

THE EUROPEAN STUDENTS' REVOLT

Henry ten Kortenaar

There are countries in the world where students traditionally play a constant, or at least recurrent, role in national politics. This is, generally speaking, not the case in Europe. Part of the tradition of European universities is a disdainful aloofness from the surrounding society and its "petty politics." This tradition did not exclude endless and passionate theoretical debates on the "perfect state," with recurrent Platonic dreams of an intellectual aristocracy governing the lower race, but it did not encourage a student to "dirty his hands" with real politics. If some students betrayed their caste by getting involved in outside politics, they soon dropped out of sight of their colleagues, and, more likely than not, out of their courses as well.

Little wonder (and little loss to the world), if the beautiful revolutionary dreams, held forth in night-long discussions, died with the doctor's degree, and were never heard of again. (One only wonders, sometimes, if the seemingly incomprehensible support of German and Italian intellectuals for Nazism and Fascism may not be a result of the unripe aristocratic ideals of their university years.) On the whole, however, European students were, politically speaking, both harmless and useless.

In the last few years this pattern has undergone a violent change: All through Europe, both in East and West, students have come out of their ivory towers, and have started a revolt, which is becoming more and more political in its implications. It is now clear that, what at the outset might have seemed a series of isolated rebellions at various universities, must be described as a continent-wide revolt of the students against "the system."

The first major clash between students and authorities occurred in Berlin in 1965 when 4,000 students protested against the banning of Erich Kuby from the Free University. Kuby, a journalist, had criticized the University for its anti-Communist ideology. "Free speech" was the battle cry, but the Berlin student

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movement soon broadened its platform, and with it, its targets: from the University to publishing tycoon Axel Springer, to the Shah of Persia, to the Socialist-Christian Democrat coalition. Ideologically, the German student movement has a strong influence on movements in other European countries. The names of Rudi Dutschke and Karl-Dietrich Wolff speak for themselves in this regard, and Daniel Cohn-Bendit (who studies in Paris on a scholarship from the German government) acted as a necessary *trait d'union* between the German and French student revolutions.

In France, where a long period of rest had followed the violent street fighting during the Algerian war, in which many students had been involved, the revolt broke out on March 22 of this year on the Nanterre campus of the Sorbonne. We still vividly remember how it snowballed through the whole of French society, and in this sense it was certainly the most "successful" of European student revolts. Or perhaps, seeing the outcome, this palm should be given to the Prague riots of 1967. They were harshly repressed, but in the end were recognized, and praised, as a major contribution to the fall of the Novotny regime early this year. In Poland, students rioted in various cities at the beginning of 1968, but, apart from the violent police reaction, not much is known of the results.

In Italy, the *Movimento Studentesco* sprang up spontaneously all over the country in opposition to the existing, politically affiliated students' organizations and began to make its stand almost at the same time as the French students. University buildings were occupied in Milan, Rome, Turin and at various other universities. Demonstrations and counter-demonstrations followed, and various political parties tried to "use" the students for their own ends, but they refused to give up their independence. Belgium, Spain, and Holland had their student troubles as well.

Though the immediate causes of the single outbreaks were different in each case, owing to local conditions (insufficient facilities at the Sorbonne or in Rome, the language problem at Louvain), the further developments were identical everywhere, and the outcome was invariably political. This is partly due to the identical reactions of political authorities. Accustomed as they were to the sometimes eccentric,

but always civilized and harmless behavior of the university population, they reacted in utter dismay and near hysteria to the unprecedented threat to their authority. We have read enough in the papers and seen enough on television of police brutality on these occasions to make it superfluous to go into detail; it is clear that the reactions were in most cases far out of proportion to the extent of the riots.

However, the students, far from being afraid of getting their hands dirty, were willing to fight back—and it was precisely during these episodes that they found their own strength. Their physical strength, more often than not, was insufficient against the clubs and tear-gas bombs of the police, but the very harshness of the repression revealed the fear and, with it, the inner insecurity of society.

The next phase on the part of authority was usually some reassuring promise about the future of university education, sometimes even a new law or the appropriation of new funds, but by that time the students had again left them behind. They were no longer interested in the better functioning of the existing university, but in their debates, their teachings, their readings of Marcuse and Debray they had discovered a new role for the university and for themselves in the university. (How different from the lazy, wine-sipping debating clubs of the past, these sweating, hungry, dead-tired masses of students, entrenched in their classrooms, day after day thinking, talking, learning, debating their programs! "I have thought and talked about things I had never thought of before," a nineteen-year old philosophy student in Rome told me this spring. "The university doesn't teach you how to think about things that really touch your life.")

The new university, as it emerged from these debates, was no longer aloof but very much part of society; its function was seen as a probing, questioning, criticizing one. The "critical university," as it was called, began its "anti-courses." And society, at least the existing power-structures, had no reason to be pleased with the sudden attention. From the initial complaints that had to do with the university itself, the students had passed to a "*contestation générale*" that engulfed the entire "system." After rejecting the paternalism of their professors, they refused to accept any kind of paternalism: in the government, in industry, in the news media, in the army, in political parties, in the Church.

Any solution or situation that had been accepted by their elders, unthinkingly or with resignation, was questioned and rejected: war, poverty, inequality,

discrimination, and much of conventional morality was condemned as immoral and unacceptable. This may sound like the Utopian dreams of the past; the difference consisted in their willingness to fight for their ideals against all powers that support or abet such solutions. Now that the universities are closed for the summer vacation, and the students are hitchhiking throughout the Continent, it may be the proper time to make up a provisional balance.

First of all, both the authorities and the students themselves have learned that "student power" is a reality. Not only have their demands for the renewal of the universities found the backing of large circles of intellectuals and of public opinion, thus forcing university authorities and governments to embark on programs of concrete change, but, insofar as they interpreted the feelings of popular masses, and where the political situation was favorable, they initiated political revolutions far beyond the university boundaries. Two governments, that of Czechoslovakia and that of Belgium, fell because of student-inspired mass movements. The economy of France was paralyzed and its government in serious peril when the student protest set off a nation-wide strike.

The inspiration of all student movements is decidedly Left-wing, but they have consistently refused to be used by the Communist parties of the countries concerned. Both in France and in Italy the students denounced Communists as part of the system, and refused their support which had been eagerly offered. In Germany, at a congress held this spring to celebrate the anniversary of the (clandestine) Communist Party (K.P.D.), a group of socialist students from Berlin (*Sozialistische Deutsche Studenten*, S.D.S.) violently attacked the Communist system as undemocratic, paternalistic and authoritarian. There is more than a streak of anarchism in the students' protest, as was shown by the black anarchist flags hoisted on the universities of Rome and Paris. The underlying idea of the anti-paternalistic revolt, the idea of "permanent adolescence," shows a remarkable affinity with the Trotskyist ideal of the "permanent revolution," as was noted by Edgar Morin in his excellent article "Une révolution sans visage" (*Le Monde*, June 5-6, 1968).

The "permanent revolution" is preached today by Castro and Mao and their names are frequently used by the young revolutionaries. Che Guevara and Régis Debray are among their heroes. This leads us to another characteristic of the student movement: far more than their elders (especially in Italy and France) they are interested in the rest of the world. Vietnam, Angola, South Africa, Latin America, the colored population of the U.S. arouse their passionate reactions.

And their interest is human as well as political: they rally for anti-Vietnam demonstrations, but they also hurried to Sicily when an earthquake struck the poorest part of the island.

Their attitude towards the United States is extremely ambivalent. On the one hand it represents all they fear and detest in the developments of the domestic situation. It is seen as the archetype of the unthinking affluence, the impersonal bureaucracy, the reign of the "one-dimensional man." These terms, and most of the other ideas mentioned, must sound familiar to the American reader: they point to an amazing fact, namely that the inspiration of the European students' revolt, and its very anti-Americanism, come from America. The United States is exporting revolution! The idea may sound incongruous, but to an attentive observer of the facts and of the ideas behind them there can be no doubt about its truth.

It all started at Berkeley one might say—though this is only part of the truth, for SNCC, and the whole civil rights movement, have much to do with it. The ideas—revolt against authority, challenge of the system, equality as the first characteristic of democracy; the methods—occupation of university buildings, sit-ins, teach-ins, etc.; the terminology; the books; the "uniform"—blue jeans—they all point in one direction: across the Atlantic. And "We Shall Overcome," sung in various shades of English pronunciation, has become the international hymn of the youth revolution.

Other countries (France, Russia) have exported their revolutions, and *ancien régime* and "Czarism" still stand as symbols of despicable tyranny. But in the countries to which these revolutions spread they took their own course, they were directed against local wrongs, no longer against those that had originated them, and towards the countries from which they had sprung there was only a feeling of gratitude and respect. Why, then, is the American revolution, after it has come to Europe, still so violently anti-American? The answer is obvious: because the *ancien régime* has not been destroyed, the revolutionary dream is still a dream not an exemplary reality. So far from being destroyed, the *ancien régime* itself is spreading, had been doing so long before the revolutionary impulse. The wealthy industrialized countries of Western Europe are gradually adopting the "American way of life," complete with Coca Cola and hamburgers, but above all with its all-invading technocracy, its streamlined efficiency, its noise, its hurry, its constant pressure.

So gradual has this process been that its values have

blended almost perfectly with the traditional ones. For this reason, the revolt of European youth against the fathers blends, in its turn, with their protest against the American "invasion." They feel they have the same right and the same reason to object as have their American contemporaries, and they adopt the same methods. It is an extremely interesting phenomenon, this anti-American revolt, consciously expressed in American terms. And it shows, in my opinion, America's cultural vitality.

As in the United States, it is easy to criticize the students' revolt for its immaturity, its negative attitudes, its escapism. Nevertheless, in its very defects there are signs of hope for our society. A challenge to an apparently inexorable course of events is a sign of hope; so is the refusal to accept war, hunger, injustice, inequality as if they were "acts of God," like earthquakes or floods. When people are willing to protest and rebel against a system of which these phenomena are a part and a consequence, this is a sign of hope.

If this had to be done then nobody could do it better than students. They have not yet been absorbed by society, not yet been conditioned by the system; they are still free to think in their own terms, still free to rebel. Yet it would be but another useless game if the questions they have raised were not taken up outside their circle. The question "How long will it last?" (coming from those who have once dreamed themselves) would then have a very poignant meaning. There are signs, however, that this dream will last longer than most. The most interesting aspect of "student power" is precisely that students have awakened the consciences of many of their elders, that they have expressed what many had felt, that their dream has appealed to others who felt oppressed by the system, and intellectuals first of all. In France, the crisis that outlasted the May revolution and the reaffirmation of the regime was that of the higher ORTF (state radio and television) personnel; in Venice, the students' outcry against the state-sponsored film festival was taken up by film makers and script writers. The "provo" movement in Holland (a more general youth rebellion, but still led by students) has plunged the whole of society into a violent, but on the whole salutary, crisis.

The students' revolt, then, will last in proportion to the response it finds in society. Many of the questions they ask, publicly and loudly, are valid questions. If they have done no more than this, they have done something extremely useful, and we have no right to reproach them for not giving the answers too.