisionism and the inception of the dissident movement, a large-scale, cross-regional "goodbye to Marx". And, with historical hindsight, one can also label it as the threshold for the gradual decomposition of the communist regimes. The system had lost its initial absolutist drive. Stagnation and immobility were its main characteristics. The increasingly routinized mechanization of ideology laid open the cracks in the system's edifice for easier exploitation by the opposition (e.g., 'new evolutionism' or Charta '77 movement). The Prague Spring (January-August), the Polish March student upheaval, the April student protests in Belgrade (which then spread all over former Yugoslavia; a corollary event was the Croatian Spring, 1970/1, an all-out contestation of this country on national bases), and the Soviet intellectuals' reaction to the Sinyavski-Daniel trial, all represented a fundamental shake-up of the Stalinist foundations of the Soviet Bloc. Their failure meant the success of an enduring disenchantment with state socialism, with any hope of reforming these regimes.

The West, on the other hand, experienced an upsurge of "romantic anti-capitalism", a rebirth of radicalism fed by the re-enchantment with utopia. The second half of the 1960 was both a return to Marx and a rejection of the then existing practices of democracy (with the notable exception of Spain and Portugal, where, between 1966 and 1968, civil unrest was a rebuff targeting Salazar's and Franco's right-wing dictatorships). The influence of the New Left, of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, of the Vietnam war, of the Latin American *guerrilleros*, and of the de-colonization movements combined, in a amorphous

blend ("political *Gedankenmasse*" or "Great Marxist Fallacy", depending where one stands), with the generational clash (the rejection of the 'Hitler youth' generation, the French *enragés*, the SDS), institutional crisis (the occupation of Sorbonne, the nearly two-year long paralysis of Italian universities) and socio-economic crisis (the workers' strikes and *autogestion* projects), and produced what some authors later called *les années 1968*. The sixty-eighters claimed to produce a critique of the ideological bases of the West in the context of the Cold War (also against elder self-representations of the Left) and a spontaneous, 'direct action' against the 'hidden oppression' of the liberal-capitalist establishment. The 'anti-politics' of 1968 were, to a certain extent, a topsy-turvy expression of the search for reconciling theory with praxis (*Theorie/wut*). The extreme radicalization of certain sectors within the student movement and the cultivation of violence as a cathartic instrument led to the divorce between left-wing post-Marxist thinkers such as Adorno, Horkheimer, and Habermas, and those whom they suspected of "Red Fascist" inclinations. In France, Raymond Aron proposed a scathing critique of the new search for redemptive revolutionary paradigms.

The present conference aims to follow upon some of the many threads described above. It puts forth a discussion of 1968 as both a global event and a local moment of crisis. The main directions we aim to pursue are: the crisis of 'really existing socialism' and the failure of "socialism with a human face"; the critique of (neo)Stalinism and the reactions of Leninist bureaucracies (role of critical intellectuals, crises with the Warsaw Pact, the Soviet invasion and its implications); the end of revisionism and the birth of the dissident (human rights) movements; Western utopia and the rediscovery of radicalism; the re-thinking of the *political* and the re-definition of modernity (e.g., the critique of liberal democracy in the West and of Leninism in the East).

Last but not least, the conveners of the event (H.-R. Patapievici, president of the Romanian Cultural Institute, Vladimir Tismaneanu, University of Maryland, and Christian Ostermann, Cold War International History Program) aim to bring a most significant and often neglected factor into the discussion, by introducing the Romanian case. It can be argued that 1968 was the pinnacle of "legitimacy" for the communist regime in this country. At the same time, the national-communist contract led to the disappearance of any influential anti-systemic, country-wide opposition to the ideological orthodoxy of the Romanian Communist Party. The case of Romania shows the watershed quality of 1968: in the absence of genuine Marxist revisionist attempts and of a transnational impact of political/civil activism, the Ceausescu regime moved decisively toward a self-styled synthesis of extreme nationalism and revamped Stalinism (the communist-fascist baroque construct). The conveners believe that, by positioning Romania in counter-distinction with other cases of former Eastern Europe and by discussing the European-wide transformation of the political and of ideology, one can shed light on the factors which engendered the major dynamics of the 1970s and 80s.