

# The Personal and Political

## 20 Years On

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Thinking about 1968, the most interesting thing for me is 1967. 1967 comes back more easily; it is the signpost from which, sometimes with difficulty, I can move forward to what I remember of 1968. The reason is quite simple: in 1967, I was in love, or thought I was in love, or at any rate involved in what would not be called, with audible quotation marks, 'a relationship'. In 1968, there was no such involvement. I think this is important and I will try to explain why. The form of these observations is neither philosophical nor theoretical, at least in any systematic way; nor are they quite personal. I will simply describe a change, not quite a reversal, in the way I think about the world. Now, as then, it seems to me that 'the personal is political'; but the slogan has come to have a very different meaning.

I can remember at the time, in arguments with the orthodox Marxist left, feeling that there was a clear theory behind the slogan and that it ought to be written down somewhere. In fact there wasn't and it wasn't. It was a collection of ideas which for me had been culled from a number of writers: Laing, Sartre and Marcuse come to mind. Other people had garnered a similar collection of ideas from other sources: Mao, Guevara, the situationists, Reich, and—for the more advanced intellectuals, who laboured to read French—Althusser and Lacan. Whatever the sources, the general idea was that capitalism implanted itself in us in all sorts of ways, and somehow or the other we had to root it out. Sometimes it was a matter of straightforward opposition to whatever was conventionally thought good ('We are dirty, dangerous, hideous, violent and proud of it'); sometimes it meant a careful exploration of what was meant by communal, socialist living. Out of the theoretical confusion eventually grew the more coherent theories of modern feminism: the first signs were just about visible in this country in 1968, but only just. I don't *think* that there has been any other lasting theoretical heritage from that period that wouldn't have been there anyway. Sartre, Mao, Althusser and the others were a background to the events of 1968, not a product, although perhaps they became more popular as a result.

It is easier, but from this distance not easy, to remember it all as a mood or an atmosphere. 'The personal is political' meant a number of different things. It is a slogan which I am now sure could have meaning only against the background of a profound optimism about the way the world was going, a barely explicit sense that things could only get better and that we would win, probably in the foreseeable future.

There was more to it, of course. In part, the slogan summed up a critique of the old left and of left reformism, a rejection of conventional and formal politics which could proceed without

any real change in people's everyday lives. It was an argument that socialism, the revolution, should have tangible effects, in its making as well as in its victory, and that involved living differently. In part, it had to do with morality, although I am not sure that any of us would have used that word at the time. There was a morality of sharing, co-operation and participation, of the rightness of subordinating one's own interests to those of the collective. In theoretical terms this was built around a juxtaposition of representative and participatory democracy—the latter typified in mass meetings that tried to govern occupations, and our attempts to involve non-academic staff in our actions. All this too was seen as involving some sort of personal change, a breaking down of our own internal barriers and an attempt to communicate with other people. There was as well a sexual content—perhaps now, in the context of what the sixties have become in popular culture, that is the aspect which springs most readily to mind. We should not be possessive or jealous, we do not own other people. Everybody, it was argued, had the right to whatever sexual relationship they wanted with whoever they wanted, and there was an implicitly assumed, if not explicitly stated, elevation of the right to sexual satisfaction to the status of a basic human right. There was too, merging with the drug culture, an openness to new and different experience.

I'm not sure how this account must read. It will seem different to those who were involved than to those who were not involved; and those who were involved will have different memories and understandings of what was going on. I am aware in my own summary of the influence of media interpretations, that somehow my memories have been changed. But beyond this I do not feel happy with it. It has been a labour to write, even in a few short paragraphs, about something which happened a long time ago and my heart is no longer in it. Perhaps in 1967, my heart was there and that is why it comes back to me more readily. Of 1968, I still enjoy remembering the sense of defiance, of saying something important (even though I cannot now remember what it was I said); but this is coupled with a boredom, and the realisation that there was a cost, above all some sort of personal cost.

What I view differently now is the 'personal'; it seems in retrospect that I had very little knowledge of the personal, even of my own experience. What I did know was what the personal *ought* to be, and I knew that through thinking, through arguing and reading. I did not know my experiences, my feelings about the world. A number of things have changed since then. Perhaps I am doing what my mother said I would do when I first joined CND in 1961: 'growing up'—but I am still reluctant to admit that. It is certainly a matter of experience, of looking

back from the vantage point, on the one hand, of failed political movements, and on the other, from the wreckage of the broken personal relationships that people of my generation and politics seem to have accumulated. Above all, there is the personal experience of becoming a father; and the experience of psychoanalysis, first as a patient and then as a trainee.

I still regard myself as on the left, even as a radical, although I seem to have less in common with my active ex-comrades than ever and the last time I engaged in any sort of political action (apart from routinely voting Labour, which I am willing to accept is not a political action) was demonstrating against the arrival of Cruise missiles; what I remember most clearly about that is watching my students and the local kids block Colchester High Street during the rush hour, and feeling pleased that they were continuing the tradition. Perhaps I have become what I was actually accused of being twenty years ago, a tired old leftist. What the twenty years have without doubt involved is an encounter with the truly personal in an inescapable way, and a suspicion of any sort of theory.

I still agree with the slogan: the personal *is* political; and I still have the feeling that the meaning I give it is written down somewhere, in one book. It still isn't. There is still a collection of thinkers. Strangely, Foucault is the first who comes to mind, although his style and the content of his arguments irritate me to the point of abandoning any attempt to read him properly. Christopher Lasch has been most important, but not necessarily because I agree with him. Melanie Klein and D. W. Winnicott are important although they have little to say about politics, and I disagree with what they do say. Basically, I now see the statement, the slogan, as indicating not something to be embraced but something to be criticised. That the personal is political is a condemnation of the society that has made it so: the personal should *not* be political. There is something totalitarian about such a state of affairs, a police state of the emotions. If the same battle over right and wrong, the same struggle for power and survival, exists, as it does, in personal as well as political life, then it is to be feared. It is, I suspect, the sign of an increasingly powerful state eating into our areas of personal autonomy.

If there is a theory with which to embrace this, it is in the concept of 'defence mechanisms' that we find in modern psychoanalysis. Defence mechanisms are ways of denying a painful reality, whether it be internal or external. It is common for people to project their internal conflicts onto the outside world, and to see the outside world in terms of their own problems. The distinction between the inside and outside is a constant matter of experimentation for all of us. It is also common to deny the internal world by seeing it in terms appropriate to the external world, and this really does reproduce inside us the world as it is outside. This latter is exactly what we were doing with the slogan 'the personal is political'. We were trying to understand our own internal realities and experiences in terms appropriate to the external world of politics. It was in fact a denegation of the personal; by elevating it to a central place, we denied its existence.

Now I would see this personal inner world, and what, after Winnicott, we might call the 'transitional area', the area where external and internal reality meet which includes the area of our closest relationships, as the place where anything new originates, an area of freedom against political systems, and an area where political change begins. But it cannot be understood in political terms, by taking a revolutionary ideology which is part of an external world and trying to organise our experience according to it.

Viewed from this point of view, the aspects of personal life

I wrote about at the beginning appear very differently. The ideas of collective living seem to involve an invasion of personal space, unless they can allow for very wide differences of opinion and feeling. In 1968, the idea was that the collective gave us more power and would work through open debate towards agreement and action. The individual would find him or herself through the collective. I do not now think this is wrong, rather that the practice meant the individual being absorbed into the collective. That was certainly my experience, and that of friends I have discussed the matter with since then. Now it seems to me that the collective process should enable freer forms of individuality, which can stand alone against the will of the collective without causing it to break apart, and that this implies a collective which does not need to force its will on dissident individuals. I cannot remember that condition being reached or even aimed at.



To regard people as private property is, of course, wrong, but private property is a matter of law, of external social structures, not of feeling. There are changes which can be made in the legal system and in the labour market which, for example, contribute towards freeing women from their economic dependence on men. Feelings are different. I have come to value jealousy. It means that somebody is appreciated for their own personal qualities, and not simply as an object of desire, a consumer product which is eventually interchangeable with others. Similarly, commitment in a relationship at the expense of self-gratification now seems to me quite an admirable quality, and totally counter to the values of late capitalist society. The interpretation we gave to Marcuse's *Eros and Civilisation* now seems itself an example of repressive desublimation, a transfer of built-in obsolescence from cars to relationships.

It is a truism, found everywhere from soap operas to psychoanalysis (and leaving aside the question of whether there is any difference between them) that unless you can love yourself, then you won't be able to love anybody else. It can be generalised into the political statement: unless you treat yourself and your own life with respect, then you won't be able to treat anybody else with respect, and that is surely a precondition of anything like a free or a socialist society. To try to run your life by an ideology, a theory or a philosophy is not treating yourself with respect.