

NOT AN ANNUS MIRABILIS: 1968 IN THE USA

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1968 was significant not only for Germany and Europe. The USA also had its 1968, even though it took a different course and is remembered differently. To the Americans, it is the year in which, from the viewpoint of Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement, the 'dream died', and in which the fragmentation of the New Left engendered helplessness. It was the year in which the Tet offensive caused protests, in which the 'silent majority' rehabilitated Richard Nixon, and a neo-conservative counter-revolution was given a boost.

While 1968 has become an established term in Germany's socio-political language, it is no more than a date to the Americans. There is no generation '68 in the USA; instead, people talk about the sixties generation and the baby boomers. In this context, the following three questions are worth looking into: first, what are the social, cultural, and political causes of America's 1968? Second, what exactly did happen in the late sixties? Why did multiple crises agglomerate, how did they influence one another, and what was the connection between the players and the events? And third, does a transnational and/or international character of the sixties exist, and if so, what does it look like?

'1968' started in the fifties, when the call for realizing individual and social freedom and equality rights was first articulated. Society renewed itself: the gross national product increased fivefold from 1940 to 1960, the population exploded, and the 'baby boom' was regarded as a historical anomaly.

The start towards a consumer society was accompanied by two revolutions: on the one hand, the peasantry disappeared, and on the other, the number of working women increased dramatically, leading to a revolution in gender ratios. However, cultural discontent and fear loomed behind the economic dynamism. Hollywood presented rebellious teenagers such as James Dean and triggered fierce controversies with films like 'Rebel without a Cause'.

The American civil rights movement played a crucial part in mobilizing the protests of the sixties. Its own racial discrimination confronted the USA with a problem in its fight against communism and fascism. The victims of discrimination were not only Afro-Americans, but also Latinos, Native Americans, and other ethnic groups to which two thirds of the 'poor' belonged statistically. The civil rights movement achieved its first breakthrough in 1954, when the Supreme Court declared the segregation of school systems illegal. In 1960, black students held a sit-in at a restaurant in North Carolina to protest against the reservation of certain zones for whites. The sit-ins were followed by knee-ins in segregated churches, sleep-ins in motels, wade-ins at

segregated bathing beaches, and watch-ins in cinemas. The avant-garde of these protest tactics were the members of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) who, however, occasionally met with reactions that were violent: in 1961, their opponents set a bus on fire, killing some of the passengers. The Freedom Rides of white students from the north became the talk of the nation.

Although the situation was growing more acute in the south, the early sixties also were years of great expectations. Late in 1960, John F. Kennedy defeated Richard Nixon as presidential candidate of the Democrats. The youthful president picked up the mood of the country, demanding that the advance of freedom be supported throughout the world. Lyndon B. Johnson, Mr Kennedy's successor, boosted expectations further by promising to wage unconditional war against poverty at his inauguration. Following in the tradition of the Kennedys, he endeavoured to put an end to racial discrimination. He was helped by the civil rights movement which had gained strength in the meantime. In the middle of 1963, the protest march to Washington took place, where Martin Luther King proclaimed: 'I have a dream'.

Even at the beginning of the sixties, the USA had a powerful extra-parliamentary protest movement. The liberal reformers around Mr Kennedy and Mr Johnson were still at one with the civil rights movement around Martin Luther King as well as with more radical groups. In 1964, Mr Johnson, a liberal-minded Texan, pushed through a civil rights act which prohibited, among other things, discrimination in hotels, restaurants, and places of amusement and sought to avoid racial, religious, and gender discrimination at work. Also in 1964, around one thousand students from the north took part in the 'Mississippi Freedom Summer' organized by the SNCC to register black voters as well as in development assistance projects. Originating at the University of Michigan, a student movement had developed in the early sixties. Small at first, its core, the SDS, was rooted in the Old Left of the thirties. Members of the SDS had articulated their ideas of a 'participatory democracy' in the Port Huron Statement of 1962.

The campus of the University of California in Berkeley became the true Mecca of the early student movement. After the baby boomers had stormed the universities, study conditions deteriorated markedly. Unable to cope, the university management responded by introducing strict administrative regulations, limiting visiting hours in the halls of residence, and curtailing political freedom of speech. When distributing fliers was prohibited late in 1964, the situation escalated. The Free Speech Movement (FSM) emerged, and the university relented.

Word about the success in Berkeley spread, and the first teach-in took place at the University of Michigan in 1965, its subject being the moral and political

impact of Vietnam. The civil rights movement in the south and the campus revolt in the north soon merged with the Vietnam protest movement, setting an example. Peace marches started in 1965/66, and in 1967, 20,000 protesters besieged the Pentagon. Contacts were established with Cuban revolutionaries and other 'third world' liberation movements, and there were uprisings in inner-city ghettos in the USA.

And there were acts of terrorism as well: regarding itself as an Afro-American self-defence organization, the Black Panther Party took to violence. Their actions, such as occupying the parliament of California, spread fear and terror. The – mostly young – Panthers did the civil rights movement a bit of no good, not least by murdering policemen. The mobilization culminated during the Tet offensive of 1968 – the year in which the murder of Martin Luther King in April triggered a veritable orgy of violence.

Unlike the Federal Republic of Germany, protest mobilization in the USA affected the presidency and Congress. The Democrats split. George Wallace, the governor of Alabama, founded a third party and saw himself as the advocate of 'law and order' – supported not only by white racists in the south but also by many workers in the north and the mid-west who no longer regarded the 'party of disorder', of hippies and 'peaceniks' as their own. With the Chicago Seven trial the student protest movement celebrated another media success before it broke apart. The last protest took place in 1970 after two protesters and two guardsmen had been shot on a university campus in Ohio. All in all, the American sixties claimed hundreds of lives – millions including Vietnam.

The USA was not only the scene of extra-parliamentary movements but also the central projection surface of the protest. First, it was the principal defendant with regard to decolonization; second, it embodied liberal capitalism like no other state; and third, it served as a role model because the fight over civil rights began on its soil – long before it even started on the extra-parliamentary stage of the western European countries.

Therefore, the New Left in Germany and Europe positioned itself 'with America against America'. On the one hand, members of the Group 47 proclaimed a 'declaration on the war in Vietnam' late in 1965 in which they proclaimed their solidarity with the American civil rights movement; on the other, the New Left turned its back on the USA, arguing with Rudi Dutschke that 'imperialism as an overriding system [...] is in full retreat'. What is more, it was demanded that NATO be 'smashed' and American soldiers stationed in Germany be educated systematically in order 'to subvert the military strength of the US army'.

To many Germans, the USA was closely linked to the democratization process in their own country after the World War, and positive memories predominated. In 1945, the USA was 'a utopian place' whose constitution and political culture inspired Germany, as Hans Magnus Enzensberger put it. But now the USA was in the wrong. The criticism of the USA voiced by the New Left triggered lively discussions in Germany. In a lecture at the Amerika Haus in Frankfurt in May 1967, Max Horkheimer, for one, asked his audience not to forget that it would not be possible to come together and speak freely at this place 'if the USA had not intervened and saved Germany and Europe from a most dreadful totalitarianism.

'Yet the protest against America also was a protest 'with America'. The study trips of many protagonists of the movement to the USA bore fruit: not only the terms 'flower child' and 'teach-in' were imported but also the forms of action and the style of the American New Left. Exchange took place in both directions: the Port Huron Statement reflects some attitudes of the German SDS. And there also are ideological similarities, so that we may say that the protest of the sixties was one uniform phenomenon. People on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean rejected orthodox Marxism, leaning more towards psychoanalysis and French existentialism.

From the German point of view, the results of the American '1968' seem paradox. In the Federal Republic of Germany, the 'power transfer' of 1969 was brought about by politicians who refused to be impressed by events in the street. In the USA, the protests had an immediate impact on the political establishment and brought about a trend reversal to the right. In the USA, the wounds suffered in the sixties have not yet healed. The 'dream' died in 1968, and in response to the protest movement, a New Right established itself. Today, the impetus of this neoconservative counter-revolution is intellectually and politically exhausted. It remains to be seen which way the wind will blow in the USA after the imminent change of generations.

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