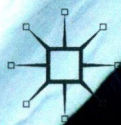


# **CRITICAL THEORY AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT**

**From May '68 to the Arab Spring**

**CHRISTOPHER PAWLING**



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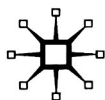
From May '68 to the Arab Spring

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First published 2013 by  
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

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Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN 978–0–230–27565–2

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

# Critical Theory and Political Engagement



# Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the help of Felicity Plester, Chris Penfold, Catherine Mitchell and all the editorial staff at Palgrave Macmillan, both past and present, who have aided in bringing this book to completion. I owe a particular debt of gratitude to Ros Brunt and Roger Bromley, who offered crucial advice on both the form and content of the manuscript at various stages in its construction. On a more general intellectual level, thanks must also be given to John Baxendale, Chris Goldie and Tom Ryall, who have sustained the tradition of stimulating discussion for many a long night in the Union Pub on Thursday evenings. Whilst I was writing this book, the untimely death of a close colleague, Gerry Coubro, who was also a member of our Thursday circle, robbed Sheffield Hallam University and the wider academic community of a brilliant thinker and teacher, whose commitment to the politics of critical theory was an inspiration to us all. This book is dedicated to him in friendship and gratitude. Finally, this project would not have been possible without the love and support of Elaine, Cathy and Kieran, whose uncomplaining solidarity has been indispensable for more years than I can remember.

An earlier version of Chapter 7 was first published in *Fredric Jameson: A Critical Reader*, edited by Douglas Kellner and Sean Homer (Palgrave Macmillan 2004). Grateful acknowledgement is made to Palgrave Macmillan for permission to reproduce this material. I would also like to thank Sony/ATV Music Publishing for permission to reproduce the lyrics of Bob Dylan's 'All Along The Watchtower' (copyright 1968; renewed 1996 Dwarf Music. Administered by Sony/ATV Music Publishing).

# Preface

In the last few hours of the 2007 French presidential election campaign, the right-wing populist candidate, Nicolas Sarkozy, rallied his supporters by invoking the spectre of May '68 and a supposedly anarchic France, prey to the destructive forces of the left and the politics of the barricade. Sarkozy's rhetoric was probably unnecessary in the light of his comfortable lead over his Socialist rival, as Alain Badiou has pointed out.<sup>1</sup> However, it is fascinating to see how the fear of a return to the sixties lingers on in the memory of the right, not least because it was the moment when the intelligentsia felt the need to engage in radical politics, forging alliances with striking workers, occupying universities and so on. May '68 offered a vivid example of intellectual engagement in political life, which was expressed in demonstrations, sit-ins, street theatre, etc.

Of course, May '68 was not the *start* of a debate about 'commitment' and the intelligentsia. Jean Paul Sartre's involvement in the opposition to France's occupation of Algeria at the end of the fifties had already offered an example of the intellectual as *public* figure, opposing colonialism and imperialism. And the idea of the committed intellectual could be traced back further, to the anti-fascist actions of the Popular Front before the War (and beyond that, even, to Zola's famous *J'Accuse* attack on the establishment in the Dreyfus Affair at the end of the nineteenth century). Moreover, if May '68 was not the first time that progressive intellectuals had committed themselves to particular causes, it would not be the last either, so that the engaged thinker would continue to exist after the days of the 'Événements'. Hence, Foucault's work to improve the condition of prisoners in the seventies and Badiou's present engagement with the cause of immigrants in France are important examples of the notion that political and philosophical theory cannot be separated from an engagement in the 'real world'.

This book will examine the writings of a number of key thinkers, from a variety of theoretical perspectives, who have made significant contributions to the debate about 'engagement' over the last 40 years. Clearly, some of the major figures in this discussion are French, influenced

by, or reacting to, the work of Sartre in particular, whose notion of 'commitment' was so influential in the sixties. So, we will be analysing the writings of Derrida, Althusser and Badiou, who have defined their positions in relation to Sartre's attempt to produce a theory of commitment which unites existentialist thought with Marxist 'humanism'. However, there are a number of non-French thinkers who have also debated this field and whose work is crucial in this context, such as Fredric Jameson and Edward Said.

Readers who are already acquainted with the work of the above writers will be aware that they do not necessarily share the same philosophical perspective. Indeed, one might want to argue that a 'humanist', such as Sartre, or even the later Said, and a 'post-humanist' such as Derrida, have very little in common. To put it crudely, the humanist thinker will tend to place human thought and action at the centre of his/her model of society, whereas the post-humanist will focus on discursive or other structures/practices and tend to see human subjects as the 'effects' of these structures. However, apart from analysing these differences, we will also be highlighting what binds these seemingly antithetical traditions together by focusing on 'zones of engagement' (Perry Anderson), where both humanist and anti- or post-humanist thinkers have challenged passivity and the status quo, in the search for ways of acting in the socio-political realm.

Hence, this is not just another polemic for or against humanist thought, with a title like *The Death of Humanism, After Posthumanism* or whatever. (As, for example, in Ferry and Renault's somewhat simplistic reduction of all French radical philosophy of the sixties to 'antihumanism'.<sup>2</sup>) Rather, we will want to move beyond this rather tired dichotomy to analyse the way in which a number of thinkers have explored a shared problematic: namely, the dialectical interrelationship between analysing the world and intervening to change it.

It has been argued that our age is characterized by an overall retreat from political commitment and a concomitant rejection of theory or 'grand narratives' of history. Indeed, it is often claimed that we have entered an era of 'post theory', in which there is no possibility of establishing a critical distance between thought and social reality, or between surface reality and the underlying structures of meaning. Thus, we seem to be trapped in an empiricist acceptance of the 'given'. Any concern with radical critique and the possibility of transcending the 'here and now' in thought, as a precondition for political practice, is a relic of the past. Thought as a 'totalising' procedure is confined to the dustbin of history.

Hence, in the contemporary world of the academy it can seem as if the idea of the 'engaged' intellectual is a misnomer, an archaeological relic from a bygone age. Indeed, it is sometimes claimed that the notion of the committed thinker is a contradiction in terms: one should, instead, be seeking to separate intellectual practice from any engagement with the world beyond the educational academy. Arguably, since the late seventies the dominant movement in ideas has been away from any attempt to relate thought to 'extra-discursive' realms beyond the supposed autonomous spheres of philosophical and critical discourse. Hence, 'holistic' and 'foundationalist' theories such as Marxism, which attempt to link culture and politics are seen as versions of 'totalitarianism', since they refuse the notions of 'autonomy' and radical 'difference' as the supposedly determining characteristics of all language and culture.

Yet anyone involved in higher education will know that the search for relevant ideas has not necessarily disappeared 'on the ground' and that students still look for ways of linking their studies with the wider world. Moreover, the massive demonstrations against the Iraq War in 2003 and the more recent expressions of radical politics, such as the students' campaign against fees and the 'Occupy' movement, have highlighted the continuing demand for a totalizing critique of Western industrial capitalism and its impact on global politics. This book argues that there is a need to re-engage with the idea of commitment in intellectual life and it is underpinned by two main axioms:

- (a) a recognition that to be an intellectual is to engage with socio-political reality, not to shy away from it. This means attempting to identify the emerging historical movements of the age and address them. Of course, this is easier in some eras rather than others – our own age constituting a moment when the precise shape and character of these forces is particularly hard to delineate. Nonetheless, to be an intellectual is, to adopt a definition from Zygmunt Baumann, to be one of those who believe that 'the ultimate purpose of thought is to make the world better than they found it' (Baumann 2006, p. 161).
- (b) an acceptance that we cannot start to analyse socio-cultural reality unless we are willing to engage with theory as theory, since the construction of conceptual models is a necessary moment in the production of knowledge. Hence, to create new knowledge is to proceed on the assumption that thought can be separated from reality before the two are re-united in a theory–praxis nexus. 'Post-theory',

as a supposedly 'avant-garde' position in criticism and philosophy, is a denial of intellectual practice as it is actually pursued, even by post-theorists themselves.

However, whilst foregrounding these axioms, I would also argue that we need to avoid a sectarian approach to the role of the critical intellectual and acknowledge that the drive to engage theory with political reality does not just embrace any one particular tendency in radical thought. Thus, whilst a crucial line of theory associated with political engagement is obviously that of a humanist Marxism, many of the key contributions to this debate have come from post-humanist and post-Marxist thinkers, such as Derrida and Badiou, which is why individual chapters have been devoted to their work, as well as to representatives of a more 'orthodox', radical humanist tendency, such as Jameson and Said. Moreover, the distance between the two tendencies may not be as great as some would argue. After all, it is the supposedly anti-humanist, post-Marxist philosopher Derrida who proclaims in *Specters of Marx* that there will be 'no future without the memory and inheritance of Marx: in any case of a certain Marx . . . of at least one of his spirits.' For, as Derrida concludes, '*there is more than one of them, there must be more than one of them*' (Derrida 1994, p. 13).

## Prefatory Footnote

The draft manuscript of this book was completed in 2011, after a relatively lengthy period of quiescence in radical politics, and whilst the 'Occupy' movement was in its infancy. Hence, it is noticeable that the original mood of the *Preface* was a trifle defensive – so, for example, the only direct reference to May '68 was a riposte to Sarkozy's attack on the left in 2007, but there was no comparison of the Arab spring or 'Occupy' with the *événements* of May '68. In many ways the theoretical project of the book was concerned with keeping alive the historical memory of a radical politics of *engagement* which had been on the back foot for some time. Echoing Badiou in *Infinite Thought*, the author tended to highlight the debilitating effects of 'historical pessimism' and the 'nihilistic motif of finitude' in contemporary thought, which had undermined narratives of liberation and change.<sup>3</sup>

Since 2011 the context for thinking radical thought and critical theory has altered perceptibly, paving the way for new possibilities. The Arab spring has opened the door to an emancipatory politics which has still to run its course, but the removal of tyrants such as Mubarak is clearly a

positive development in global politics.<sup>4</sup> Nearer home, the banking crisis has impacted on vast swathes of the population in Europe and the US, helping to radicalize those who have not traditionally concerned themselves with critiquing the political economy of late capitalism. For, as Brecht puts it so succinctly: 'When a great man's house collapses/Many little people get crushed.'<sup>5</sup>

The 'Occupy' movement developed as a result of the growing awareness that anarchic financial markets will never 'police' themselves and that the '99%' have to wrest control from the '1%' who currently exercise mastery over the world's wealth.<sup>6</sup> However, just as important as this growing economic awareness has been the *form* of the politics adopted by the Arab spring and the 'Occupy' protest, which has echoed the 'festive' politics of May '68, taking temporary possession of the visible loci of public life in places such as Tahrir Square and Zuccotti Park and inaugurating a new 'politics of space'.

These radical movements have been inspirational at the level of concrete political practice, but what are their implications for the development of an *engaged critical theory* in the contemporary world, especially in the spheres of art and culture? At first glance one might expect radical theoreticians to argue in favour of a fairly uncomplicated revisiting of earlier forms of *commitment* in which, to quote the Brecht of militant communism, 'The politician must be a philosopher and the philosopher a politician.'<sup>7</sup> But is it possible to overcome the division between 'contemplating' and 'acting', or the split between the cultural intelligentsia and the people, through a straightforward 'demand' of this kind? One might want to argue that there can never be a simple 'suturing' of politics and philosophy, or politics and art, in the work of the engaged artist or critic. As the Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish has argued, the writer 'has to use the word to resist the military occupation', but he/she also has 'to resist – on behalf of the word – the clanger of the banal and the repetitive'.<sup>8</sup> Hence, the questions concerning 'commitment' and 'freedom of expression', 'form' and 'content', 'theory' and 'practice', etc., which were raised in the past by Sartre, Benjamin, Marcuse and others, have not disappeared and will continue to impact on the work of radical thinkers whenever historical 'moments', such as the Arab spring or the winter of the 'Occupy' movement, engage progressive artists and theoreticians in political action.



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# 1

## Critical Theory and Radical Politics in the Late Sixties

Reflecting on the relationship between critical theory and politics, Stuart Hall, the former Director of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, has commented on a number of occasions about the influence of May '68 and radical student politics on the intellectual 'project' of Cultural Studies. Hall argues that this indebtedness to the politics of 1968 was worked through at the level of what one might call 'form' and 'content' – the ideas which emerged at this time and the forms of intellectual practice which they engendered. Thus, 'new kinds of questions about the "politics of culture"' emerged in the wake of the 'cultural revolution of May '68' (Hall 1997, p. 9) and the influence of radical currents of thought, especially Marxism, was marked. At the same time, there was the attempt to develop both an interdisciplinary approach to research and a more collective approach to the garnering of knowledge which would expressly oppose the 'competitive individualism' of traditional modes of intellectual enquiry. Consequently, as Colin MacCabe notes in a recent interview with Hall, '1968 transformed the Centre so that it became a national focus for politically committed students who wanted to pursue intellectual work' (Hall 2008, p. 9).

In this chapter I want to address Hall's argument and attempt to explore the way in which the experience of student politics at the end of the sixties and beginning of the seventies helped to shape the formation of critical theory, both inside and beyond the Centre. The chapter will try to shed some light on the appeal of political commitment at this time and the underlying debates about what a 'politics of intellectual life' might entail. The mode of exploration will be partly autobiographical, but the rationale will not be to focus on the career of a leading student militant. Rather, I will attempt to offer some insight into what it was like

to be a fairly 'typical' student, of a left disposition, who was interested in the socio-political implications of research and intellectual life.

In 1967 I started on a degree in English and German at Birmingham University at a moment when student politics was already gathering apace. There was a liberal agitation for a democratization of the university's structures, with a call for student representatives on key bodies, such as the faculty board, senate, etc. In addition, we organized a sit-in to put pressure on the university to give up its investments in white-dominated Rhodesia and other suspect regimes. Outside the immediate environs of the university, I joined demonstrations against the Vietnam War, including the clash with police outside the American Embassy in London's Grosvenor Square in October 1968. Gradually, I began to realize that my individual studies of literature and culture could not be conducted in a political vacuum and that I needed to connect my own search for knowledge with a broader struggle to transform society. A first year course in English on the novel, taught by David Lodge, introduced me to the work of Marxist critics such as Arnold Kettle and Georg Lukács and a parallel unit on the German novel, led by Roy Pascal, helped to deepen my knowledge of Lukács's work even further. Second and third year options on the English degree introduced me to Cultural Studies, which was beginning to flourish at Birmingham, and at this point I began to see how I might draw on the work of Frankfurt School thinkers, such as Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, to form a bridge between the critical theory I was encountering in German and radical alternatives to traditional literary analysis in English studies. However, it wasn't necessarily obvious how these excursions into left-wing critical theory connected with what was happening beyond the groves of the academy and how the links between intellectual life and socio-political reality *in general* were to be forged. My wider knowledge of politics was still somewhat hazy, and my notion of 'commitment', as for many students at that time, was an amalgam of Labour Party politics and the libertarian stance I had picked up from publications such as *Oz*, *International Times* and *Black Dwarf*.

Libertarian politics was exceedingly important in the late sixties, not least because it challenged the division between politics and art through agit-prop, street theatre, etc., and in many ways the appeal of libertarian thought at this time was summed up by the slogan from Paris in May '68: 'All power to the imagination!' Libertarian thought was also influential on a concrete political level, as I discovered when I spent a year abroad in Germany in 1969–70. During my time at Frankfurt University I lived in a 'Wohngemeinschaft', a collective composed of anarchist and

socialist students. The group had links to the Anti-Vietnam Campaign and we sheltered two GIs who were deserting from the army and were attempting to escape to Sweden, where they would be safe from extradition back to the United States (US). One of the deserters, Dave, was only aged 19, as in the famous pop song about Vietnam, yet he had already gone through nightmarish experiences in combat and found it very difficult to cope with even the most simple everyday tasks. His truck had driven over a landmine in South Vietnam and he had lain for 18 hours in acute pain, waiting to be rescued. As a medical orderly, he had been carrying morphine and so he injected himself with strong doses to keep the pain at bay, but this meant that by the time he arrived in Frankfurt he was mentally and physically addicted. As a consequence, he would wander around our flat at night, unable to sleep. Eventually we were able to get the money together to buy Dave and his companion the necessary rail tickets for Sweden, although unfortunately we never discovered whether they were successful in reaching their destination, leading us to think that perhaps Dave's emotional instability had aroused the suspicion of the border guards on the way.

My experience of student politics through the *Wohngemeinschaft* was important, but the inherent limitations of a libertarian/anarchist philosophy also became clear at this time. I had chosen to study in Frankfurt because of the reputation of scholars such as Theodor Adorno and Jürgen Habermas at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research (commonly known as the Frankfurt School) and the intellectual debate there was stimulating, introducing me to a blend of critical Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis. However, my encounter with the student politics at Frankfurt University and the internal debates of the SDS (the German Socialist Student Organization) proved to be somewhat disillusioning. The students union was dominated by the figure of Hans Jürgen Krahl, a charismatic but rather narcissistic individual who was leading a series of sit-ins at the university and the Institute for Social Research. Krahl was a brilliant but tortured Marxist-Anarchist who was able to take the lead in attacking Horkheimer and Adorno after the latter had called in the police when the SDS had occupied the institute in the Autumn of 1968. (The justification for the original occupation had been Horkheimer's refusal to condemn US policy in Vietnam.) Whilst one could see why Krahl and his comrades were frustrated with the cautious approach of the institute and the way it seemed to be endorsing the political conformism of intellectual life in the Bundesrepublik, Krahl sometimes seemed to be more interested in using student politics to wage an Oedipal struggle against his former

supervisor, Adorno, than in developing a broad popular alliance against the Vietnam War.

Although Krah! was an important figure at that moment, perhaps more significant was the arrival of Danny Cohn-Bendit, who had just moved across to Frankfurt from Paris after acting as one of the leaders of the *Événements*. Like Krah!, Cohn-Bendit was fired by an anarchist politics of 'direct action'. He was a persuasive orator who offered a Marcusian analysis of the 'authoritarian state' and the role of the university in disseminating 'instrumental reason', an analysis which was convincing to a young 20-year-old, searching for signposts in a confusing political and intellectual environment. However, Cohn-Bendit's version of political engagement seemed to be limited to igniting acts of provocation against the state (what one might describe as a politics of, or by, the 'deed'). Hence, I have vivid memories of escaping from the Frankfurt police and their water cannons after having participated in an action against the city's 'bourgeois' department stores, which involved smashing windows and 'liberating' their contents. Some of these actions were inspired by a politics of humour and the imagination – for example, I recall one suggestion that we dress up as Santa Claus, go into the plusher apartment stores and give out presents which had been 'liberated' beforehand. However, it seemed to me that for Cohn-Bendit and his allies, actions like this were primarily designed to provoke the state into a violent response which would demonstrate to innocent bystanders, and the populace at large, that their 'liberal', 'democratic' society was actually only a thin veneer of 'repressive tolerance', beneath which lay hidden a totalitarian regime in waiting. To put it harshly, one might say that radical commitment was largely restricted to street demonstrations where an 'enlightened' left intelligentsia exhorted the people to throw off the shackles of their existence as consumers and 'dupes' of the system and join the impending revolution.

The limitations of the politics of Cohn-Bendit and the German SDS led me to search for another, more disciplined way of engaging with sections of society beyond the university. The Communist Party seemed staid, living on memories of past struggles and ambivalent about the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, which to any internationalist was the equivalent to American action in Vietnam. Thus, on my return to England I joined the Trotskyist International Socialists (later the Socialist Workers Party [SWP]), who offered an analysis of both class struggles in Britain and the wider impact of Western capitalism on the rest of the world. Moreover, if handing out leaflets to car workers outside the Austin-Morris factory in Longbridge on a wet Friday morning might

seem miles away from the more 'glamorous' struggles on the streets of Frankfurt or Paris, it did bring a sense of responsibility to what was otherwise a rather inward-looking intellectual politics of the university.

Thus, to be a 'committed' intellectual was not to belong to an academic elite, but to be a member of a party with an 'organic' link to the working-class. We were servants in the wider battle for social and political emancipation and knowledge was a tool to be used, not for self-aggrandizement, but for furthering the 'struggle'. Hence, instead of seeking personal reputation and status through individual research in the academic 'machine', one was involved as a much more anonymous figure in the party, working collectively on the party-authored leaflet or pamphlet. In retrospect this might be seen as a suppression of individual self-expression and the development of a personal voice, but it was a mode of working whose positive attributes are sometimes forgotten. As Fredric Jameson has noted,

In the 1960s many people came to realize that in a truly revolutionary collective experience what comes into being is not a faceless and anonymous crowd or 'mass' but, rather, a new level of being.... in which individuality is not effaced but completed by collectivity. It is an experience that has now slowly been forgotten, its traces systematically effaced by the return of desperate individualisms of all kinds.

(Jameson 1998a, p. 10)

## **Creating the 'Organic' intellectual**

The experience of working within a collective was also crucial in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University, where I began postgraduate research in the early seventies. In a manner somewhat similar to the Frankfurt School, the Centre fostered interdisciplinary research into contemporary culture which was informed by an amalgam of sophisticated Marxism, semiotics and feminist theory. The Centre was a university research department, but it also operated as a 'utopian enclave', to use the term coined by its then director, Stuart Hall. One might say that it was, in some ways, an attempt to create a 'red base', offering a workspace for left-wing intellectuals who were committed to the creation of 'really useful knowledge', which would help to forward the struggle for a socialist society.

The Centre provided a forum for debating issues which also engaged me as a committed 'party' intellectual outside the university. For



example, if the 'classical intellectual' had been transformed by May '68 into a 'radicalized companion of the masses', as Sartre maintained, how was he/she to relate to the left-wing party? Was it absolutely necessary for committed left intellectuals to join a Marxist party or could they operate alongside it, as Sartre did himself, defending left ideas through a critical stance of 'anti anti-Communism'? Was the role of the radical intellectual to remain 'unassimilable', as an 'unhappy consciousness' of the left, with 'a mandate from no-one'? (Sartre 2008 [1972], pp. 227, 247, 264).

One way of thinking the role of the radical intellectual through a Marxist framework had been suggested by the pre-War Italian Marxist, Gramsci, whose *Prison Notebooks* had just been made available in the Lawrence & Wishart imprint. Stuart Hall summarized Gramsci's work for the Centre, and then for a wider audience, in an extremely illuminating fashion and it is worth returning to him for an elaboration of the Italian philosopher's famous distinction between the 'traditional' and 'organic' intellectual:

Our aim ... could be defined as the struggle to form a more 'organic' kind of intellectual. Gramsci spoke of the distinction between those 'traditional' intellectuals who set themselves the task of developing and sophisticating the existing paradigms of knowledge and those who, in their critical role, aim to become more 'organic' to new and emergent tendencies in society, who seek to become more integral with those forces, linked to them, capable of reflecting what Gramsci called the 'intellectual function' in its wider, non-specialist and non-elitist sense. He also designated two tasks for those aiming to become 'organic' intellectuals: to challenge modern ideologies 'in their most refined form', and to enter into the task of popular education.

(Hall et al. 1980, p. 46)

In later years, Stuart Hall has tended to question the optimism of this commitment to the notion of an 'organic' intellectual, sutured to the labour movement and a wider 'historic bloc' of progressive popular-democratic forces. In a recent interview in the *Critical Quarterly* Hall has argued that, not only was there 'no political party' in the early seventies to which radical intellectuals could affiliate, but there was 'hardly a class we could address' either (Hall 2008, pp. 9–10). Hence he has been largely critical of those party-affiliated members of the Centre, in groups such as the International Socialists or the International Marxist Group, who were attempting to close the gap between their theoretical work at