

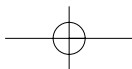
1968 THIRTY YEARS AFTER

Four hypotheses on the historical consequences of the student movement

Claus Offe

First of all, any reflection of former participants on the 1968 movements and events should resist the temptation of painting them in heroic colours. These were exceptional events, though largely inconsequential in terms of the stated ambitions of their proponents. Instead, the following reflections are a rather risky exercise in counterfactual historiography. Historical accounts can make use of counterfactual speculation in either of two senses, the one being the mirror image of the other. Either the question is: what would be different at the present point in time if a certain event *had* actually occurred at the time under consideration that did *not* occur? (An example is the thought that the attempted and failed assassination of Hitler on 20 July 1944 had actually been successful, or if the Soviet forces in East Germany had actually used military force to prevent the opening of the Berlin Wall in November 1989.) Conversely, one can ask what would be different today if events had *not* happened that did in fact happen (for example, what if Kennedy had not been assassinated in 1963?). Either type of thought experiment can yield stimulating speculations, though the answers cannot be demonstrably true. They can be useful because the many different answers that can be given to such questions help us to realize the range of variation of interpretive readings of history and, by implication, the historical roots of present realities.

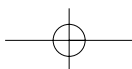
It is the second of these speculative operations that I want to apply to the student movement of 1967–8, focusing on the (West) German case. In order to do so, we need a sufficiently abstract and encompassing definition of what we mean by '1968'. For that, I propose the following: the movements and events of 1968 amount to the attempted subversion of some dominant



'code'. A code is an institutionalized rule of classification and evaluation. We use codes (or 'discourses') in order to attach order and meaning to the world; also, codes are cognitive and evaluative routines that are established, prescribed by holders of social and political power, if inconspicuously so. They consist in pairs of attributes, each element of which is associated with positive or negative value or degrees of relevance. Codes can also come in the form of equations, such as the equation of capitalism and freedom. Sometimes, however, codes break down and disappear from circulation, arguably because they are no longer suitable for coping with complexities or because they are challenged as biased, selective, and driven by power and interest.

During the second half of the 1960s, students were engaged in smashing those cognitive and evaluative schemes that had been established in West German post-Second World War society. A telling example is the practice of political mobilization through street theatre performances. Quite apart from its political content, this practice implies the demolition of the difference between representative aesthetic high culture that is performed at specialized indoor places ('theatre') and normal, vulgar everyday life ('street'). Politics in university lecture halls, love in public, educational efforts made by students on professors, the politicization of family life, black Americans in 'white' swimming pools – all these are examples for the questioning of dominant rules of classification – the ruling order prescribing 'what belongs where'. The French student movement was particularly creative at articulating oxymora. Examples include the 'beach under the pavement', 'bring imagination to power' or, quintessentially: 'be realist – demand the impossible!'. In aesthetic culture, films like Godard's *Weekend* use a metaphor for joy and relaxation in order to tell a tale of physical and social horrors. What was at stake was the challenging of ruling ways of making distinctions and evaluative oppositions. Here are some more specific examples:

- Domestic affairs versus foreign affairs: the Vietnam War was turned into a core issue of domestic politics.
- West versus east: the distinction defining the Cold War was demolished, and the common 'authoritarian' features of both systems brought into critical focus – resulting in the 'anti-anticommunist' refusal to adopt the western Cold War code.
- Art versus life: the fusion of both aspects in street theatre, pop music, and the countercultural decoration of the body and everyday life.
- Science versus politics: the critique of political implications of science, research and academic training.
- Private life versus politics: 'the personal is political' – a feminist slogan coined in the 1960s.
- Representative political elites versus loyal and obedient masses: the practice of 'extraparliamentary opposition' (also implying the insignificance of the code of 'governing party versus opposition'.

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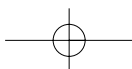
- The present and the (recent German) past: the questioning of an alleged sharp rupture (as implied in the dominant code of the 1950s and 1960s, which was signalled by the description of 1945 as a 'collapse' of Nazi Germany, followed by an 'hour zero' of economic reconstruction); the refusal of this comfortable code was justified by the 1968 movements and their precursors with reference to a wealth of evidence for personal, political, cultural and structural continuities; if there was a 'collapse' in German history, or so the students would claim, it had occurred in 1933, not 1945.
- The equation of legitimacy and legality: the practice of 'limited' violations of legal rules insists that some illegal acts may well be legitimate.

In sum: the practice of the student movement can be characterized, at the most abstract level, as the attempt to distinguish between right and wrong distinctions, between those that mislead and those that enlighten and liberate, and to insist upon the validity of the latter and to expose the power content of the former. The late Austrian poet Ernst Jandl has written an ingenious (though untranslatable) little poem smashing the political code of left versus right and quoted thousands of times: '*manche sagen/ lechts und rinks/ kann man nicht velwechsern. werch ein illtum!*'. (The trick is the exchange of the letters r and l; it can be interpreted as a hidden reference to the Chinese and their cultural revolution, as the Chinese have stereotypical difficulties in pronouncing these letters in distinguishable ways.) In the US, on the other hand, the established power structure rooted in 'middle America' insisted on *its* code in openly threatening tone: 'America – love it or leave it!' was to be read on bumper stickers of millions of American cars.

Now, to return to counterfactual speculation: what is it that would be missing today if that peculiar attack on these and other ruling distinctions had not taken place? To answer that question, I propose four hypotheses. All of them have, I think, a certain plausibility. But each one of them is incompatible with each of the others, at least at the surface of it. I will arrange them in a sequence of decreasing optimism.

My first hypothesis: 1968 marked the birth of several cumulative waves of liberation. Had the ruling codes not been demolished by the 1968 movements, they would have preserved their power over the thoughts and actions of the people. In this sense, the movement of 1968 was a 'cultural' revolution. We think differently today than the normalcy of the two postwar decades prescribed because the movements of 1968 liberated all of us, including the generations born later, from the discursive power of those rules and codes. Without the work of destruction that the *soixante-huitards* performed at the cognitive frame of the postwar social order, there would today, this is what this hypothesis holds, be no insistence on participation and transparency, no feminist or environmentalist movements, no green parties, no liberating achievements for ethnic, religious and sexual minorities, and so on.

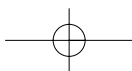
My second hypothesis implies the doubt that there is much validity to



this all-too-comfortable and self-congratulatory view of which there are still many proponents around. It argues instead that '1968' was not the cause of an effective liberation, but rather a relatively short-lived symptom of a crumbling of the reigning codes of the two postwar decades that occurred independently of the students' rebellion and for quite different causes. Thus the movements of 1968 were merely an epiphenomenon of the latter. The rules of evaluation and classification that were attacked by the *soixante-huitards* were anyhow on the verge of faltering and becoming untenable at that time. The student movements did nothing but celebrate and dramatize this collapse that was occasioned by anonymous forces of social and cultural change. They demanded something that was about to happen without the rebellion, pushing something that was falling anyway. Instead of causing an earthquake, the movements were at best its seismic sensors.

This sobering interpretation, too, can claim considerable plausibility: the sword of anticommunism had lost its cutting edge after the regimes that reigned in the state-socialist countries of central and eastern Europe had spent the last remainders of their moral respectability between the building of the Berlin Wall and the invasion of Warsaw Pact troops in Prague in 1968. The distinction between domestic and foreign affairs, that is, between events that are 'close' and concern 'us', on the one hand, and the distant occurrences in other parts of the world with whom 'we' have nothing to do nor in common, on the other, had become irrelevant through the diffusion of electronic media. As a consequence, the atrocities of the Vietnam War were present in every living room in the west. That the spheres of research, development and public policy had almost indistinguishably merged into one huge military-industrial-research complex was common knowledge of every newspaper reader ever since the Sputnik shock of 1959, the US space programme developed in reaction to it and the European discourse on the '*défi américain*' and the backwardness of the German system of higher education. Also, 'sexual liberation' can be read as being less the outcome of some programme of emancipation than the combined result of massive secularization, on the one hand, and the new techniques of birth control that became available by the mid-1960s. Also, the socioeconomic gender divide of male workers and female homemakers was put in question not so much as the result of the consciousness-raising activities of the new women's movement; instead, this questioning was placed on the agenda of debate and policy making as female participation in higher education had increased and as Germany suffered from severe labour shortage in the 1960s (the latter being partially a consequence of the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961).

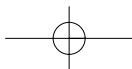
The 'post-materialism' of the generation of 1968 was itself the product of the experience of increasing and sustained material prosperity and social security with which this generation had been blessed; its members could materially afford to undergo their famous 'value change' (Inglehart) and turn post-materialist. We know that the activists of the student movement and a



large proportion of their followers emerged from social and cultural *milieux* that were in particular ways privileged by the success of the postwar prosperity and at the same time morally sensitized by the left-liberal tradition of their social and political family background. For both reasons, they were inclined *and* could afford to spell out, without taking too much personal risk, that western democracies did not live up to their proclaimed core values of liberty, justice and peace and that the proverbial emperor was naked. The achievement of these movements did therefore not consist in turning around the course of history, but in calling with great sincerity and engagement those dirty secrets of societal reality by their names that could no longer be concealed anyway. The students and their movements were thus rather symptoms of the incapacity of postwar society to provide itself with a consistent and credible normative self-description – instead of being a new type of revolutionary as which they masqueraded.

Nor was this grandiose self-misunderstanding of a voluntaristic and revolutionary ‘new beginning’ at all productive. To the contrary, after having spelt out the truth about so many social and moral failures and deceptions of their contemporary society, the activists of the generation of 1968 were not able to find out the truth about themselves and their true historical role. For they held fast, and they did so in tacit agreement with their most militant enemies, to one distinction: that of the social and political order of the ‘establishment’ on the one hand, and a revolutionary movement on the other. The media quite willingly often catered to both sides, dramatizing what was going on as a ‘revolution’ rather than profound social change that affected both sides. For instance, after the attempt on Rudi Dutschke’s life on 11 April 1968, the major German illustrated weekly *Der Stern* came out with a title page that looks amazingly silly in retrospect. It read: ‘Can the revolution still be stopped?’

Instead of also debunking the ridiculous antithesis of ‘the revolution’ versus ‘the establishment’, as Jürgen Habermas urged them to do in June 1968 when he spoke of a *Scheinrevolution* (pseudo-revolution), the students fetishized their own role. As a result, many of the activists fled into a multiplicity of theoretical models and strategic doctrines that can only be viewed with irritation in retrospect and most of which were evidently even more clearly outdated and ill-conceived than those doctrines to which their enemies within the ‘establishment’ adhered. At the very least, the immediate heirs of the movement of 1968 were neither cognitively nor morally able to situate themselves realistically within the field of societal forces. That is why they were not capable of providing some durability to the movement and of guarding themselves against the dangers of cooptation, of privatization, of commercialization or of self-marginalizing radicalization. For what began soon after 1968 in Europe as well as in North America was the determined rejection of the transitory identity of ‘student’ and its often pathetic replacement with other and ‘borrowed’ identities and forms of organization – be it

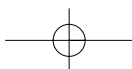


those of the leadership of an avant-garde party, the factory worker, the member of a rural commune family or the general of a guerrilla army.

Nevertheless, and this is the third hypothesis, it was a consequence of the student movement that the irritations it inflicted upon the ruling codes and the gain of insights that emerged from it became irreversible. Even if the student movement did not by itself create anything 'new', it has durably prevented from happening any reactionary return towards the previous normalcy that it has challenged. The codes of the 1950s, to say nothing about still earlier decades of German history, no longer figure as an option. Today, a figure like the Austrian rightist populist Haider, whose party is part of the governing coalition of that country, seems a virtual impossibility in Germany. The student movement has written its activities into collective memory in such a way as to immunize an entire generation, and arguably more than one, against reactionary reversals being implemented as official state policy. Rightist moves such as a recourse to authoritarianism, racism, any 'natural' legitimization of gender roles, etc. appear, at least in Europe, to be definitively foreclosed. The fact that open and violent forms of reactionary mobilization, namely xenophobic violence, occur predominantly in those parts of (united) Germany in which no student movement could unfold in the 1960s and where its civilizing legacies are absent, namely East Germany, can be invoked in support of this cautiously optimistic assessment.

Yet again, this 'immunization' hypothesis is also open to objection. This objection is the core of my fourth hypothesis which also seems to make some sense, and it does so not just from the point of view of very conservative commentators. This hypothesis concerns alleged cultural damages that must also be counted among the legacies of the student movement. Agnes Heller has adopted this highly critical and personally bitter perspective. She argues, in essence, that the short-lived mobilization of the late 1960s as well as its rapid decline have left behind a culture of political postmodernism. The students, according to this reading, have entered into a slippery slope, at the end of which comes not the replacement of wrong distinctions with more accurate and relevant ones, but the denial of the human capacity to make *any* reasonable distinction. Political postmodernism thus implies denying human reason the faculty to distinguish right distinctions from wrong ones at all; it thus entails the devaluation of moral universalism and of any conception of progress. The outcome is resignation, cynicism, retreat and arbitrariness. An egocentric cult of arbitrary differences and of rapidly changing superficial commitments, bare of any criteria, is likewise an element of the political culture of postmodernism that has been inherited from the original attack on the dominant distinctions.

Agnes Heller goes as far as understanding the movements of 1968 as the starting point of a decivilizing process the victims of which are not just wrong distinctions but all reasonable distinctions in general, and with them rational claims to validity. She speaks of the decay of style, form, discipline,



authority and all standards of critique. On the terrain that has been emptied of all such standards and distinctions, she recognizes the diffusion of 'uniform informalism', of hedonistic desublimation and of an almost methodical lack of seriousness in dealing with public affairs. Is the disinterested and detached 'do-your-thingism' of today's student generations the final outcome of the students' libertarian revolts? Adopting this perspective for the sake of argument, one would have to conclude that mindless and speechless mass events (such as the techno music festivities of 'Love Parade' held every summer now in Berlin) are the perverted inheritance of the political mass demonstrations of the 1960s. If so, then the outcome of liberation would not be liberty, but just indifference. Is challenging authority a self-defeating activity which eventually leads to the subversion of *all* standards of authenticity, morality and rationality? This pessimistic assessment is not entirely implausible if we compare the vast protest movements triggered by the Vietnam war with the silence and indifference with which the Gulf war, Kosovo, and now Macedonia are greeted by today's student generation.

I said at the outset that all of the four readings can muster a measure of plausibility, yet are, taken together, quite incompatible with each other. I am not sure how this puzzle might be resolved. The first and the second hypothesis can be synthesized if we manage to come up with a synthetic theory that would be able to integrate structuralist and voluntaristic explanations of social change. The third and the fourth hypotheses could perhaps be made compatible within a theory about the normative ambiguities of modernity and postmodernism. But both of these demanding tasks are way beyond the scope of the present reflections.

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