

European protest cultures in 1960/70s. Heidelberg: Martin Klimke, Heidelberg Center for American Studies, Universität Heidelberg Joachim Scharloth, Deutsches Seminar, Universität Zürich, Heidelberg, 25.08.2006-27.08.2006.

Reviewed by Anette Warring

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (October, 2006)

Studies on the protest movements and their cultures around 1968 are typically carried out in a national context or, if comparative, leaving out large areas of Europe. Bringing together researchers on the protest cultures in Western European democracies and dictatorships as well as on the communist Eastern European states at the conference “Between the ‘Prague Spring’ and the ‘French May’” has been therefore very fruitful. The conference was the 3rd one of the Interdisciplinary Forum Protest Movements (IFK). It took place at Heidelberg Centre for American Studies and was very well organized by Dr. Martin Klimke, University of Heidelberg, and Dr. Joachim Scharloth, University of Zurich.

Focusing on trans-national exchange and national re-contextualization, the overall objective was to discuss if there was a specific European dimension of the networks of protest: How did ‘1968’ differ in East and West? Can Europe be considered a microcosm for global events due to its geo-strategic position during the Cold War? The outcome of the conference was especially significant concerning the differences and similarities between East and West and between the democracies and dictatorships while the ambitious question about a unique European dimension was difficult to stick to and even more so to answer.

Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth opened the conference drawing our attention to three

central topics as guidelines for the discussions during the two days.

1) The relation between the national, trans-national, international or global dimensions can be understood in two different ways: a) 1968 was the first global protest movement: Activists all over the world expressed their opposition against imperialism and the exploitation of the Third World. They protested for a peaceful and just co-existence of races, genders and peoples, at the same time, aiming at a fundamental change of the international political system of the Cold War. And b) The internationality of 1968 was an illusion: There were hardly any trans-national networks and the exchange of ideas was limited in scope and depth, as well as transformed by its re-contextualization in the host culture.

2) The relation between the political and the lifestyle dimension of the protest movement can also be considered in two opposite ways: a) The 1968 movements all over the world were influenced by the same ideas of Marx, Mao and Marcuse and developed similar political goals from these theoretical premises. And b) The 1968 movements did not share the same ideas and aims. What they all had in common was a set of symbolic forms and protest techniques. Thus, 1968 should be viewed as a lifestyle phenomenon rather than a political movement.

3) The relation between viewing 1968 as a genera-

tion in revolt or as a construction made primarily by the media can be regarded in two ways: a) The 1968 movements were a generational revolt. Young people all over the world protested against consumerism, militarism and lack of sensitivity of their parents and called for a change towards post-materialist values. And b) The fusion of the most diverse movements under one imagined umbrella “The New Left”, as well as the identification of a small group of activists with a whole generation, is not based on historical facts. Rather, it is the result of media discourses after 1968 - an invented tradition.

These very important and inspiring questions and possible positions showed to be quite difficult to follow consequently in the discussions, and very few papers unambiguously claimed one of the mentioned positions.

The papers echoed the national approach toward characterizing the research field, but the comparative potential was demonstrated by Konstantinos Kornetis’ (History Dept. European University, Florence) paper about the protest diffusion in the semi-periphery countries Greece and Spain. The repressive regimes reinforced activism in both countries, but the student movements were also widely determined by a strong international spread of radical youth culture. Common trajectories are visible in the evolution of the movements in the two countries. The students had experienced repression and suffering from authoritarianism in the past, in both public and private sphere, and distanced themselves from the most violent groupings, condemned the glorification of violence without rejecting its utilitarian value. Both youth movements were inspired by the parallel experiences of international incitement to protest and became a major source of pressure on the regimes.

Assessing the impact of “1968” in two different but related socio-political settings - the divided Germany - has another comparative paper. Using the term “big 1968” pointing at the broad

trans-national youth movement and the “small” 1968 pointing at the specific political response in a particular country, Timothy S. Brown (History Dept., North-eastern University, Boston) pointed out that the differences between the world youth revolt as expressed in East and West Germany were rather a matter of the space available to start with than of a fundamental difference in impulse, and that they were not as isolated from each other as they are often considered to be.

The trans-national exchange and transgression were studied more specifically in the papers of Jacco Pekelder (Duitsland Institute, Amsterdam University) and of Rolf Werenskjold (Faculty of Media and Journalism, Volda University College, Norway). The RAF solidarity movement and the international reception of e.g. the RAF hunger strike in West Germany, France, Italy and especially the Netherlands were the core of interest in the paper of Pekelder. Among the radical leftist in Europe RAF was understood as a crucial comment on the flaws of Western democracy and capitalist society. But different motives of the solidarity movement as e.g. anti-psychiatry, the memory of the wars and the Holocaust, fear of the German model, were also at stake. The RAF solidarity movement was an important part of the trans-national debate about the legitimacy and practical use of political violence. The impacts of the media in spreading the global youth revolt are normally emphasized but very few achievements have been carried out. Werenskjold presented some of the preliminary results of a quantitative analysis of the global 1968 revolution in the Norwegian television news. The hypothesis has been constructed that there is a connection between the volume of coverage from different countries and regions, and how the term “1968 revolution” was later used in the Norwegian public.

Analysing on the protest movements of Eastern Europe is usually neither well known, nor very well represented within the research field of social movements. Having the comparison of East

and West as one of its main aims, this conference offered no less than three papers on Eastern Europe. Boris Kanzleiter (Institute for Eastern European Studies, Free University, Berlin) showed how in Yugoslavia 1968 turned out to be the first open mass opposition movement after World War II. While the Yugoslavs defined themselves as part of a global generation of revolt, their protests were characterized by a set of particularities combining topics, symbols, and demands from student movements in both the socialist East, the capitalist West and from the post-colonial countries. Gyula Virag (University of Eötvös, Budapest) pointed out that though the variety of nationalities was notable at the 9th Youth Festival in Sofia 1968, the decisive role of Komsomol, that actually gave the main mass basis of the WFDY, insured that the festival was embraced by ideology. The strategy was to demonstrate unity in the politically divided world and diversity in an ideologically unified world. While Kanzleiter and Virag focused on 1968 as an important year, Zdenek Nebrensky (Prague) emphasized the importance of tracing the starting points of the protest cultures back in time. By focusing on the use of a subversive protest language, Nebrensky showed that the student movement in Czechoslovakia in fact started in the early 1960's, and that by 1968 this language had already crossed the threshold of the mass media.

The importance of understanding the historical heritage of protest movements was also pointed out by Maud Bracke (Dept. of History, Glasgow) in her paper on the French Communist Party, PCF. The party's roots in the old left and the communist tradition made it very difficult for them to support the revolt of 1968. Thus, the détente of the Cold War did not, as was the case for the left as such, facilitate PCF with new revolutionary potential.

The literature on the protest movements of 1968 often distinguishes between the student revolts as mainly political on the one side, and the hippie movements as mainly a life style protest on

the other. This contrast also forms a basic principle for the most prevalent interpretation of the course of the rebellion: A broad youth culture movement with origins in the end of the 1950's was replaced by a more pronounced counter culture in 1968, and by going through a process of political radicalisation the movement was subsequently discarded of its lifestyle radical aspects. Considering the title of the conference it is not surprising that by far the most contributions focused on the student revolts, mostly approaching these as social and political movements. This analytical focus did also leave space for studies focusing on the cultural upheaval of 1968, as for cultural analysis of the changes, both before and after 1968.

Thus, Niek Pas' (Institute for Media Studies, Amsterdam University) paper on the Dutch Provos explored how the Provos were not only rejected by society; they constantly played a game with their own image in the media and public opinion. With their original happenings starting in 1966 they both inspired and provoked other counter cultures in Europe and in the USA. Where the Provos can be seen as absurd comments on what they saw as an absurd world, the so called "Stadtindianer", was another way of protesting against the given social order. In his paper Sebastian Haumann (History Dept., University of Düsseldorf) discussed how the phenomenon of the "Stadtindianer" in the late 1970's in Germany could be interpreted as a shift of paradigm from revolution as an end of protest to autonomy as objective.

An aesthetic approach was, although in very different ways, central in the papers of Beate Kutsche (Institute for New Music, University of Arts, Berlin) and Susanne Rinner (Dept. of German, Georgetown University, Washington). Having a musicological perspective on the cultural upheaval of 1968, Beate Kutsche pointed out how students, inspired by Adorno's music aesthetic thoughts, but in contrast with his pladoyer for

New Music, were targeting New Music events as a result of their interpretation, that New Music had been institutionalized and established and thus, in Adorno's terms, invited to be considered as a conspirator of the "Kulturindustrie". Susanne Rinner, on the other hand, presented a literary approach on the study of 1968. Re-reading the canonical East-German literary novel by Irmtraud Morgner "Leben und Abenteuer der Trobadora Beatriz nach Zeugnisse ihrer Spielfrau Laura" (1974), she proposed to read East-German literature as a seismograph of East-German dissent and of ruptures in West-Germany and Europe, arguing to rethink literary expressions in both East and West as political statements by analyzing their narratives.

Thomas Ekmann Jørgensen and Andreas Rothenhöfer gave an insight into how key words and concepts provide an important entrance to study and discuss the late sixties.

Coming from Marxian ideology the concept of alienation is connected to the idea of a mythical golden age. Empirically Jørgensen followed the difficulties of the New Left intellectuals trying to engage (factory) workers in the critique of alienation. With reference to wider historical lines, Jørgensen found the background of the feeling of alienation in the individual liberation of man and the rationalization of modern society. Jørgensen suggested that the intellectuals of the left felt a lack of coherence between individual action and what was going on in the society. More over they were inspired by the critique of mass consumption and the cultural industry in Adorno's thinking.

Andreas Rothenhöfer established in his presentation a distinction between different levels of discourse analysis: the epistemic, the semantic and the group/ individual perception. A central question in the presentation was how we as human beings get to our generalization, from the individual perception to the abstract discourse. Engaging the audience in the process of interpreta-

tion he also presented ten quotations from texts of the late sixties (Marcuse, Habermas, Dutschke a.m.). As a methodological solution to the problem of historical ethnocentrism Rothenhöfer suggested a bottom-up approach, focusing on the creation of meaning at the level of individuals and groups.

IFK has existed since 2003, and its primary aim is to provide a forum for young scholars to discuss their ideas and research results, and to generate new approaches concerning the historicization and scientific treatment of protest movements and social dissent since World War II. Thus, it was both sympathetic and very interesting that the conference in Heidelberg first and foremost had invited young scholars. The variety of approaches was refreshing. As an interesting contrast to the young scholars, an eye witness and activist of the 1960's and 1970's, K. D. Wolff has been invited to discuss the case of Régis Debrays, whose fascinating story was the focus of the keynote address of the conference, given by Ingrid Gilcher-Holthey (University of Bielefeld).

The authors of this conference report have just started a historical research project on the political and cultural upheaval of the 1960's and 1970's in Denmark (<http://www.1968.ruc.dk>). Hence, the trans-national and comparative focus of the conference was very inspiring, leaving no doubt that the international exchange of knowledge and ongoing discussions between scholars are highly fruitful ways of exploring the phenomenon of protest cultures and movements. It will be interesting to follow the further work and activities of the IFK, which hereby is highly recommended. For further information, please visit <http://www.ifk-protestbewegungen.org>.

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Citation: Anette Warring. Review of *European protest cultures in 1960/70s*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. October, 2006.

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