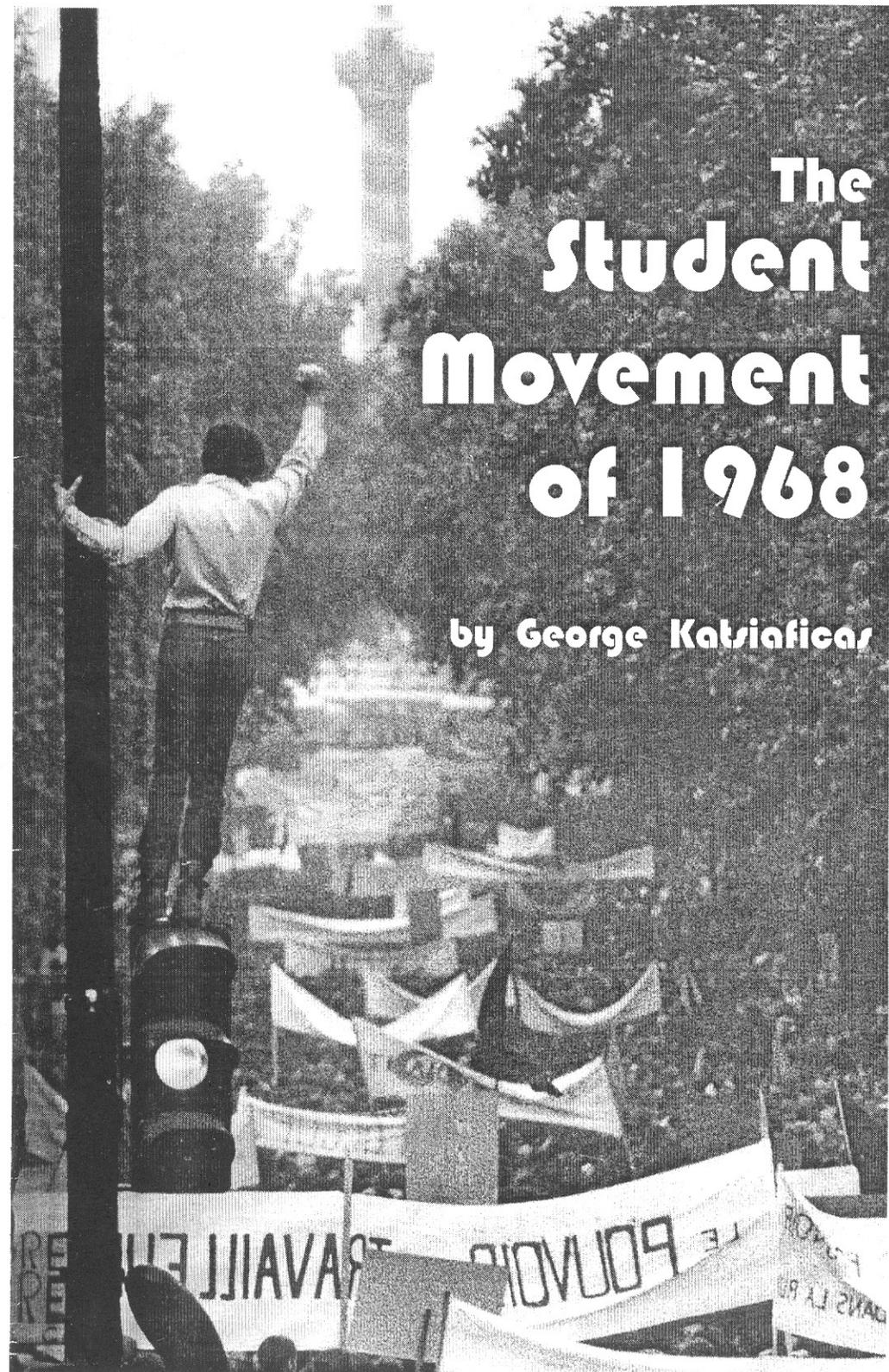


# The Student Movement of 1968

by George Katsiaficas



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**Email.**

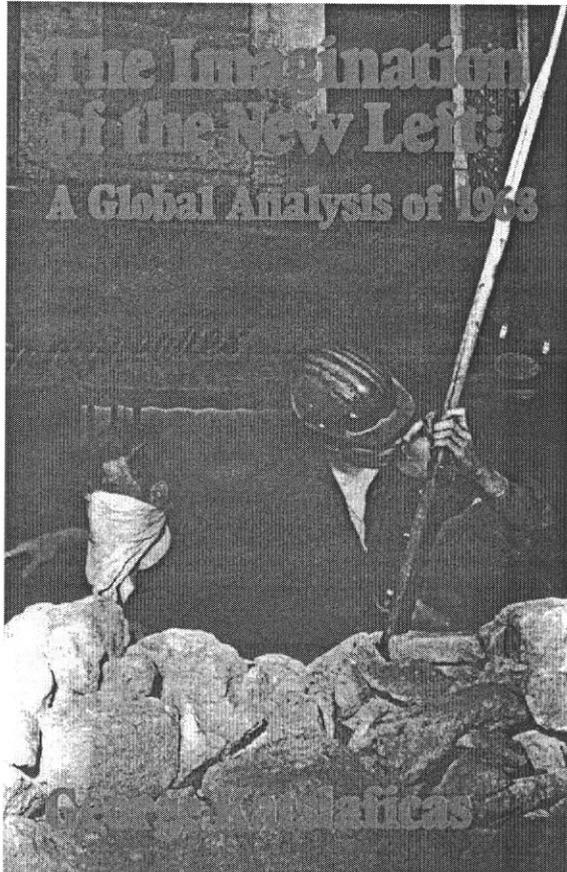
[mourningcommute@yahoo.com](mailto:mourningcommute@yahoo.com)

**Website.**

<http://radicalpraxis.tripod.com>



The text of this pamphlet is taken from  
*The Imagination of the New Left:  
A Global Analysis of 1968*  
by George Katsiaficas  
(South End Press, 1987)



For further reading:

*1968: Marching in the Streets*  
by Tariq Ali and Susan Watkins (Free Press, 1998)

*Beneath the Paving Stones:  
Situationists and the Beach, May 1968*  
by Guy Debord (AK Press, 2001)

*1968: Magnum Throughout the World*  
Edited by Eric Hobsawm (Harzan Editeur, 1998)

*Media '68:*  
*A public archive of the facts and ideas of 1968*  
<<http://www.media68.com>>



world's most powerful nation-state.

What was significant in 1968 was not only that students were in the forefront of the New Left, nor merely that their numbers were so swelled that they were in themselves an important social force. What was most significant was that the particular interests of the student movements became identified with the needs of the most oppressed members of the world system and that a general will was articulated which negated the accepted values of nationalism, hierarchy, and the global division of labor. In May 1968 and May 1970, the general strikes sparked by students transcended the existing system of values and simultaneously sought to transform the structures of the world system and the everyday routines conditioned by those structures.

From the start, it was at the level of everyday life that the New Left sought to transform society, an aspiration which explains why the movement built its own communities and attempted to define a new process of politics. At the same moment, however, an essential dimension of the movement's identity was its international connectedness, a phenomena understood by both the CIA and the KGB (who organized their own international student association in an attempt to gain control of the movement). In Santo Domingo in 1967, the CIA went as far as organizing an entire "Counter-University." Coupled as it was with a diffuse cultural revolt, however, the student movement was controlled neither by outsiders, nor by its own hastily organized groupings. Perhaps this is clearest in the case of Mexico, where the 1968 student movement endured its bloodiest days during the preparations for one of the world's premier events: the Olympic Games ★



**If 1968 was anyone's year, it was the year of the students.** From Peking to Prague to Paris to Berkeley, students sparked the movements which marked 1968, and more than any other group, it was their international practice which made the New Left a global movement. In conjunction with the movements for national liberation, particularly with Vietnam, the student movement became a force in international relations, compelling world policymakers to modify – and in some cases to cancel altogether – their grandiose plans. Soon after Richard Nixon was elected to his first term as President, for example, he threatened the Vietnamese



**Student demonstration, Montreal**

Nixon to limit the U.S. invasion of Cambodia and helped provide the Black Panther Party with some protection from police and FBI attacks.

Within movements for national liberation, students have long played a significant role both in sparking popular mobilizations and in the initial formation of revolutionary organizations. In Cuba, it was the student movement (organized as the *Directorio Estudiantil Universitario*) and the army which overthrew the Machado regime in 1933. When Batista and the army overthrew the constitutional government in 1952, it was again students who initiated the armed struggle against Batista and who maintained opposition to his regime in the brutally suppressed national student strike of 1955-56. In Vietnam, students played an important role in sparking oppositional movements in the cities. As early as 1949, they began to demonstrate against U.S. involvement in their

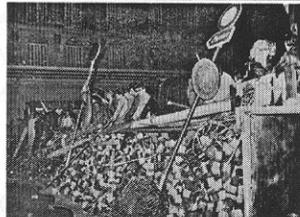
with the use of nuclear weapons on Hanoi if they did not immediately surrender. It was the hundreds of thousands of predominantly student demonstrators who marched in cities across the United States in October and November 1969 that caused him to modify his choice of weapons. Six months later, the 1970 nationwide student strike compelled





**PARIS, MAY 1968**

Pent-up anger and frustration over poverty, unemployment and the conservative government of General Charles de Gaulle, gave rise to a mass movement for sweeping social change. In the month of May, workers and students took to the streets in an unprecedented wave of strikes, walkouts and demonstrations. Barricades and street fighting were seen for the first time since the Resistance of WWII. By May 18th, 10 million workers were on strike and more than 120 factories and universities were occupied.



**ROME, SPRING 1968**

Coming off the energy of university occupations in 1967, the Italian student movement soon accelerated, thanks in part to the May events in France. Beginning at Rome University, where over 400 people were injured in clashes with police, strikes and sit-ins quickly spread to Florence, Turin, Pisa, Venice, Milan, Naples, Padua, Palermo, Bologna, and Bari. The result was a political crisis that would lead to the resignation of the Italian prime minister and his entire cabinet.

Important exceptions – notably the fascist students of Hitler, Tojo, and Mussolini – students have generally been pro-liberty and anti-war. They have marched peacefully, demonstrated militantly, and formed their own international associations. In terms of massive upheavals, however, the student generation of 1968 was the first since 1848 to erupt globally with such numbers and enthusiasm.

How do we account for the role played by students around the world in 1968? There are many factors underlying their activism: their youthfulness (which leaves them free from many of the responsibilities which immobilize their elders); their segregation on the campuses (which creates a “critical mass”); the relatively free nature of the universities in terms of both the exchange of ideas and the leisure time afforded its members (both of which contrast sharply to “adult” institutions); and

last, but not least, the fact that students are *supposed* to study social issues (a demand which brings them face-to-face with some of the obvious problems of the existing world system).

While the above factors may account for student activism, they do not explain why international events catalyzed the eruptions on campuses in 1968 or why the vision and demands of the students were international ones. In order to understand this central dimension of the student revolt, its context in the Third Industrial Revolution and the globalization of production needs to be considered. The modern world system increasingly depends upon its universities for technical research as well as for the education of its technicians. After World War II, the quantitative expansion of the universities and increasing interpenetration of national economies in a world economy occurred at a dizzying rate, creating the preconditions for the emergence of the student movement of 1968. Far from remaining marginal institutions reserved for the training of new elites, the universities were moved to the center of the global system of production. The tens of millions of college students in 1968 represented the ascendant new working class upon whom the functioning of the global system depends. Not only were (and are) students in a central position in a global system undergoing rapid technological changes, they were also one of the "weakest links" in such a system. As Ernest Mandel put it in 1968:

A new social group has emerged from the very vitals of capitalism, from all that it considered its essential "achievement": the higher standard of living, the advances in technology and the mass media, and the requirements of automation. There are six million university students in the United States, two and a half million in Western Europe, and over a million in Japan. And it proved impossible to integrate these groupings into the capitalist system as it functions in any of these territories... What the student revolt represents on a much broader social and historic scale is the colossal transformation of the productive forces... the reintegration of intellectual labor into productive labor.

If, as Clark Kerr observed, the universities stood in relation to the latter half of the twentieth century as the railroads did to the end of the nineteenth, then the student movement of 1968 stands historically in line with the militant railroad workers of 1905 whose strikes and strug-

The African independence movement, led by college-trained activists, also affected black youth... Students who later took part in the sit-in movements heard reports of the African independence struggle... a few weeks before the initial Greensboro sit-in... even the most unintellectual black students were envious of the African independence movement and vaguely moved by it.

If, in 1960, the signs of awakening were present, few expected that by the end of the decade, the actions of students would precipitate a near-revolution in France or bring about the greatest crisis since the Civil War in the United States.

Inspired by Vietnam and activated by the global *eros* effect, anti-imperialist student movements erupted throughout the world in 1968. In Ethiopia, Ecuador, India, Thailand, Peru, Puerto Rico, Uruguay, Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, Indonesia, Pakistan, Greece, Turkey, Panama, Mexico, Italy, Spain, Japan, Belgium, France, West Germany, and the United States (to make only a partial list), these movements spontaneously acted in solidarity with one another. Even the most casual observers were compelled to acknowledge the internal character of the movement:

The turbulence of student radicalism now has the appearance of being worldwide. Alongside the formal international federations of students that appear to be of scant significance for the more dramatic activities of the student radicals, there is a spontaneous and unorganized, or at best an informal, unity of sympathy of the student movement which forms a bridge across national boundaries. In 1968, student radical movements seemed to be synchronized in content and technique. (Edward Shiis)

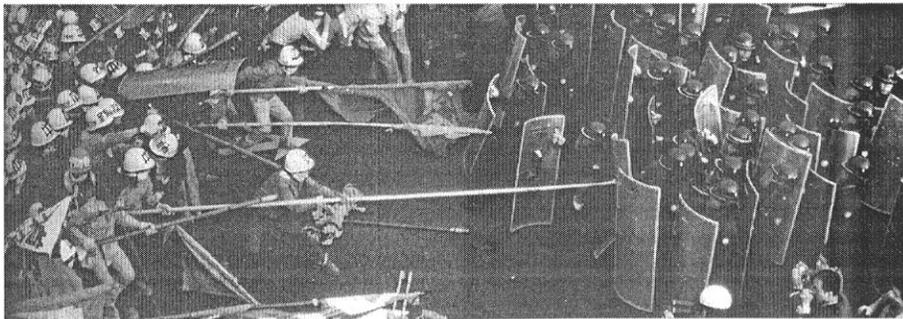
Or as Seymour Martin Lipset, a specialist in the study of student movements, observed in 1968:

Anyone who attempts to interpret the revival of student activism in recent years must face the fact that he is dealing with a worldwide phenomenon. Wherever one looks – at stagnant underdeveloped countries like Indonesia, at rapidly expanding, economically successful ones

## TOKYO, FALL 1968



**A militant but controlled use of violence, a great deal of it appearing as play characterized the Japanese student movement of the 1960s. The fervor of 1968 saw a months-long occupation of the Todai University medical school, ending in January 1969 after a three-day battle involving thousands of police. The All Japan Federation of Student Self-Government Associations, or Zengakuren, was the main force behind organizing thousands-strong demonstrations, such as those shutting down Tokyo in the Fall of 1968 in protest of the Vietnam war.**



what had been student politics "characterized by an extraordinary tranquility and virtual absence of mass activism" in 1967 suddenly became remarkably militant and internationally focused activism in 1968. In Turkey, there were suddenly sit-ins, boycotts, and militant confrontations again in 1968, although between 1960 and 1968, press statements, meetings, and occasional demonstrations had been the norm. In Africa, there were major student demonstrations in at least seventeen countries in 1968.

In Nigeria, a student movement emerged in May 1968 demanding the right of assembly. The university was closed for three weeks, and only when high school students joined the revolt did the governments give in. On May 29, 1968, students occupying the University of Dakar (Senegal) as a protest against scholarship reductions were attacked by police, and in the days of street fighting which ensued, one student was killed, twenty-five wounded, and 900 arrested. When the trade unions went on strike to support the students (as well as for higher wages and price controls), the President closed the university and imposed a nationwide state of emergency.

If the actions of students in 1968 were directly political, the impact of their actions was felt on other levels as well. By questioning the assumptions of everyday life – the cultural conformity of consumerism, the oppression of women, discrimination against minorities, and the segregation of youth – the student movement helped stimulate a worldwide cultural awakening which accompanied and outlasted the global political revolt. In both the core and periphery, the East and the West, the student movement spontaneously generated coherent global aspirations which stood in sharp contrast to the established reality. From France to Tunisia and Yugoslavia to Mexico, students broke with traditional political parties of the Left and the Right and developed new forms of organization and practice. Their unified actions and



**Swedish students storm the Soviet embassy following the invasion of Czechoslovakia in August**

emergent aspirations were a product of centuries of centralization of the world economic system, but at the same time, they helped define new dimensions to the global culture. New values for international and interpersonal social relationships quickly spread as a result of these movements, values which went beyond what was previously considered possible or acceptable. In many countries, the student movement built a cultural base outside the universities and established semi-liberated territories in places like San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury; in Berkeley, Madison, and Cambridge; in Amsterdam in the period of *Provos*, *Kabouters*, and the Orange Free State; in Berlin's Kreuzberg; in Nanterre and other parts of Paris; and in London's Notting Hill. Free schools, food co-ops, radical bookstores, communes, and collective coffeehouses were established as focal points of this emergent counterculture, and many of the values built within these communities could not be extinguished after the political turmoil had subsided. In Zurich, 10,000 people demonstrated for an autonomous youth center on June 29 and 30, 1968, and the police mercilessly attacked the marchers (hospitalizing 200 people and severely beating 2,500 more who were arrested). Twelve years later, in 1980, a new generation successfully used tactics like nude marches and "roller skate commando" demonstrations and temporarily won an autonomous youth center.

In some cases, student revolts in 1968, such as those that occurred in Canada, Ghana, and Finland, were limited to issues involving educational reform. In Belgium, Flemish students at the Roman Catholic University in Louvain rioted for three weeks in January after the French-speaking faculty announced they planned to remain at the university. Even in a case such as this, when the focus was purely educational, the student movement had *political* repercussions; tensions over the Louvain University disturbance contributed to the collapse of the government of Premier Paul Vanden.

In other countries, students responded to issues which originated outside the universities. In February 1968, Egyptian students rioted over the military defeats in the 1967 war and closed five universities. Later in the year, at Mansura, demonstrations over a university regulation spread to Alexandria and Cairo, where the unrest became more political in character. In the ensuing confrontations, sixteen people were killed in Alexandria on November 25 as police battled 5,000 students with clubs, tear gas, and gunfire.

As a general pattern in the twentieth century, students and youth have been in the forefront of those would end wars and establish a new system of international cooperation. From the May 4 Movement in China to the May events in France, students have been a blasting cap capable of detonating upheavals throughout society. Although there have been im-

like Japan, at right-wing dictatorships like Spain, at Communist systems such as Czechoslovakia and Poland, and at such Western democracies as Germany, France, Italy, and the United States – one finds aggressive student movements that challenge their governments for not living up to different sets of social ideals.

The international character of the student movement has long been one of its defining contours, proving a reference point within which its theory and practice were articulated. In 1968, however, television, radio, and traveling spokespersons spread the movement around the world as never before, synchronizing its actions and making the political generation of 1968 a truly international one. It is quite apparent that the chain reaction of protests (or *eros* effect) operated on a global level because so many of the significant outbursts of student protest were related to one another. In February 1968, for example, students in France were heard chanting "Solidarity with SDS," the New Left organization in Germany which was under attack. The next month, 400 German SDS members formed a prominent contingent at a demonstration in London. After the French students erupted in May, police battled 5,000 students in Rome who gathered to burn de Gaulle in effigy. In June and July, there were four days of street fighting in Berkeley when police attacked demonstrations in solidarity with the striking workers and students of France. On June 15, 10,000 Japanese students blockaded the center of Tokyo to show their solidarity with French students. In Santiago, Chile, thousands of students attacked the U.S. Embassy on October 4 in support of students in Mexico and Uruguay, who themselves identified with the May 1968 student-led revolt in France.

What is striking about the 1968 student movement is the degree to which their actions became political. Seldom in history has such a general will been formulated in spontaneously generated moments of confrontation. The day-to-day story of class struggle seems to be much more concerned with immediate material gains and losses. The transformation of economic struggles into political ones was (and is) a central turning point in the life of social movements. This transformation of self-interest into universal interest – another dimension of *eros* effect – was what occurred in 1968 and was obvious for all to see. In Scandinavia, for example,