

For and Against Protest

Guest Article from Stefan Müller-Doohm

In the flood of retrospectives of the '68 movement that in this anniversary year are competing for our attention in the form of books, articles, documentaries, films and discussion panels featuring the ever same group of people who witnessed that period of time, one aspect is often conspicuous for its absence. During those wild years it was not only happenings and so-called "Sponti-Sprüche" (old sayings and slogans that were altered to be provocative) that were fashionable with the students; the extra-parliamentary opposition was driven by profoundly political motives. The specific causes of outrage and civil unrest included the escalation of the Vietnam war, which was backed diplomatically by the West German government as a US ally; the activities of the American secret service, the CIA, in South America; the Six-Day War in the Middle East; and the military coup in Greece. Domestic factors had an even more provocative impact: there was the inflexible education system, the ossified university structures riddled with authoritarian interdependencies, and crucially, the plans to impose emergency laws, as well as the power cartel of the grand coalition of Christian and Social Democrats, and finally the fact that a far-right party had won seats in a number of regional parliaments,

for example in Hessen and Bavaria.

In response to the global and domestic situation, youth culture and student protest movements bloomed and, fuelled by state sanctions, gradually developed radical tendencies. The protests also attracted more and more public attention as the opposition groups became increasingly media-savvy. Direct actions, sit-ins, and the like now reached the masses thanks to broad newspaper and television coverage.

Against the strategy of violence

In the summer of 1967, a year before the wave of protests in 1968, a demonstration was held outside the Deutsche Oper in Berlin in protest against the state visit of the Shah of Persia. In clashes with the police, who violently pursued the fleeing demonstrators, a student named Benno Ohnesorg was shot from behind by a police officer. This event received coverage in a campaign pitted against the students by Springer Media, which had not been involved until this point, prompting Adorno to open a lecture with the eyebrow-raising observation: "The students have, to a certain extent, taken on the role of the Jews". Soon afterwards he stated: "I under-

stand how difficult it is to form a just and responsible opinion of even the simplest fates, since all news that reaches us is already manipulated. But that cannot prevent me from expressing my sympathy for the student whose fate, no matter what is reported, stands in no relation to his participation in a political demonstration. [...] I bid you, in memory of the our dead fellow Berlin student Benno Ohnesorg, to please stand."

Although Adorno tried to take account of the political students' need to discuss issues in his lectures and seminars, he also clearly voiced his concerns about the strategy of deliberate violation of the law, violence against property and the provocation of individuals. Adorno's scepticism regarding the political consequences of this actionism is expressed in a series of letters to Herbert Marcuse. In one of his letters to the "holy animal" of the student movement he wrote that some representatives of the protest movement tended "to synthesize their form of praxis with a non-existent theory, revealing glimpses of a decisionism that harks back to the horrors."

It became clear that Jürgen Habermas shared Adorno's opinion – expressed not only in letter form – at the legendary congress "Hochschule in der Demokratie – Bedingungen und

Organisation des Widerstandes" (the university under democracy – the conditions and organisation of resistance), which took place on 9 July in Hannover after the funeral of Benno Ohnesorg. In his speech "On the political role of the students in the Federal Republic of Germany" he described the state-sanctioned police operation against the demonstrators in Berlin as an act of terrorism in the sense of targeted intimidation. For him the student protest was a legitimate and desperately needed expression of democratic consciousness and political engagement. On the podium he explained: "The task of the student opposition in the Federal Republic of Germany was and is to compensate for omissions: for the lack of theoretical perspectives; the lack of sensitivity with regard to deceptions and denunciations; the lack of radicalness in the interpretation and practice of the constitution of our social welfare state and democracy; the lack

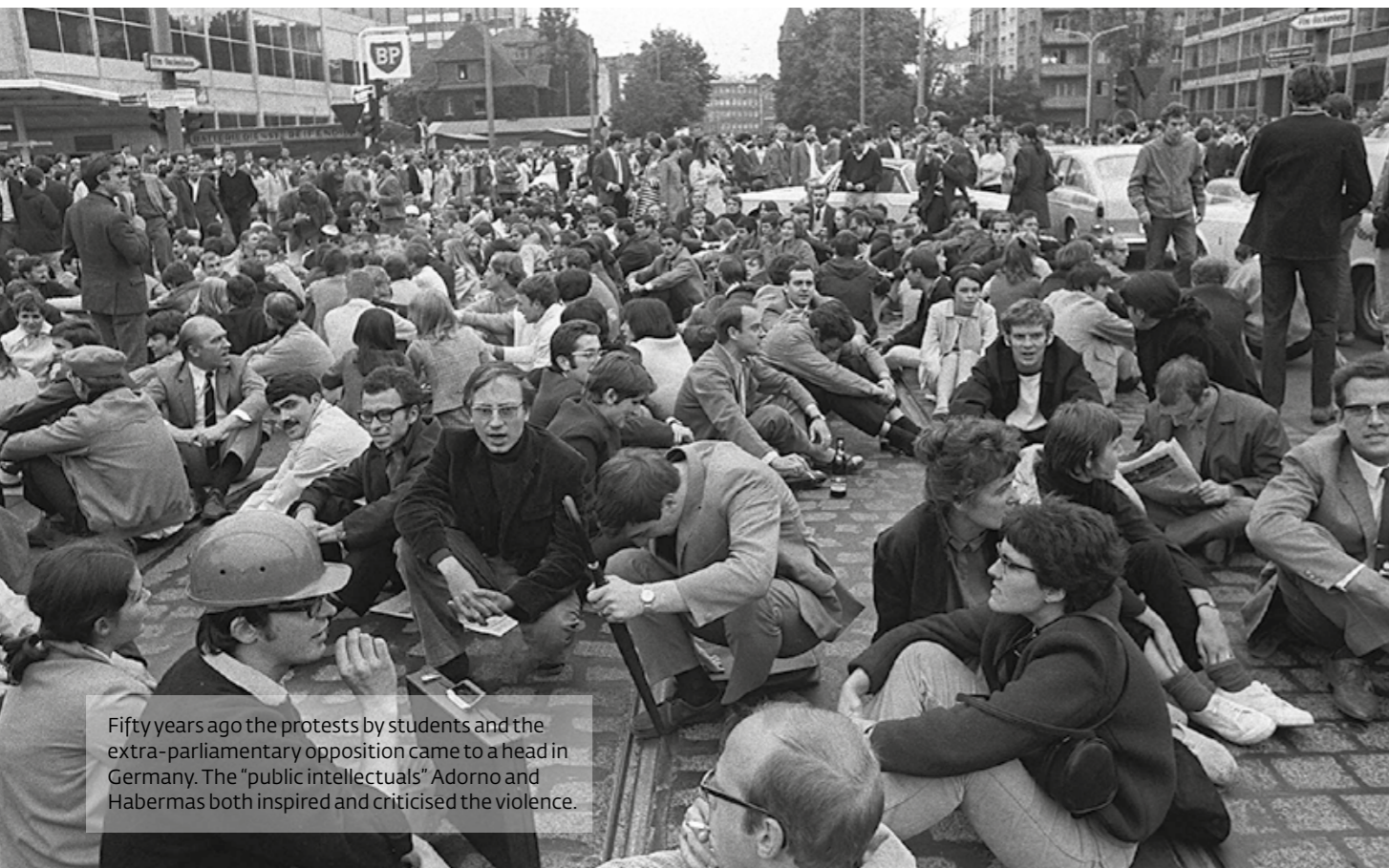
of foresight and a vivid imagination." But Habermas also warned against actionism at any price and spoke out firmly against "converting the sublime violence of institutions into manifest violence through provocation." When Rudi Dutschke, by that time the leading figure of the student movement, spoke out in favour of actions that did not preclude violence, Habermas countered with a speech in which he accused Dutschke of adhering to a voluntaristic ideology that he described as 'left-wing fascism'.

Habermas enters the fray

A decade later Habermas admitted that with this remark about left-wing fascism he had reacted "a nuance too much in the mould of the bourgeois intellectual" and that it had been "somewhat out of place", although it had not been intended as anything other than

"internal criticism of the methods of the protest movement."

Adorno and Habermas played a central role in the protest movement in a number of ways. Firstly, there was their influence as academic instructors. As such they addressed the philosophical and socio-theoretical issues that lay entirely within the interest horizon of the non-dogmatic Left, which would otherwise hardly have encountered discourse partners of this intellectual calibre at the universities. Secondly, Adorno and Habermas, as non-conformist public intellectuals, served as role models, prepared to take the risk of intervening politically on a regular basis, not least to campaign for the demands of the protest movement to extend democracy as a way of life to pre-political spheres such as the family, the workplace, schools, the media and universities. Thirdly, Adorno and Habermas, each in their own way and with their own particular emphases, provided the diagnostic interpreta-



Fifty years ago the protests by students and the extra-parliamentary opposition came to a head in Germany. The "public intellectuals" Adorno and Habermas both inspired and criticised the violence.

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tions and analytical categories of the time, wrapped up in a neo-Marxist vocabulary which the New Left referenced in its critiques levelled at the very foundations of late-capitalism society and its crisis phenomena.

There were four main thematic complexes which had a special significance for the socio-critical thinking of the New Left. One was the discourse on the past and guilt, another was the critique of capitalism, then came the critique of the cultural industry, or rather of the structural and functional shift in the public sphere, and finally, the critique of the education system.

It was Adorno in particular who, shortly after re-emigrating to Germany, warned against the afterlife of Nazism under democracy and, as early as 1951, provoked the public by declaring that it would be barbaric to write a poem after Auschwitz. In so doing Adorno positioned himself as the prototypical taboo-breaker.

Intellectual engagement

In his statements on "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?" at the colourful annual conference of sociologists in Frankfurt in 1968, which was repeatedly interrupted by the distribution of various leaflets, Adorno identified society as a negative totality that manifested itself as a closed system whose stability resulted from the increasing productivity of an ever-more comprehensive mastery over nature. However, Habermas pinpointed in his publications three far more nuanced developmental tendencies in late capitalism. First off, an increase in state activity

as a regulating factor for preserving order; secondly, the growing function of science as the primary productive force; and finally, a depoliticisation of the public aimed at preventing the manifestation of latent conflicts.

From the outset, a driving force behind the protest movement was the core demand for universities to be democratized, neatly summed up in the scathingly ironic statement: "under the gowns is the musty odour of a thousand years". This catalyst for protest, which is often overlooked today, was undoubtedly inspired by Adorno's call to dismantle the authoritarian structures and hierarchies within the universities.

Habermas was no less critical than Adorno, but his objections focussed more specifically on the "chronic affliction of university reform", namely the specialisation of individual fields of study that were increasingly sealing themselves off from one another, the bureaucratisation of the universities, and methods of instruction which were too school-like. A democratised university, he believed, was the prerequisite for criticism of science which must find expression within academia since the unthinking application of scientific information was too risky in the context of social praxis.

These analyses and initiatives regarding education policies for which university and secondary school students took to the streets did have an impact. Part of that impact was that in the course of the 1970s a growing number of reform universities were founded. The founding of the Carl von Ossietzky University in Oldenburg at the end of 1973 on the basis of the reform models of interdisciplinary project-based studies and one-phase

teacher training was a shining example whose flame has long since been extinguished – like other liberalising achievements of that experimental ground-breaking period.

Looking back, if we were to sum up the position occupied by Adorno and Habermas in the period of time commonly referred to as '68, it is clear that on the one hand they showed solidarity with the '68 movement as a democratising movement and, on a higher, theoretical level, delivered reasons for radically reforming universities and society alike. On the other hand, they unreservedly criticised the nascent extremism and violent tendencies expressed in the actionist practices of the protest movement. Habermas was more aggressive than Adorno in his intellectual interventions, and in his analyses he clearly opposed the protest movement's interpretation of the historical situation as a revolutionary situation.

In retrospect, one salient feature of the public debates between the New Left on the one side and Adorno and Habermas on the other is the dynamic that developed in the wake of increasing intellectual polarisation. This dynamic manifested itself in an escalation that followed the typical progression from the first phase of collaboration on an objective level, to the second phase of provocatively expressed competing interpretations, to the third phase of conflict, to the fourth phase of the battle between opposing camps. Looking back therefore, the controversies of 1967/68 demonstrate very clearly that when intellectuals form opposing camps, the opponents end up blocking one another, making it hard to find a consensus, a consensus that is dependent upon allowing oneself to be persuaded by argumentation.