

Developments

40/68 – Notes from the Ground: Reminiscences of a Reluctant 68er

By Roger Crockett*

The problem with our memories is that our imagination constantly interferes. Friedrich Dürrenmatt contended that whether something would have been possible is sometimes more important in memory than that which was real, so that past possibility becomes confused with past reality.¹ Put another way, that which was possible gradually encroaches on that which was real, until years later memory accepts the synthesis as fact. Must, then, the designation “non-fiction” for any memoir not be a contradiction in terms? What I was in 1968 is not quite what I wish I had been, and the temptation is strong to impute motivations in retrospect that were not present at the time. The fact that it has been forty years since my experiences and that I have never written them down before, renders any attempt at chronological accuracy futile. Thus, I am grateful to the editors of the *German Law Journal* for heartily accepting this subjective, rather than an historically objective, report from the ground.

There is nothing unique about having been a student in West Berlin in the late sixties. I am not even sure I qualify as an official 68er, since the majority of my year as an American college student studying in Germany formally took place in 1969. But as we know from the perspective of history, what we call the Sixty-Eight Revolution was indeed international, began several years earlier and, after reaching seismic climax in 1968, continued with significant aftershocks for several years more. Neither I, nor I suspect, the majority of the German students whom I befriended in that year, shared Hannah Arendt’s view that history was being made on a scale comparable to 1848.² In any case, time has proven that claim to have been exaggerated. We were trying to attend lectures and seminars and stay on course to get our degrees someday.

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¹ FRIEDRICH DÜRRENMATT, *TURMBAU: STOFFE IV-IX*, 11 (1990).

² HANNAH ARENDT, *Letter to Karl and Gertrud Jaspers, 26 June 1968*, in HANNAH ARENDT/KARL JASPERS: *BRIEFWECHSEL 1926-1969*, 715-716 (Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner eds., 1985).

Completion of an intensive German language course delayed my arrival in Berlin by two weeks. The semester had already begun when I took up residence at the Student Village of the Free University in Zehlendorf. Arriving through the Dreilinden border crossing and hastening to my destination, I was unaware of what was going on across town in Charlottenburg. It was November 4th, 1968, the day of the *Schlacht am Tegeler Weg*, the last pitched battle of a long spring, summer and fall of discontent. It was getting cold, and winter is never a good time for warfare, especially when the enemy is using water cannons. The tactics changed for the winter campaign— the “indoor season.” Axel Springer, whose crusade against student-friendly lawyer Horst Mahler had been the catalyst for Tegeler Weg, remained a focus of protest. But there were other targets of the students’ outrage, including the Viet Nam War, highly-placed former Nazis throughout German society, and an outdated, authoritarian university system. And in the fall of 1968 a new issue had emerged. In November, eighteen leftist students were expelled from the Berlin Film and Television Academy, among them Harun Farocki, who later became a world-famous director and professor at Berkeley. Their “crime” was making radical films and participating in demonstrations. Calls for a “solidarity strike” immediately circulated and a plenary session of all students majoring in the study of German was convened in the Auditorium Maximum of the Henry Ford Building. All evening and well into the night we were regaled with speeches, most of them pro-strike. Those who spoke against the strike were hooted down by the vocal core who had called the meeting. Bernd Rabehl, a prominent SDS member and one of the truly intellectual leaders of the student protest movement, spoke eloquently that evening. He told us that we, the students, had replaced the workers as the new proletariat. Just as the workers’ revolution had succeeded in Communist countries through solidarity against a recalcitrant establishment, we now must be aware of our duty to fight repressive and therefore illegitimate authority by keeping solidarity with victims of that authority. If that was not his exact text that evening, it is reasonably close. We certainly heard his anti-authoritarian message several times during that year. In any event, the evening wore on and students’ patience wore thin, as was the intention of the organizers. After interminable speeches, when the majority of students had left the hall and only the committed core was left, a nearly unanimous strike vote was taken. The students in other disciplines and departments followed.

Now a strike did not mean simply boycotting classes. That would have been a meaningless exercise in which far fewer than half the students would have participated. A strike meant using any and all means, including violence, to insure that instruction did not take place. But as there were many more lectures and seminars than there were groups of radical students to enforce the strike, they decided to be selective. Professors perceived to be authoritarian, anti-Marxist or otherwise inimical to the movement became targets. *Farbeier*, eggshells filled with red food coloring, were a weapon of choice. Protesters would wait for a professor to say something they deemed politically offensive, then would lob volleys of these eggs at the lectern. The practice was particularly prevalent at the Otto Suhr Institute for Politics, where the back wall of every lecture hall looked like a painting at

the *Documenta* exhibit. I believe that only one politics professor escaped the barrage of *Farbeier* that semester: Kurt Sontheimer, a distinguished political scholar who was seen as exemplary by students on the political left. Another popular weapon was spray paint. Marxist slogans appeared everywhere, on inner and outer walls, sidewalks, windows. Graffiti artists renamed the Otto Suhr Institute the “Karl Liebknecht Institute.” Nearly every building got similar treatment.

But the weapons were sometimes more threatening. I was sitting in a proseminar one December morning when a commotion in the hall was followed by a dozen students bursting in to announce that the seminar was cancelled in the name of the revolution. Some had with them crude wooden clubs, table and chair legs mostly, symbolizing their stated willingness to knock heads, if necessary, to further the cause. If they had targeted our professor because they thought he was not fair-minded, they had underestimated him. Many of us in the room were not willing to yield, and, seeing trouble brewing, he made the following Solomonic suggestion: The seminar would continue, and at 8:00 PM, all of us—professor, protesters and seminar participants—would meet at the *Alter Krug*, a student watering hole in Dahlem, for an evening of political discussion over beer. Both sides kept their word, and it became one of my most memorable evenings of the year, full of fruitful dialogue: respectful disagreement as well as theoretical rapprochement. Often heated but always peaceful, the conversation continued until closing time.

It was not always so peaceful. One young female professor—I will call her Professor Albert—already well-published in Classical German literature, was deemed to be authoritarian and became a strike target. Perhaps her perceived “attitude” problem was exacerbated by the fact that she frequently appeared in a mini-skirt and leather boots. In any case, she made herself an even bigger target by lecturing in the Audi-Max, the university’s largest lecture hall. As a crowd of us gathered outside the hall, waiting admittance for her to enlighten us on Goethe’s *West-östlicher Divan*, a contingent of hostile protesters waited inside to inform her that she would not be lecturing on that day. As to the course of the conversation inside the Audi-Max, I can only speculate. The very visual result was a suddenly airborne Professor Albert, flying headlong at about shoulder height through the door, a mini-skirted projectile that landed face-down at my feet. I was too immediately shocked to help her up, but I do not believe she would have accepted my hand had I offered it. She got to her feet, dusted herself off, exited the hall and did not lecture at the Free University again. She subsequently had a distinguished teaching career in the United States and retired from a very prestigious university.

The student protest movement had at least one significant effect on the German language: the use of the informal *du* and the formal *Sie* as forms of address. Prior to sixty-eight, students were subjected to the same dance of uncertainty around the golden calf of social convention as was everyone else. At the point at which acquaintance became friendship or romantic interest turned into love, the *du* would be offered in a somewhat ceremonious manner, and to the personal relationship would be added linguistic intimacy. After sixty-

eight, students said *du* to one another, regardless of whether they were even acquainted. It remains this way today. We were, after all, no longer fellow students (*Mitstudenten*), we were *Kommilitonen*, comrades in arms—another lexical change made in this time that stuck. Students were conscious of breaking convention. In the anti-authoritarian atmosphere of the protest movement, this was a way of thumbing one's nose at society. It was something students had control over, something we knew would rankle the older generation. The core of Marxist students began calling everyone *du*, a sort of linguistic terrorism that often had its intended effect of bringing the conversation partner to a boiling rage. Yet this act of revolution had its own evolution. Not all students embraced it right away. I was living in House 10, one of twenty dormitory buildings that comprised the Zehlendorf Student Village. Shortly after my arrival we had a house meeting to discuss the issue of address. The consensus amounted to a confused compromise, reflecting the general state of flux at the time. We would say *du* automatically to everyone on our floor. We would address students on other floors of House 10 with *du* unless they objected. With students from other houses in the complex we would have to make our own individual arrangements as before. By the end of the academic year it did not matter anymore. We were all on *du* terms with each other.

The weather warmed up, the days lengthened, and it became "outdoor season" again: bonfires and cookouts at the Village, swimming in the *Schlachtensee*, strolling the *Kurfürstendamm*, sunbathing on the university lawn, and running from police in riot gear. Apropos lawns, no signs were more universally disregarded in the summer of sixty-nine than the ubiquitous "Keep off the Grass" signs. The sacred German lawn, respected for centuries, became crisscrossed with impromptu paths and covered with scantily clad sunbathers. Apropos police in riot gear, a spring of street clashes culminated one hot June evening in the occupation of the *Philosophische Fakultät*, a four-story villa on the campus that housed the College of Liberal Arts. An evening seminar was in progress on the third floor. Shortly before eight, we heard chants of "Mao Tse-tung! Ho Chi-Minh!" emanating from the stairwell. It speaks volumes about the year we had just experienced when I say that we hardly even noticed the commotion, that is, until several protesters burst in to announce, just as in the previous semester, that the seminar was over. This time, however, they had an additional message: they had occupied the building in the name of the revolution and we, the seminar members, had joined them. Not to fight beside them was senseless, they explained, because they had locked us all onto the third floor and had hidden the keys, the police were gathering outside, and when they stormed the building, they would not be able to tell one student from another.

Their story checked out. We were indeed locked in, and the police were arriving fast. One paddy wagon after another, sirens howling, approached the building, and out of each poured twenty of Berlin's finest, clad in riot gear and equipped with cudgels and tear gas. Their prediction, soon to come true, was what bothered us the most. We looked just like the protesters, especially our trendily long and unkempt hair. What ensued was the product of poor planning, blunders and overreactions. By this point there had been no

threats of violence, no one had been injured, and no property had been damaged. The protesters simply baited the police with an act of civil disobedience, and the police played right into their hands. Had they not come out in force acting like they were looking for a fight, the protest would soon have petered out. What the protesters wanted was a long sit-in, all night and perhaps the next day, with plenty of live television coverage. But they were not at all prepared for a siege. They had locked themselves and us onto the one floor that had no running water. Nor did the fourth floor library, connected to the third floor by a separate stairway, provide even a single sink. Still, we were in for a long evening that would have to end badly. Most of us in the seminar retreated up to the library to watch the unfolding drama from the windows. Concentric rings were forming. A line of police encircled the building. Outside of them several hundred curious students had gathered and formed the outer circle. Both rings grew in size during the evening as more police wagons arrived, and more students found out what was going on. Of course, it was a mistake for us to be at the windows. We were giving the police identifiable faces for later, but all that is sober analysis after the fact. *Farbeier* rained down onto the police in volleys, and as there were no toilets available, the protesters urinated into buckets and emptied the makeshift chamber pots onto the police as well. Everything was calculated to provoke a violent response. The protesters threatened to set the library on fire if their demands were not met. What these demands were, we never found out, but they almost certainly were demands that the police were in no position to meet, and by now they were in no mood make any concessions. Those of us in the library never believed they would set it on fire. It was not the protesters we were afraid of.

Then came the apparent denouement. The protesters had made another miscalculation. By locking our professor in with us, they had given the police a way to distinguish between them and us. By now the police had advanced to the barricaded door and were talking to both the professor and the leader of the protesters. The result of the negotiations was that the protesters would release the seminar members as identified by the professor, then a few minutes later would exit the building themselves. There would be no arrests if the exit was peaceful. Out of the building we came single-file, to flashbulbs and the glare of television cameras, but also to the thunderous applause of the curious students gathered outside. They assumed we were the protesters. We were out of the building but still inside the tight police cordon. Moments later the protesters filed out to even louder applause, as high profile members of the *Außerparlamentarische Opposition* (APO) became recognizable. Then the police broke their word. The last man out was the leader, and police slapped handcuffs on him in full view of hundreds of his admirers. The enraged crowd rushed the police, who were in turn pushed back against us: police, protesters and seminar members in one tight knot against the building. The protesters then attacked upon seeing their leader arrested. Out came the cudgels. The melee was on. At one point I got knocked to the ground. Looking up I saw a cop standing over me with club drawn. Somehow I eluded him on all fours and worked my way to the outside of the mob. That part is a blur in my memory. I know I got away and did not look back.

I made it through that night and that year without getting my head bashed, at least not physically.

But I but experienced instead a philosophical and political head-bashing. That year profoundly changed the way I viewed the world. In this regard I was no different than millions in my generation. I returned to the United States after my year in Germany still abhorring the methods of a small minority of anarchists—who could ever respect someone who would manhandle a professor or throw urine at the police? But I better understood and sympathized with the cause. How could young Germans not be incensed by a repressive university system that put all the power in the hands of a few authoritarian professors? How could they not react to a spiteful tabloid magnate whose juvenile tirades against students were inciting the masses of undereducated *Bild-Zeitung* readers against them? How, indeed, could they tolerate or excuse their society welcoming back with open arms so many old Nazis into positions of responsibility and even seeing one of them named Chancellor? And, by extension, how could I not at least raise my voice in protest when my own government was methodically defoliating an agrarian country on the other side of the world in the name of an ideology? I am saddened and angered when I hear people belittle the sixties as though they were a brief historical aberration brought about in a period of permissiveness by misguided, drugged adolescents. Overshadowed by the occasional protests turned violent, riots that dominated the news, was the fact that the great majority of students sought peaceful protest and well-justified change. And lost amid the boorish acts of the few who wanted to tear everything down, were the countless teach-ins, rallies and debates about how to create a more just, less authoritarian and more inclusive society. Behind that which a handful of anarchists tried to ruin was a whole lot of idealism.

The saddest thing about 1968 is not that it occurred, rather that it has not been repeated.