

Why This Disco Dancer will be Voting for Ken

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The aim of this article is to explore the historical connections between the great political events of 1968 (which are being widely commemorated this year), the origins of 'dance culture' and the history of London politics which has led up to the current Mayoral elections. It might seem strange to see any connection at all between such phenomena as the movement against the Vietnam war, the Loft and Ken Livingstone's campaign for re-election, but in fact there are deep resonances which link them all. Disco arose out of a moment when the culture of racism, sexism, homophobia, individualism, hierarchy and war was being challenged from many sides. London's political life since the early 1980s has been characterised by similar struggles.

1968 and all that...

April 2008, and the airwaves are thick with recollection. It's forty years since revolutionary students on the streets of Paris, London, Rome and Berlin declared "We will fight and we will win!". It's 40 years since riot police in Chicago, an assassin's bullet in Memphis, a politicians' speech in Birmingham, and tanks on the streets of Prague showed the world what the reaction to such radical hopes might look like. Those of us born after 1968 must all sometimes feel as if it's impotent shadow will hang over us forever: a history to which we can never be equal; a moment of real possibility such as we can barely imagine; a past which still defines our world but which we can never access. But it would be wrong only to understand 1968 in terms of the headline wins and losses, or to judge the 'success' of the 'New Left' of that time in terms of its own utopian aspirations. Most of all, it would be wrong to think that '1968' belongs only to the distant past. The images of riot police and student revolutionaries, the situationist slogans and the Rolling Stones soundtrack, can all make this seem like echoes from a different world: in fact, this was the moment of our own era's traumatic birth. The multiple 'events' of 1968 might have been understood crudely as the elements of a failed revolution, but in truth they amounted to a complex set of challenges to the norms of post-war culture, challenges whose implications are still being played out today.

Most famously, May 1968 saw a great irruption of student and trade-union protests - against the restrictions, iniquities and hierarchies which dominated the lives of young working people - which almost brought down the French state and terrified governments and corporate elites across the world. Although these protests had in truth been building for almost two years previously, there was a moment when it seemed possible that they would ignite a revolution. Their revolutionary hopes may not have been fully realised, but the world of work as well as the world of university education was certainly transformed by this generation and their demands: the idea of someone like me getting a job teaching in a university would have seemed pretty unlikely before 1968!

In the UK a wave of student protests saw the London School of Economics under occupation, while a massive demonstration at the US embassy in Grosvenor Square protested the ongoing pursuit of the war in Vietnam, a war to which Labour prime-minister Harold Wilson refused to commit British troops, despite continued pressure from the US. In the USA itself the struggle against the war reached a violent pitch when police attacked protesters at the Democratic National Convention.

April of that year saw both the assassination of Martin Luther King and the infamous ‘rivers of blood’ speech by Enoch Powell, the British Conservative politician who predicted that black and white people could never co-exist without violence in British cities. The struggle to prove him wrong would be long and hard, and still goes on today.

In Dagenham women machinists went on strike for equal pay at the Ford plant (a fight that they would lose in the short-term, but whose objectives would be enshrined in law before a decade was out), while feminists protested the crude sexism of beauty contests like Miss America and Miss World. Just two years earlier, the miniskirted, kohl-eyed princesses of Carnaby St had been just about the most radical version of womanhood that anyone could imagine. The struggle to make sure young girls get a choice about who they want to be is as alive now as it was then.

Homosexuality had been decriminalised the previous year in the UK, and 1969 would see the Stonewall riots in New York kick off the gay liberation movement. The modern environmentalist movement was born during the years 1967-1970. The Czech communist party attempted to implement democratic reforms which might have led the way to a new kind of society (one worthy of the name of ‘Communism’), only to be crushed by Soviet tanks. The search for new alternatives to corporate domination and ‘communist’ totalitarianism has defined radical and democratic politics ever since. Mexico, Argentina, Italy, Germany and many other countries were shaken by student protests and waves of strikes by militant workers throughout that momentous year and in the several years that followed. In the West, the heart of the swirling millieux of protest, challenge and invention was the idea of the ‘counterculture’, a fusion of psychedelic avant-gardism, radical politics and social experimentation which would refuse the closed hierarchies and orthodox assumptions of ‘traditional’ culture.

What was it all about?

The economic and technical systems of twentieth-century industry had produced types of society which were very different from those which had gone before. Mass production required armies of workers to be brought together in the factories and cities of both the capitalist and ‘socialist’ worlds. Mass consumption and mass culture saw everything from motor cars to records being produced according to huge economies of scale which made them accessible to the general public, resulting in a way of life which was luxurious by historical standards, but rather drab and uniform to our eyes. People found themselves living in great crowds - from the busy streets and shop floors of the industrial towns to the massive audiences for cinema shows and football matches. At the same time, governments took control of transport and communications networks which gave them unprecedented power to shape the lives and activities of their citizens.

All this could have largely benign consequences: in countries like the UK, the power of government was largely focussed on improving the lives of working people, re-organising whole industries to create better working conditions, creating welfare institutions such as the National Health Service and public education, taxing the wealthy and creating unprecedented opportunities for the poor to live a decent life and get a good education. On the other hand, the combined power of the modern state and a conformist culture could have horrendous results: in Italy, Germany and elsewhere, fascist governments murdered millions who would not or could not conform to their idea of what it meant to belong to the nation. But fascism was defeated in World War Two, and by the late 1960s, the combination of modern industry, government intervention and cultural uniformity had produced

a prosperous and predictable life for most people in many countries such as their grandparents could only have dreamed of.

But it was not without costs. There were still great inequalities of wealth in capitalist societies, and various groups within them were dissatisfied with their lot. Black people in the US and second-generation immigrants from the Caribbean to Britain felt that they could never belong to the imagined family of their nations. Young people were dissatisfied with the deference that was expected of them until well into their 20s and grew impatient for more radical reforms: if life had improved so much since the 1930s, why couldn't it improve even more, doing away altogether with poverty and with the expectation that most people should spend most of their lives working at tedious and unfulfilling jobs? Above all, women were incredibly constrained by the expectations of post-war culture, which imposed the ideal of the stay-at-home housewife on women whose mothers and grandmothers would often have had much more extensive working and social lives outside of the home.

The events of 1968 represented an explosion of creative challenge to all of these restrictions and a real desire to push the power of democracy into new areas of social and cultural life. The era of industrial capitalism had seen all adults given the vote for the first time in history, but the visionaries of the so-called 'New Left' wanted to go beyond the limitations of a system in which 'democracy' just meant voting for some guy in a suit every four years. The ideal of really participating in the creation of your own world and your own culture was shared by hippies, socialists, anarchists and proto-punks and was arguably the basic organising idea of the counterculture. While capitalism may not have been abolished, it was forced to transform itself to accommodate many of these desires. The world of flexible working, the feminised workplace, gay soap operas, and web 2.0 might not be exactly what the New Left had in mind when they demanded a new world and a new life, but none of these positive changes would have come about without the agitation and energy of the counterculture.

What's this got to do with Disco???

The history of dance music culture has been so dominated by commerce and by white men that it might seem strange to say this now, but it was precisely this countercultural maelstrom from which 'disco' first emerged. Soul and funk - the soundtrack to the Civil Rights movement and black militancy - met the spaced-out soundscapes of acid-rock in the experimental disco productions of the 1970s. The Loft was a bohemian, polysexual space informed by David Mancuso's commitments to civil rights, gay liberation, feminism and egalitarianism as well as his interest in the psychedelic strands of the counterculture. Mancuso, like many of his contemporaries had been involved in and shaped by the struggle against the Vietnam war, and the Loft's celebration of peace, love and life has to be understood in that context as more than just a banal attempt to escape from the realities of social, political and military conflict. The desire for a more *participative* culture surely motivated the crowds who would come to dance all night, in a space in which they all contributed to the energy of the event, and nobody stood on a stage looking down at them.

By the late 1970s', the public perception of 'Disco' had been partially captured by the image of elite celebrities snorting coke at Studio 54 and John Travolta performing bizarrely formalised dance routines, but dance music continued on its polysexual, multicultural, cosmopolitan journey as it mutated into House and beyond. The backlash against disco came at the end of the 1970s, just as the 'New Right' coming to power on the backs of the fears of many white voters that their historic

privileges might be compromised by the rise of women and black people. It was exactly the same kind of macho conservatism which inspired the 'Disco Sucks' campaign of 1979 which motivated small but significant numbers of comfortable, white, blue-collar workers to back Thatcher and Reagan during that year, paving the way for the governments which would lead the worldwide backlash against feminism, trade-unionism, anti-racism and social democracy.

And Livingstone??

In Britain, the Left fared very badly during the subsequent years, as the historic defeat of the Labour Party in the 1983 general election and the failure of the national miners' strike during the following year represented crushing victories for Thatcher. In London, however, the story was different. The Greater London Council led by Ken Livingstone pursued a programme of radical left-wing reforms which not only sought to improve life for ordinary Londoners - by drastically reducing fares on public transport, for example - but took seriously the new countercultural politics which had emerged in 1968.

When the GLC under Livingstone implemented policies actively to promote multiculturalism and to combat sexism and homophobia, they were attacked with an incredible ferocity by the Tories and the right-wing press. Although newspapers like *The Sun* today condemn homophobia and racism, back in the mid-80 simply suggesting that schools and councils might try to discourage homophobia or encourage a respect for multiple ethnic cultures was enough to see politicians like Livingstone attacked as part of the 'loony left'. Try as they might, however, the press and the government could not win back control of the GLC. Livingstone was widely seen as one of the most effective politicians on the Left because he understood how to make progressive policies popular, and his programme of local festivals, anti-racist education and generous public spending built a genuine base of support for his policies across London, while contributing significantly to the long-term decline of ethnic tension and sexual discrimination in the city.

Ultimately there was only one way for Thatcher to deal with the GLC: abolish it. In a move of astonishingly crass authoritarianism, the Thatcher government simply shut down the entire Greater London Council in 1986, leaving the biggest city in Europe without a municipal government for over a decade. The resentment of this gesture was such that when Tony Blair's government reintroduced local government for London and created the post of London mayor, there was no question who Londoners would elect: many of us had been waiting for fifteen years for the chance to put Ken back in charge of the city. Blair and Gordon Brown actually hated Livingstone more than they hated the Conservatives, representing as he did a strand of Labour politics which had been willing to challenge Tory ideas rather than simply to adopt them in a watered-down version as New Labour did. But despite their best efforts - even expelling Livingstone temporarily from the Labour Party - they could not prevent his election as London Mayor in 2000. By 2004, they had given up trying, and allowed Livingstone to re-join the party and run as the Labour candidate.

Ken Livingstone is no saint, and as London mayor he has done things that I don't approve of. He has made all kinds of compromises with financial institutions and with the police, and he is no great friend of bohemian culture. However, his compromises have always been based on a serious calculation as to what was actually politically feasible at a given time. Livingstone is a socialist, but he recognises that we live in an era when working people are not sufficiently well-organised in a country like Britain really to challenge the power of the corporations. Whenever he has had a chance, however, he has pushed policy in a progressive direction, linking the Olympic bid to

development in the poorest districts supporting the campaign for a living wage for the poorest workers in the City, encouraging cheap public transport and cycling, supporting the 2003 European Social Forum, and re-asserting London's identity as a city which is proud of its cosmopolitanism, not afraid of it.

Now, for the first time, there seems to be a real chance that he might be beaten. and that the Conservatives' brand of selfish, mean-spirited, elitist, racist politics might be back in charge of London for the first time since the 1970s. If Boris Johnson is elected Mayor, then there is no question that the dominance of the corporations over London life will be greater than ever, and we can forget about saving Shoreditch (including landmarks such as the Light bar) from the encroachment of the City. More importantly, a racist who went to Eton and supports the war in Iraq will have beaten the most effective progressive politician Britain has seen since the 1970s. The spirit of the counterculture, of anti-racism, feminism and democratic egalitarianism which informed the protests of 1968, the dancefloor at the Loft and the policies of the GLC in the 1980s will have suffered another setback, and we will all be the poorer for it. Personally, I'll be giving the Green Party my first preference (because I think the best way to register support for countercultural values is by voting for the countercultural party), but I'll be voting Ken as my second preference in the knowledge that that's the vote that will really count. There might be better Mayors than Ken imaginable, but in the real world he's one of the few links we have been serious politics and the countercultural traditions which informed the Loft and so many other things that we all still value today.