Work, play and politics
Chapter 9: 1968 and all that

I was back in London in time for the first all-London cup final in April 1967 when Spurs beat Chelsea 2-1 and for the hippy summer of love, to the smell of patchouli and the joyful, drugged-up sounds of the Mamas and the Papas' *San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair)*, the Beatles' *Sgt Pepper* LP and *All you need is love*, Procol Harum's *A Whiter Shade of Pale*...though I remained an inveterate soul fan, a slave to Aretha, James Brown and now Otis Redding, who scored a cross-over hit at the Monterey festival in June 1967 – then died in a plane crash in December. There was also the Labour government's mean-minded and inept suppression of the pirate broadcasting ships and the launch in September of the anaemic BBC substitute, Radio One.

But by going on my mini world tour I'd missed a couple of key events in the alternative publishing world. *It**, Britain's first underground paper, had been launched in October 1966 at the Roundhouse, a disused warehouse, with a paid-for party attended by the Italian screen goddess Monica Vitti, the Beatle Paul McCartney and the theatre director Peter Brook, while Richard Neville's *Oz* (the English version of an Australian original) came out much more quietly in January 1967.

**It/IT/International Times*: as you might expect, the exact name of the paper was never a fixed element, more a movable feast.

I started work in April 1967 at Cornmarket Press, the education and careers publishers founded by Clive Labovitch in partnership with the Tory politician Michael Heseltine*. Cornmarket's core business was the careers directory series in which employers advertised for potential recruits who could pick up free copies of the books wherever they went for advice. The flagship title was the *Directory of Opportunities for Graduates*, which made serious money from companies offering openings in industry and the professions, followed by the *Directory of Opportunities for School Leavers*. The careers directories were backed up by *Which University?*, a reference book for would-be students, and there were also "real books" such as *The Age Between* by Derek Miller, a psychiatrist from the Tavistock Clinic pronouncing about teenagers, and *The New Polytechnics* by Eric Robinson, an academic who advocated and pioneered the expansion of polytechnics. A (to us now) sexist-sounding curiosity from the Cornmarket stable was *Late Start: Careers for Wives* by Clive's wife Penelope and Rosemary Simon. The book recognised and tried to respond to the fact that some women at least were waking up to new possibilities at work: the times, they were (up to a point) a-changing.

*The business partners, who met at Oxford in the 1950s, had separated in 1965 with Heseltine adopting the name Haymarket Press for his own publishing business, which started with magazines like *Man About Town* (later *About Town* , later still *Town*) and *Management Today.*

My first direct boss was Rosemary's husband, Peter M Brown, who was in charge of the *Directory of Opportunities for Qualified and Experienced Men*, another (to us now) bizarre title reflecting the fact that professional careers in the 1960s were still very much male-dominated. I wrote blurbs for the advertising sales staff and researched ways of distributing the book, eg via professional institutes

and specialist colleges. Gradually, I found myself reading proofs for the other directories, being asked to write press releases, becoming a general editorial dogsbody.

But I must have been doing something right because without much warning I was promoted to editor – of the directories and the other books then being prepared for publication by Cornmarket (everything except *Which University?* which was edited by Audrey Segal). The person I replaced was an ex-Oxford Union president, Ian Lyon, who went off to edit the *Illustrated London News.* The existing directories weren't very demanding since they included little editorial content but I found editing the books a real learning experience. Both authors needed quite a lot of help with their sentences and even more with the structure of their paragraphs and chapters. Then suddenly I found myself in charge of yet another project – the *Directory of Further Education*. As usual, Cornmarket had maximised its advertising space-selling effort while not bothering too much about editorial content until enough space had been sold. Then when the decision to publish the book was taken, the necessary editorial had to be provided – somehow – and in a hurry, thus costing far more than if it had been systematically planned in the first place.

We needed a team of compilers. We had to obtain, and extract the course information from, the brochures of every further education college in the country, then organise the material according to subject headings. What we really needed of course was computerisation: what we had to depend on in 1968 was a card-index system and a platoon of willing workers to set it up and operate it. I recruited my sister Monica to supervise the compiling part of the operation; she stayed on at Cornmarket until the business collapsed in 1973.

Our source of literate but cheap labour in 1968 was a London agency run by a Mrs Bradford. She could supply an apparently unlimited number of unemployed arts graduates who were available to work for a flexible number of days for 50p an hour. They had to have basic literacy so they could distinguish between *astronomy* and *astrology*, *misanthropy* and *misogyny, paediatrician* and *paedophile*; they had to be reasonably careful, conscientious and systematic; they had to turn up roughly on time; but that was about all. The operation, which at its peak included more than a dozen people, needed an overflow office in a separate building. *DoFE 1968* was finally published in the autumn and inevitably made a loss: there was no 1969 edition.

There was only one book published by Cornmarket that I could take any commissioning credit for – *The Rise of Enoch Powell* by Paul Foot. What happened was this. After Powell's notorious "rivers of blood" speech on 20 April 1968 attacking immigration and the proposed race relations bill, liberal England was in uproar. The Tory leader, Edward Heath, sacked Powell from the shadow cabinet though the incident didn't seem to affect his popularity or that of the Tories.* At Cornmarket we gathered for an emergency editorial meeting at which Clive Labovitch made a rare impassioned speech insisting that something must be done to destroy Powell's credibility. Names of possible journalistic assassins were bandied about.

*Powell's adoption of an essentially racist attitude, supported by some right-wing Tories, has been cited as the crucial factor in the 1970 general election result; the political scientist R W Johnson said: "It became clear that Powell had won the election for the Tories..."

And then I spoke up: "In my opinion the right person for this is Paul Foot who has recently published *The Politics of Harold Wilson*, a highly competent demolition job. If you agree I will ask him." There

was no dissent. So, feeling very pleased with myself – and my new status as a temporary assistant commissioning editor – I phoned Paul and put the proposal to him. But to my great disappointment he said no. He said he'd already been approached by Tom Maschler of Jonathan Cape with precisely this idea – and had turned it down on the grounds that he didn't think demolishing Powell was a political priority from a left-wing point of view.

I remonstrated; I argued; and Paul agreed to meet me to discuss the idea further. Perhaps he was influenced by the reports of Smithfield meat porters and London dockers marching in Powell's support. But when we met I successfully made the case that attacking Powell and destroying his credibility was highly important from a left-wing, as well as a liberal, point of view. He agreed to do the book.

Paul's typescript when he delivered it didn't need any intervention from me and I had nothing more to do with it. The book was published by Cornmarket in hardback, and also by Penguin in paperback, but there was a curious postscript. Clive Labovitch was so nervous about a possible hostile response from Powell that he took out expensive libel insurance, ensuring that the book couldn't make Cornmarket any money. As it turned out, this was a needless precaution. In the event Powell adopted a reasonable and constructive attitude to the book "offering all help with articles, speeches and information", as Paul acknowledged in the introduction.

Powell was a complex and crafty character, difficult to predict, as I found out years later when I phoned him for some quotes for a *Radio Times* feature about the *Any Questions?* radio programme. After some polite preliminaries I asked my first question. There was silence at the other end. Then Powell spoke: "Aren't you going to ask me anything else?" I twigged: he'd worked out that if he knew all the questions he was going to be asked before he said anything in reply, that would give him an advantage. It would be easier to control the interview and avoid uncomfortable follow-up questions.

In 1968 I had my own platform to sound off about Powell – and everything else. For once in my life I was writing a regular column, in the anarchist weekly paper *Freedom*. John Rety, one of the editors, had agreed to the idea in the autumn of 1967 and I kept at it for about 18 months including the whole of that memorable year of 1968 featuring the Prague spring, when the Czechs defied the Russians for several months (until August when the tanks rolled in); when there were student revolts in Britain and all over the world but particularly in Paris (where de Gaulle's government wobbled and the general lost his nerve and flew secretly to Germany for reassurance that the army would remain loyal); when there were riots and political assassinations in the United States, notably of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy; when there were civil rights protests in the US and Northern Ireland. And when everywhere in the west there were anti- Vietnam demonstrations, eg at the Democrat Party convention in Chicago where "Mayor Daley's pigs" acquired their reputation with the aid of their nightsticks, and in London where Grosvenor Square became a surrogate battleground in March and October.

Echoes of these events continue to reverberate more than 50 years later. In April 1968 I wrote in *Freedom*: "The murder of Martin Luther King was shocking but not surprising. The riots which have followed it have been neither...In death King recaptured what he was losing to Stokely Carmichael and Rap Brown: the allegiance of the urban Negro*. But the allegiance was to the man as leader/hero not to his ideas. The blood of the martyr will be the seed not of King's church but of the

heresy of Black Power. There will be more riots. They will be in spite of the concessions that the white establishment will make – and partly because of them. As the machinery of government and the law is used to discourage racism instead of imposing it, the demands of Negroes will escalate...King's non-violence was made obsolete by its early success. As buses, lunch counters, elections were desegregated, Negroes, particularly in the northern states, began to believe that something could be done about the real issues – jobs, housing, poverty. But the walls of white power did not come tumbling down at a blast from King's trumpet."**

*"Negro" was the term then used by African Americans to describe themselves. The word figures strongly in King's "I have a dream" speech.

***Fifth Column, Freedom,* April 1968

I followed most of these events from afar – via the mainstream media – but I was at the two London demos against the Vietnam War. After the first one, on 17 March 1968, I wrote: "It was a violent demonstration. Both police and protesters pushed, kicked, punched. The demonstrators threw sticks, stones, fireworks, lumps of earth, flour bombs, red paint. The mounted police charged the crowd and used their sticks."

One demonstrator, Jay Ginn, used her experience with horses to hold up the charge. She can be seen in a published photograph* with long blond hair and white boots in front of a police horse holding on to its reins. Interviewed in 2023 and asked to justify her "bravery", she said: "No, it's not brave if you understand horses."

**The 1960s Photographed by David Hurn,* London: Reel Art Press, 2015

Everyone who was anyone on the left of the time was in Grosvenor Square that day. The feminist activist and historian Sheila Rowbotham wrote: "I pushed, but not too hard, because the police were really beating isolated demonstrators behind the lines with their truncheons. Then the horses started going right through the crowd, driving people back and sideways and trampling them in the crush."* Tariq Ali of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, which organised the march, wrote that "The fighting continued for almost two hours" and concluded: "Many comrades were badly hurt and one pregnant woman had been beaten up severely."**

**Promise of a Dream: Remembering the Sixties,* Sheila Rowbotham, Verso, 2001

***Street Fighting Years*, Tariq Ali, Verso, 2005

Tariq also says in his memoir that the German student militants of the SDS were displeased by the general lack of militancy on 17 March. "They felt we should have prepared our supporters, providing them with helmets, and battled it out with staves," he wrote. But the late Jenny Diski can be more precise because she was with the SDS contingent on the day. As they formed up for the march to Grosvenor Square, they "wore crash helmets and had with them a thick wooden stave which they held at waist height across the eleven or so strong young men (and me) as they lined up...Every now and then at a barked signal the line suddenly broke into a real run, an organised trot, but still (apart from me) keeping in step. It was a small but quite alarming charge, an organised, running phalanx, which returned to a brisk march only at the next shout of our leader."*

**The Sixties*, Jenny Diski, Profile Books, 2009

Then at Grosvenor Square: “On a signal, they began a full charge, complete with an almighty bellowing. They held out the wooden stave in front of them, straight-armed, and it and I hit the fence...after two or three runs at it, during the last of which I, of course, fell over, the fence was flattened.”

Exciting stuff, fighting in the streets, though it had its limitations, as some of us argued at the time. “One of the objections to streetfighting – as Daniel Cohn-Bendit suggested at the LSE last week – is that if undertaken seriously against determined opposition it may not leave much time for the real work of social revolution...,” *Freedom* (22 June 1968). “Another objection...is that once you begin you have to continue – until the regime falls or you are crushed.”

And there’s something else. What you won’t find in any of these three books is an account of what was happening in Northern Ireland during 1968. And yet over the decades to come the conflict there was to have a bigger impact on British life and politics than events in Vietnam, Prague, Chicago or Paris. It was, for people with a historical bent, a second “Thirty Years War”*. The event that led up to the “Troubles” was a march on 24 August 1968 from Coalisland to Dungannon organised by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association. It was inspired by the American civil rights movement and adopted its tactics of non-violence and self-discipline. Blocked by the police at the entry to Dungannon, the demonstrators decided not to charge the cordon and sang *We Shall Overcome*.

*Officially, the “Troubles” ended with the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. But just as the Peace of Augsburg of 1555 failed to put an end to Catholic-Protestant conflict in 16th century Europe, the GFA has not been a 100% success: sporadic violence has continued.

The next march was in Derry on 5 October. Once again there was an echo of the worldwide non-violent movement – a banner of the Committee of 100. As at Dungannon the issues were not complicated and could be summarised in the simple slogan “End discrimination against Catholics” – in the voting system for local councils, in housing, in jobs. But dominating everything was the sectarian Protestant police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary, which broke up the Derry demonstration by baton-charging the crowd, leaving many people injured including several MPs. It was in effect a declaration of war by the forces of “order” – and as everybody knows, 30 years of war followed, starting with two days of riots in the Catholic Bogside district of Derry.

One aspect of the problem in 1968 was that to many left-wing and liberal people safely ensconced on the British mainland, “civil rights” was something that reactionary white Americans needed to concede to black Americans – nothing to do with “us” over here. So Northern Ireland wasn’t really on their agenda. But over time the IRA’s bombs and examples of British repression, such as the introduction of internment in 1971 and the Bloody Sunday massacre in 1972, changed all that.

The second of London’s anti-Vietnam War demonstrations was a curious affair in several ways. The lead-up to it featured lurid tabloid stories threatening a mega-riot, another “October Revolution organised by the Reds”, whereas the event itself was something of an anti-climax. On the day there were two separate demos. The official march, organised by the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (who claimed it numbered 100,000), deliberately avoided Grosvenor Square and proceeded peacefully to Hyde Park. On the march there were slogans but the mood was subdued, awkward: the streets were

deserted except for police at strategic points like Downing Street; shop-fronts were boarded up; the atmosphere was eerie. A small breakaway section organised by the Maoists and supported by some anarchists targeted the American Embassy and there were scuffles in Grosvenor Square and a few injuries and arrests but nothing on the scale of the March demonstration.

A noticeable aspect of both these demos was the chanting. "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh!" and "Victory to the NLF!" shouted the members of the various Marxist factions while the anarchists were silent for once. We were marching against the war – and obviously against the Americans who were fighting it with mass bombing and napalm. But we were not supporting their Communist opponents. Objectively, though, from the viewpoint of a disinterested observer there wasn't much of a difference and, as so often, there were "violent" as well as "non-violent" anarchists on show.

Over the year of 1968 nothing else in the West came near the Paris revolt in terms of threatening the established order; a key point there was that the student uprising spread, geographically to the regions of France and in social and economic terms from the university to the factory. Student occupations of the university can be shrugged off: workers' occupations of the factory are a serious threat to capitalist order. That is why de Gaulle's government was rattled.

I wrote in *Freedom*: "The most significant element in the French rebellion was not the raising of the barricades but the occupation by students and workers of the universities and factories. As has been said so often, it is by taking control at work that the exploited classes have the capacity to achieve a revolution. The physical occupation of places of work demonstrates the power of the masses. How many policemen do you need to expel from their factories all the workers of France?"

But the reaction when it came was decisive. A pro-government demonstration in Paris was followed by a massive Gaullist victory in the June elections.

There is an epitaph. On 20 July 1968 I wrote in *Freedom*: "If you've never been to the international [anarchist] summer camp now would be a good time to go, particularly if you are a student. Since the camp is being organised in France it will probably attract a number of French students who have been involved in the Revolt..." But a week or two later, with my partner and her two young children, I turned up at the advertised campsite near Bayonne to find – just four families, each with a Spanish father and a French mother; not a single student. The anarchist wing of the May movement was broken.

To add to the mood of depression we had a wretched few days in the campsite where it seemed to rain all the time. By day the beach was hardly inviting; by night camping was increasingly miserable. Finally a powerful summer storm drowned our two pathetic little tents – without exaggeration it washed them several yards down the slope. In the middle of the night we were rescued and given shelter by the anarchist families who of course had proper professional tents with separate rooms.

Next morning there was only one thing for it. "You must go south to Spain," they said. But I said: "We can't – there's an anarchist campaign for holidaymakers to boycott Francoist Spain." And they said: "If anyone can give you permission, we can – and we do." So we went across the border in search of the sun and sandy beaches...

In the autumn and winter of 1968 life carried on though not in a radical direction. Just as France had reacted to the May days of insurrection by re-electing de Gaulle's government, electors in the

United States responded to the turmoil there by supporting Richard Nixon’s law and order campaign and electing him president in November. Disorder was followed by reaction. Everywhere the prospects of major social change seemed dimmer than ever. But at least there had been some signs of radical life in 1968.