Preface

Even half a century later the ‘events of 1968’, seen as the culmination of the cultural and social transformation of the sixties, still engender a lot of interest. Indeed: one could say that 1968 has achieved a kind of mythical status. Partly that is, of course, linked to a generational issue. Students and dropouts in their twenties played a dominant role in the different political protest movements of the late sixties, in the development of countercultures, in the sexual revolution and in the outburst of musical creativity of the time. The survivors of this generation are now, of course, the quintessential ‘boomers’ who look back fondly at this period as the heroic era of their lives, as well as their youth. Many of the protagonists of ‘68’ in the West did not survive (although it has to be said that drugs caused far more fatalities than state violence) but those that did are now often respected members of the establishment—something symbolized by the award of the Nobel prize to that reluctant icon of the protest movement Bob Dylan in 2016.

Turkey is one of the countries in which ‘1968’ (as a shorthand for the movements that rocked the world in the sixties and early seventies) has always received a great deal of interest and that interest seems only to have increased in recent years. In the Turkish case that seems to have less to do with the nostalgia of a generation of former activists than with an interest among younger intellectuals and academics in the alternatives offered by the activism of the sixties and seventies and what it might have to offer in terms of analyses or solutions for today’s issues. That, to me, seems to be a big difference between the way ‘68’ is remembered (and studied) in Europe or the United States on the one hand, and Turkey on the other—the underlying notion that it is not only interesting historically, but *relevant*. The underlying question motivating many publications on 1968 in Turkey seems to be ‘What went wrong?’

This double special issue is an expression of that interest. It asks some very interesting questions. It recognizes that ‘1968’ was a global phenomenon but that it took on different shapes according to the different social and political circumstances, and the historical setting, in which the activists had to operate. The question to what extent the movements of the sixties and seventies in Turkey were part of a global wave and to what extent they had specific characteristics of their own is at the heart of this special issue. The transnational dimension is investigated both in the sense of comparison between the

different movements highlighting the shared influences, but also in the sense of connections between them. This in a sense ‘synchronic’ analysis is offset by a ‘diachronic’ one that investigates the way the radical movements of the sixties were connected to the Kemalism of the early republic, or rather: to a reinterpretation of early Kemalism as a revolutionary and anti-imperialist struggle. One of the most distinguishing features of Turkish left-wing movements is indeed the way in which, from Doğan Avcıoğlu onward, they have been able to see themselves as standing not only in the tradition of revolutionary Marxism in its many guises, but also in that of national liberation.

While situating the Turkish ‘68’ globally and historically is one of the main concerns of the collection, some articles offer penetrating insights into different aspects of the movements in Turkey, particularly on the role and position of women activists. This is a topic that is currently receiving much interest because of the problematic contrast between an ideology of gender equality and a practice of male dominance in a patriarchal society such as the Turkey of the sixties.

The collection also recognizes that ‘68’ was a cultural movement as well as a political one and while that may sound like a commonplace where the sixties in Europe or the US are concerned, in the Turkish case this cultural dimension (which ranges from fashion to music and visual arts) is nearly always overlooked, so its inclusion is important and innovative.

If a follow-up to the collection is ever contemplated, I think it would be particularly useful to employ a comparative approach to understand the different reactions to the left activism of the sixties and seventies, as I think there is something very specific to the Turkish case. While it is true that the leftist youth faced state violence everywhere—ranging from the brutality of De Gaulle’s police forces in France and state troopers in the US to the ‘dirty wars’ of Latin America—in Turkey the left was faced by the fast increasing violence of young right-wing militants, who often had the tacit support of state organs, but were not part of the state. This right-wing youth militancy had strong historical roots in Turkey as well, going back to the *Milli Türk Talebe Birliği* (National Turkish Student Union, MTTB), the *Tan* riots of 1945 and the anti-Greek pogroms of 1955. The degeneration of the activism of the late sixties into the brutal street violence of the later seventies of course has to be studied against the backdrop of a global economic crisis, but it seems to have uniquely Turkish features as well. Ultimately it led to the Turkey of today, which is politically and economically the legacy of the military coup of 1980, and is headed by a president who is himself a late ‘boomer’ and who once was a young right-wing militant.

As this collection convincingly shows, '68' was significant, but perhaps it would not be an exaggeration to say that its historical importance in the Turkish context was primarily in the counterforces it unleashed.

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