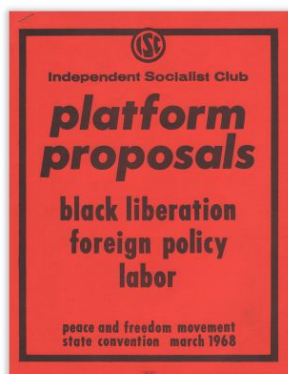


Marx and Marxism in Berkeley in 1968

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written by Jason Schulman | August 23, 2018



Berkeley (California) was probably a unique political-cultural milieu in the U.S. in the 1960s, both before and after 1968. It was part of the larger political-cultural scene of the San Francisco Bay Area from 1945 onward. The Bay Area at the time was a relative backwater in the U.S., compared to the East coast. The area had, however, seen one of the biggest general strikes of the 1930s, when the Communist Party-influenced ILWU (International Longshore Workers Union) helped bring San Francisco to a halt in 1934, including mass street battles with the police.

As late as the 1970's, prior to the serious beginnings of gentrification, San Francisco was still something of a "labor town" where capitalists and politicians had to tread softly. In 1945, the poet Kenneth Rexroth and others had laid the foundations of the later San Francisco Renaissance with a gathering of poets and radicals that reached into the 1960s, when it was challenged and overwhelmed by the hippie counter-culture. In 1951, the anarchist poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, in San Francisco's North Beach area, had founded City Lights Bookstore, a center for books and poetry available in few other places (and still in existence).

Across the Bay from San Francisco, Berkeley was a somewhat different but related cultural-political scene. One of the differences was, of course, the main campus of the University of California system, which by the 1960s had over 20,000 students. UC Berkeley had famously purged its own radical professors during the McCarthy era (late 1940s/early 1950s), a kind of liberal house-cleaning intended to keep at bay right-wing witch hunt forces such as HUAC (House of Un-American Activities Committee, a congressional investigative body) by doing their dirty work for them. In 1960, there were major riots against HUAC in San Francisco, in which Berkeley radicals participated, effectively ending HUAC as a force.

Berkeley was a city (population 100,000) where Communists, ex-Communists and other radicals from the 1930s and 1940s could to some extent "lay low" during the period of McCarthyite reaction. The city saw the (1948) origins of Pacifica radio, in which many such types found a home during the 1950s emergence of FM broadcasting, featuring not only jazz and classical music but also poetry and serious news programs not available elsewhere. Cody's Bookstore, another iconic scene, was started in the 1950s, and by the late 1960's occupied a large building on Telegraph Avenue, south of the campus, where it remained for decades, one of the best bookstores in the U.S.

By the early 1960s, Berkeley and San Francisco were increasingly swept up in the emerging black civil rights movement. By 1964, there were mass demonstrations in both San Francisco and Oakland against racial discrimination in hiring, and some Berkeley students went to the Deep South in the

summer of 1964 to help with voter registration of black people. When they returned, they brought with them the outlook and organizing methods learned in the South, for movements both on and off campus. This led directly to the origins of the Free Speech Movement in Fall 1964, in which 800 Berkeley students ultimately occupied the administration building, demanding the right to have political tables on campus, including for organizing off campus. They won. Their arrests became a national and international flashpoint. Sproul Plaza, the main campus area for tabling and leafleting, became something like a major Athenian agora in which two dozen political and cultural tendencies vied for influence.

Both interesting and significant was the fact that, amidst such ferment, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the main national group of radical students, never gained a foothold in Berkeley, in contrast to many other U.S. campuses which lacked such a varied political and cultural scene.

The national elections of 1964 were a major turning point. The "great liberal" Democrat and "peace candidate," Lyndon Johnson, overwhelmingly defeated a right-wing, war-mongering Republican, Barry Goldwater, in an election in which both the civil rights movement and the then-emerging Vietnam War were major issues. Within a few months of his landslide victory, Johnson escalated the bombing of North Vietnam, an unsurpassable education by events for the 1960's generation then coming of age. Shortly thereafter, the U.S. invaded the Dominican Republic to put down a radical uprising there, warning of possible "Communist influence" from the nearby Cuban Revolution, which was then consolidating itself and was (seemingly) oriented to exporting revolution throughout Latin America and beyond. New Deal Democratic Party liberalism never recovered from these and other developments.

I became a student at UC Berkeley in the spring of 1966, above all to maintain a student draft deferment, as the American troop presence in Vietnam reached 500,000. I was bored by the classes and dreamed of expatriating to Paris. There were daily political rallies on the main campus plaza, overwhelmingly left-wing and anti-war. I was anti-war but mistrustful of the Maoist, Trotskyist and vaguely Third Worldist groups that partly set the tone. The Chinese "Cultural Revolution" was then in ascendance, which many Berkeley students and ex-students rather naively assumed was a counterpart of the cultural revolution then taking shape in the Bay Area, centered in the "sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll" of the burgeoning hippie scene in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco.

In 1966, UC Berkeley offered no courses in Marx and Marxism per se, though that was mainly beside the point because, especially to hostile outsiders, led by newly-elected California governor Ronald Reagan, much of the "Berkeley" experience at that time seemed a 24/7 immersion in Marxism. A number of the speakers haranguing the noontime crowds on Sproul Plaza were from self-styled Marxist groups, such as the often spellbinding Peter Camejo (Socialist Workers Party) or the recovering left-liberal Bob Avakian, also a great demagogue, and not yet the *jefe maximo* of what became today's Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP). The junior philosophy professor Richard Lichtman, with a humorless rapid-fire but competent delivery, began offering courses on Hegel and Marx around this time. Two of the highly talented theorists of the political science department, John Scharr and Sheldon Wolin, taught Marx and Lenin in their classes. Professors of German and Russia history (Gerald Feldman, Martin Malia, Carl Schorske) were not sympathetic to Marxism per se, but could hardly avoid dealing with it. In 1969, after Lichtman was denied tenure, the philosophy department brought in the eminent Polish thinker Leszek Kolakowski to teach Marx, though by the time he arrived he had already turned away from the Marxist humanism for which he had become famous in Eastern Europe. The opening lecture of his undergraduate Marxism class was packed with student militants, but Kolakowski's talk on the origins of the dialectic in the neo-Platonic thinkers of late antiquity, above all Plotinus, quickly cleared out the room. I stayed; it was a great course on a history of which I was, to put it mildly, unaware, of the philosophical expressions of the great medieval and Renaissance-era millenarian uprisings.

It was actually an offhand comment by a maverick anthropology professor named Ernest Becker that inspired me to read, over the summer of 1967, the three volumes of Isaac Deutscher's biography of Trotsky, which (in the slang of the day and since) "blew my mind." I was not specifically taken with Trotsky's politics, aside from the obvious anti-Stalinism, nor Deutscher's spin on them, but by the sweep of his life as an activist, writer and speaker. I was already receiving English translations from the Socialisme ou Barbarie group in France, and other "ultra-left" writings such as Ida Mett's pamphlet on Kronstadt, from S ou B's fraternal group in Britain, Solidarity. I set out looking for a group with some variant of these politics, and a friend pointed me to the (then) Independent Socialist Clubs (ISC), which called for the working-class overthrow of every government in the world. I had found "my people."

Perhaps the most accomplished Marxist on campus at that time was actually Hal Draper, who by then worked in the acquisitions department of the library (as a result of which Berkeley had an outstanding collection of working-class and socialist history). Draper had emerged as a firebrand speaker at mass rallies during the Free Speech Movement, earning respect as the "one person over 30" (in the trope of that time) who could be trusted. Draper was the grey eminence of the ISC (later renamed International Socialists (IS). He also gave public talks for the group, and wrote a widely-read pamphlet "The Two Souls of Socialism," contrasting Marx and Engels (socialism from below) with an array of (in Draper's view) then popular "socialism from above" figures ranging from Fidel Castro to Mao to Herbert Marcuse. Because of Marcuse's World War II work for the OSS (Organization of Strategic Services), the predecessor to the CIA, the ultra-Stalinist Progressive Labor Party (with a negligible presence in Berkeley) ran a campaign against him called "Marcuse: Cop-Out or Cop?."

These campus goings-on could hardly be understood separately from the larger mobilizations and events of these years: the mass anti-war march in San Francisco of spring 1967 of perhaps 100,000 people, the fall 1967 Stop the Draft Week demos at the army induction center in downtown Oakland, involving thousands, or the (less successful) attempts to halt the troop trains in western Berkeley. Nor could they be separated from the (above mentioned) hippie counter-culture developing across the bay in San Francisco. Fall 1967 also saw the giant March on Washington DC, during which the poet Allen Ginsberg tried to levitate the Pentagon with Buddhist chants.

In early spring 1968, the Tet offensive in Vietnam, though it was militarily defeated, ripped away the last vestiges of the U.S. claim that it was "winning the war," which no one in Berkeley had taken seriously for years previously. The Orwellian statement by a U.S. officer "We had to destroy the village to save it" summed up the outrages being committed there to "defend democracy," supposedly embodied by the corrupt militarist clique then ruling South Vietnam.

The 1960s radical black movement was present in Berkeley above all through the Black Panther Party (BPP), which had been founded in Oakland in 1966 and quickly gained national notoriety for armed public demonstrations (entirely legal under the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, but which terrified the "establishment", which never imagined the constitution extending to black people). BPP founder Huey P. Newton was in jail from Fall 1967 until 1970, but other talented leaders such as Eldridge Cleaver (whatever his other problems) and Bobby Seale spoke at Sproul Plaza and elsewhere on the campus. I remember Cleaver in 1968 telling a meeting to "get down" with the thought of "Big Daddy Karl Marx."

A mass registration campaign throughout California in 1967 succeeded in getting the newly-founded antiwar Peace and Freedom Party (PFP) on the statewide ballot with over 100,000 signatures, a development carefully monitored in the White House itself, as a sign of the disintegrating Democratic Party. The 1968 PFP convention nominated Cleaver for president of the United States. Shortly thereafter, however, he and other Panthers were involved in a shoot-out with police, and

Cleaver had to flee the U.S., first to Algeria and then to France, where he was granted asylum by Giscard d'Estaing. (The PFP later nominated Dr. Benjamin Spock, of liberal child-rearing fame.)

My own real education in Marxist politics was provided by older members of the ISC and the internal education meetings we had on China, where we read books like Harold Isaacs' classic *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*, and on the Russian Revolution. As a result of this education, combined of course with involvement in the unfolding of the broader left movement, I was, age 21, able to hold my own in study groups in the county jail in December 1968, against older speakers from the Stalinist PLP, and others. The hippies who had been arrested with us looked on in awe at such "head trip" debates, and one of them later said "That ISC really educates its members." Which it did. (I remember a new arrival from Cornell taking me aside and saying "In Ithaca, you just had to be against racism and imperialism. Here in Berkeley, people want to know where you stand on Norman O. Brown's theory of polymorphous perversity vs. Freud's genital organization before they'll even talk to you.")

Berkeley was occupied five times in 1968-1969 by the National Guard and by the Alameda County sheriffs. Twice in summer 1968 there were confrontations on Telegraph Avenue, just off the campus; in Fall 1968, 80 people (myself included) occupied the philosophy department building, and were arrested; in February and March 1969 there were violent confrontations over the demand for a "Third World Studies" program for black, brown and Asian students, and finally in May 1969 there were even larger confrontations over the mass appropriation of (off campus) university land for what became "People's Park," during which the police shot and killed one guy throwing rocks from a rooftop. When asked at a press conference why the sheriffs had fired buckshot at the crowds, Alameda County sheriff commander Frank Madigan replied laconically "We ran out of birdshot."

Such, then, were the local, national and international contexts for my encounter with Marx in Berkeley, 1968.

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