WEST GERMANY: A RETURN FROM CULTURAL NOSTALGIA TO POLITICAL ANALYSIS

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One important and commonly known, though not decisive, trigger of the anti-authoritarian student revolts in West Germany was the police bullet that killed Benno Ohnesorg on June 2, 1967, in West Berlin. (In 2009, the perpetrator was unmasked as an informant of the GDR secret service.) The student Ohnesorg had been taking part in a demonstration against the state visit of Reza Pahlavi, the “Shah of Persia.” Pahlavi (and his wife Soraya, especially) had captivated the German public via the tabloids, which treated them as a substitute for German monarchs, while the critical intelligentsia saw Pahlavi as a dictator and puppet of American imperialism in the Middle East. The writings of Iranian exile Bahman Nirumand and leftist columnist Ulrike Meinhof helped to educate students about the repressive forces of the Iranian state and stimulated outrage. The students staged an entirely peaceful demonstration against the state visit, just as they had previously done to protest the Vietnam War. This served as the catalyst for the international and transnational significance of the local student revolts.

Criticism of the US as a “protective power”

The people and politicians of Berlin reacted to these demonstrations with great irritation. The situation of this city divided by a wall since 1961 presented a peculiar irony in that it was precisely the students of the Free University (which had been established by the Americans) rising up in the “frontline city of the Cold War” against the “US as a protective power.” The Springer press, which set the tone at the time, unequivocally supported the US in this role and sharply rebuked the student protesters. (Finally, in 2009, the Springer publishing house agreed to revise its former role under the scrutiny of neutral historians and observers.) The press claimed, accurately enough, that it was a “small radical minority” that was fouling its own nest, and that these students would be better off going “over there” (that is, to the part of Germany occupied by the Soviets, and to the “real existing socialism” of the GDR).

Nonetheless, attitudes were gradually beginning to shift, which garnered more popular support for the student protesters. In the German
liberal middle class, people increasingly doubted the validity of the US-led war in Vietnam—then a minority opinion now shared by historians and the broader public in the US as well as worldwide. Moreover, relations with Israel grew more distant after the Six-Day War, which Israel launched three days after the Ohnesorg incident, on June 5, 1967. In the aftermath of this conflict, when Israel began the policy of settling in the occupied Arab regions—a policy still criticized today—the West’s predominant support for Israel gave way to solidarity with the Palestinian Liberation Movement.

“Anti-Americanism” as a trademark of the radical Left

The various strands of development that merged in this dramatic week in June 1967 reconfigured the structure of world conflict in a way that can still be felt to this day. The East-West conflict and issues of decolonization diminished in importance as power struggles with Islamic states grew. In 1979, the Islamist Mullah regime ousted the Persian shah in Tehran; today it is in a bitter dispute with the United States. In turn, the US is fighting its “war on terror” in two of Iran’s neighboring states, Iraq and Afghanistan, which in some respects carries forth the armed struggle conducted by social revolutionary guerrilla groups against “US imperialism” in the 1970s. Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has rhetorically placed himself in the vanguard of an anti-American faction fighting against US hegemony, which is wavering—a front line which, if not for the Islamic fundamentalists, some former 1968 activists could probably join. “Anti-Americanism” was a trademark of the radical Left in the late 1960s. At the time, however, this was little more than a marginal stance that was unable to weaken the “soft power”—the cultural
power of persuasion—or pose any sort of challenge to the military power, but now it has come to stand for a global shift in attitude. The reputation of the US is worse now than at any time since 1945, and the “last superpower” is unable to find any effective means to combat the asymmetrical manner in which its opponents conduct war.

**Anti-authoritarian protest even in America**

On the other hand, the sources of anti-authoritarian protest are to be found in the US itself: it is widely known that the protest wave started on the American West Coast (Berkeley) and took its lead, in terms of its content and form, from the homegrown dissent against the Vietnam War. European protesters adapted both outward symbols and philosophical foundations of this wave in their own revolts, including the American subculture of “sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll,” different forms of direct action (sit-ins, teach-ins, go-ins), and postindustrial and neo-spiritual ideas. On the European continent, this revolt was only quashed by Marxist-Leninist elements in an authoritarian backlash among the students themselves.

When people commemorate 1968 today, either semi-officially or privately, they can only focus on local and folkloric aspects of lifestyle and consciousness that they could easily integrate into the changed values of modernized, postindustrial societies. To understand the extent to which 1968—a year that characterized an era and broke with all that had gone before—was embedded in global developments that have continued to cause ripples right up to the present day, however, a detailed political analysis is needed. Such an analysis needs to take supposedly marginal aspects of the student revolt in the West into account. The Prague Spring marked the beginning of the end of Soviet rule over Central and Eastern Europe (though not of internal and external Russian authoritarianism); the Maoist “Three Worlds Theory”, i.e., the battle of villages against cities, can be interpreted as the prelude to China’s return to the world stage (still under communist leadership). At the same time, other members of the 1968 movement (among them the founders of the first global postmodern nongovernmental organization “Médecins Sans Frontières”) took a stand in Biafra in Nigeria against a bloody ethnic civil war, and the dictators in the Latin American and Mediterranean regions of the world collapsed under the pressure of the “third wave of democratization.”

Between 1965/68 and the next landmark year of 1979—the year of the Iranian Revolution, the disastrous invasion of Afghanistan by
the rise to power of Ronald Reagan—world politics changed radically, adopting a form to which the events of 1989 and 2001 hold the key: the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact merely postponed the dramatic loss of US hegemony in the world, which has now been displaced by a multi-polar global society. With the powerful influence of politicized religious movements and nongovernmental organizations, this global society is hardly likely to restore the sort of “world order” that the classical state system of international relations dictated.

**Foreign policy and transnational dimensions**

One recurring theme in this lengthy development is the increasingly critical attitude, even among Western nations, towards the US and Israel. Yet 1968 was by no means the kick-off of acerbic anti-Americanism; a good part of the anti-authoritarian Vietnam protest stemmed from the disappointment an entire generation of Americans and American supporters felt over America’s betrayal of the republican values of its own constitution. Only then did the authoritarian wing of the student movement in West Germany fasten upon the more totalitarian traditions and excesses of the French and Russian Revolutions, coming to radically reject even the basic values of Western democracy and liberalty. It is interesting to note the continuities and breaks in this process: while many former West German “68ers” remained faithful to a political-cultural anti-Americanism, which hates “America” across the board for all that it is and represents (rather than criticizing US decision-makers specifically for what they do or fail to do), many critics of America have returned to their disappointed love and affirm American values, even in cases where American policy contradicts them, such as in the Iraq War or in the unethical treatment of prisoners at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp in Cuba. In other words, the 1968 generation became both America haters and “anti-Germans”—forming a pool from which neo-conservatives and Third World activists alike are able to recruit support.

This circumstance has resulted in the development of two factions in international relations. On the one hand, America supporters, including militant opponents of “Islamo-fascism,” which they perceive in Iran and al-Qaeda, have adopted a strange sort of “right or wrong, my America” philosophy. The anti-hegemony faction, on the other hand, has made strange bedfellows of America’s opponents, including caudillos (militant leaders, like Venezuelan
President Hugo Chavez) and fundamentalists (like Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad).

In other words, any political analysis or review of the year 1968 should focus on the “foreign policy” and transnational dimension it had right from the start—as well as on the future of the West. Some observers claimed that the Iraq War was a founding moment that led to a Europe independent of the US, while others saw in it an opportunity to do away with the traditional European resistance to the American “empire.” The fact that both of these interpretations proved to be overly hasty, especially now with the Obama administration, underscores the present need for the European Union to rethink, with deep historical insight, the role that it intends to assume as a global player in the political arena.

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