

Burleigh J. Hendrickson. *Decolonizing 1968: Transnational Student Activism in Tunis, Paris, and Dakar.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022. xv + 237 pp. \$26.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-5017-6771-5.



Reviewed by Björn Lundberg (Lund University)

Published on H-Diplo (August, 2023)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

In recent years, academics have paid close attention to the mythologized wave of student protests in 1968 and their international ramifications. Burleigh Hendrickson's *Decolonizing 1968*, which illuminates the transnational and postcolonial nature of the student revolt, is the most recent addition to the line of books.[1] The author takes the reader on a journey through three countries on two continents: Tunisia, France, and Senegal. This study is not only transnational in terms of geographical scope, but it also employs this approach to challenge established narratives of center and periphery. The book cover depicts Senegalese student activist Omar Blondin Diop alongside Daniel Cohn-Bendit during the Paris protests in May 1968. The slightly blurred photograph illustrates how these protests relied on cross-border movement. Blondin Diop's death in a Senegalese prison five years later also serves as a reminder of the tragic costs for some leading activists, particularly in Tunisia and Senegal.

The book addresses three major questions. The first is concerned with how to operationalize

a study of transnational elements of the Global Sixties in a concrete and localized manner without making universalizing claims. The second deals with the protests' transgressive nature: how the ideas and practices of student movements spread across and beyond university campuses and national borders. Third, the book considers how reconsidering "the imperial remains of the postcolonial world" challenges our understanding of 1960s political geography (p. 8). It is worth noting that the first and third questions concern the theoretical and methodological aspects of the investigation, which may obscure the fact that the book's main contribution, in my view, is its solid empirical analysis.

The empirical chapters are organized into two main sections. Each of these sections addresses developments in Tunisia, France, and Senegal in turn, with each chapter focusing on a single country. A prologue, no less than two introductory chapters, and finally a brief conclusion frame the study. The prologue connects 1968 to the Arab Spring more than forty years later, while the first

introductory chapter outlines the study's framework and purpose—with a special emphasis on what it means to “decolonize” 1968. For those who are not familiar with the history of higher education in Tunisia and Senegal, the second introductory chapter provides valuable background on the educational systems in the former colonies as well as the characteristics of Habib Bourguiba's and Léopold Senghor's regimes. Hendrickson demonstrates how the migration of students from Tunisia and Senegal to Paris and their subsequent return were important in multiple ways. Alumni of the University of Paris played crucial roles in the struggle for independence (Bourguiba and Senghor had both studied in Paris) and in the establishment of new institutions of higher education in the former colonies. Students moving between colonies and metropole also established transnational, postcolonial networks that were “reactivated” in 1968 (p. 35).

The chapter structure, with each section beginning in Tunisia and ending in Senegal, emphasizes that this is more than just an examination of how the 1968 student protests spread beyond Paris to former African colonies. The theoretical framework and methodological choices that underpin this study allow for an examination of the reciprocal relationship between student movements in the metropolis and the colony, calling into question the notions of center and periphery. Hendrickson succeeds in demonstrating how the student protests were far more complex than simply the global spread of a Parisian phenomenon. Each country and city had its own set of circumstances, and the protests changed course as the authorities reacted.

Hendrickson further deserves credit for successfully presenting a new perspective on the Paris student revolt. It should be noted, however, that the well-documented uprising is not depicted in its entirety. Instead, the emphasis is on two distinct aspects: first, the links between Paris, Tunis, and Dakar, and second, how the situation of migrants

and refugees shaped the students' experiences in Paris in 1968. The University of Nanterre, and its proximity to immigrant communities on the outskirts of Paris, played a particularly important role here. For intellectuals of the New Left in France, argues Hendrickson, immigrant workers from the former colonies represented Third World struggles on the home front. Thus, when students and teachers in newly built higher education facilities were confronted with the experience of proletarianized workers from the Mediterranean and former French colonies, the university became a site of postcolonial activism.

As Hendrickson points out, labeling the 1968 protests as postcolonial is more than just a chronological statement. The Third World was visible not only through portraits of Che Guevara or the Vietnamese peasant symbolizing global anti-imperialism. In effect, Hendrickson sees 1968 as a “postcolonial moment in French history that brought the Third World to the metropole” (p. 62). It included the legacies of imperial downfall in Algeria, Indochina, and West Africa, as well as the consolidation of anti-imperialist movements and the experiences of subaltern immigrants living in the *banlieus* of Paris.

Hendrickson's decolonization of 1968 contains both comparative elements and *histoire croisée*. The networks of individual student activists and intellectuals are given particular attention. These networks and the international ties to the Parisian metropole played a crucial role in the protests in Tunisia and Senegal, but not simply by imitating or replicating the strategies of students at Sorbonne. Decolonizing 1968, according to Hendrickson, entails challenging reductionist narratives that place Paris at the center of student protests. The complexities of these transnational connections are revealed through meticulous examination of student networks. “More than any diffusionist or copycat theories that maintain Paris as the center and origin of 1968 activism, Tunisia

functioned as a critical cog in the transnational solidarities of 1968,” writes Hendrickson (p. 58).

Regarding the comparative elements, the analysis reveals several similarities in terms of strategies, organization, and outcomes, as well as some significant differences. For example, while parts of the trade union movement supported the students in Paris and Dakar, the Tunisian trade union UGTT remained loyal to President Bourguiba (until the 1970s). The regimes in Tunisia and Senegal attempted to control and limit university student activism through regime-friendly student unions, which led to increased support for more radical groups. The protests in Dakar, on the other hand, cannot be understood without the local context, in which Senghor’s politics of *Francophonie* led to demands of Africanization of higher education.

Hendrickson is open about the fact that the postcolonial lens is not the only way to view the Paris student protests. He does, however, make a convincing case that the student protests cannot be understood without this framework. The shrinking French empire and experiences of exploitation in Indochina and Algeria all played a role. They were more than just a backdrop against which the generation born after 1945 grew up, with the battles of Dien Bien Phu and Algiers, and who now enrolled in universities as higher education institutions grew rapidly in both Europe and numerous former colonies. This colonial and postcolonial experience was woven into the fabric of the student movement. In the words of Hendrickson, “May ’68 was a postcolonial moment not simply because it occurred ‘after’ imperial collapse in North Africa and Indochina; rather, it was ‘produced by’ the end of empire” (p. 70).

While the author is successful in provincializing Paris’s role in the chaotic events of 1968, the temporal and generational aspects of the myth-making surrounding 1968 and the Global Sixties are not explored in depth within this volume. Admittedly, the author does challenge the temporal

understanding of 1968 by including its aftermath during the 1970s. Hendrickson also demonstrates, without making it a major analytical point, that 1968 is, in many ways, a history of 1961, 1966, and, especially, 1967. This implies that we should question the use of 1968 as an “obvious” starting point, just as we should question the elevated role given to university students in narratives of the Global Sixties. Anti-authoritarianism was at the heart of this revolt, but university students were not the only ones challenging authorities during these years. Therefore, we should be careful not to exaggerate the role of university student protesters in the general zeitgeist of the late 1960s.

Relating to this problem, “youth” is a recurring term used to describe the protests and activists, but to what extent does this youthfulness reflect age, social conditions, or identity? Unfortunately, the concept is never discussed in detail. It seems clear that university students worked in a liminal space, sometimes acting on behalf of “future generations,” mobilizing around a concept of youthful radicalism, mobility, and progressivism, while at other times they instead stressed their role as (adult) citizens and full members of a community. To what extent did this boundary work include demarcations against other groups like high school students or young workers? Unfortunately, the question of what set university students apart remains largely unresolved.

Long discussions about sources and methodology are rarely welcomed by academic book publishers in the United States. Hence, the breadth of sources in this book is not fully revealed in the introduction. Although this omission may appeal to a broad audience, it obscures some of the researcher’s backstage work. As shown in the bibliography, Hendrickson consulted more than fifteen archives in three countries, as well as newspaper clippings from the same number of newspapers. In addition, the author conducted a series of interviews with activists, some of whom are anonymized while others are identified by name. Without

a doubt, each of these categories of materials has advantages and disadvantages. For graduate students and academic colleagues who wish to further advance the field of decolonizing research, a more explicit discussion on the use of sources, including oral history and newspapers, would have added to the many strengths of this book.

To summarize, the book's great value lies in the transnational analysis of student activism in Tunis, Dakar, and Paris, and the solid empirical work that underpins it. Hendrickson moves between local, national, and global arenas with apparent ease and succeeds in developing an empirically grounded analysis that highlights both individual actors and underlying structures. The work is open access through Cornell University Press thanks to a Creative Commons license, and it should be an essential read for anyone interested in the international ramifications of the 1968 student revolt.

Note

[1]. Works on the student movement and the Global Sixties include: Samantha Christiansen and Zachary A. Scarlett, eds., *The Third World in the Global 1960s* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013); Timothy Scott Brown, *West Germany and the Global Sixties: The Antiauthoritarian Revolt, 1962–1978* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); and Quinn Slobodian, *Foreign Front: Third World Politics in Sixties West Germany* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012)

Björn Lundberg is a researcher and teacher in history and human rights studies at Lund University. Since the completion of his PhD in 2018, his main research interests have concerned the history of knowledge and the history of childhood and youth. He has published research articles in Contemporary European History, Media History, and the Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth, and he is the author of several books in Swedish, including a biography of Swedish middle-distance runner Gunder Hägg (2020).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: Björn Lundberg. Review of Hendrickson, Burleigh J, *Decolonizing 1968: Transnational Student Activism in Tunis, Paris, and Dakar*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. August, 2023.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=59190>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.